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# Bodies Shaped in Paint and Earth

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BODIES SHAPED IN PAINT AND EARTH

By

Emily Ann Engelhard

THESIS

Submitted to  
Northern Michigan University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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2013

## ABSTRACT

### BODIES SHAPED IN PAINT AND EARTH

By

Emily Ann Engelhard

*Bodies Shaped in Paint and Earth* is a hybrid collection of nonfiction essays and poetry that charts the past twenty-two years of my life. Organized in mostly chronological order and varying wildly in structure, style, and tone, the essays and poetry trace my evolving perspectives on loss from a naïve childhood to an experienced adulthood to a place that hovers, hopefully, somewhere in between. Essay and poetry are woven together with the intention of creating an experience that captures life's fleeting physical and emotional realities as well as the more ethereal, endless realms of an ancient mind.

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2013

To my family.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you: Paul Lehmberg, for your wise, unfaltering guidance in matters of writing and, most importantly, in matters of life. Beverly Matherne, for your passion and attention to the sound of each word, the beat of each present moment. You are amazing people who showed me writing's - and the spirit's - true purpose, its power, its potential. Gabriel Brahm, for introducing me to Zizek, who taught me that the only way to light is to stride through the darkness of fear. Richard Hackler, for your incredible energy, optimism, and friendship in this chaotic world. Tim Johnston, for being a wonderful, supportive, indelible friend, one who has never once turned down my request for the use of his truck. Liz Faucett and Justin Daugherty, for teaching me not to take everything so damn seriously. Chanomi Maxwell-Parish, Frank Steed, and Cameron Witbeck, for always making me laugh. Faith Connell, Melissa Bamerick, and Carissa Ruiz, for never giving up on me and for always, always being there. Tyler Dunn and Becky Pelky, for unicorns! All of my friends here in Marquette and elsewhere, you are amazing. Jordan Meyers, my best friend, my partner, my life-long companion, I adore you, and I'm glad that I found you. Finally, my family, for being the most powerful, beautiful presences in my life - thank you for the adventures, the opportunities to grow and learn, and the unconditional love that has shaped me into the person I am today. I love you. I love you. I love you.

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## INTRODUCTION

The development and writing of my thesis, *Bodies Shaped in Paint and Earth*, was beautiful and transformative. It led me to a place that helped me discover more about myself and my family than I ever thought possible. I will never be the same. When I learned that I had to introduce the body of my thesis with a synopsis and an explanation of its purpose, however, I momentarily panicked.

What ignited my fear is the endlessness of what I've discovered; the complexity; the fact that what I really want to say during these next ten pages has little to do with the work you're about to read, and more to do with what is beneath it all, on a non-literary level. Later in this introduction, I'll try my best to be blunt, straight-forward, technical, whatever-you-want-to-call-it, but right now, for a few pages, I'm taking advantage of this space. I'm going to say what I've wanted to say for a long time, because this is my space. It's my family's space. It's a space that belongs to all of my characters, who deserve my apologies, my gratitude.

When I first started writing seriously – I'm referring to my later years as an undergraduate and my first year as a graduate student – I wrote with the hope of understanding why my life was such a disheveled thing. I liked to blame others for my struggles, and my parents were the primary victims. In my first essays, my mother is depicted as a crazy woman who hauled my sister and

me across the country for no other purpose than to achieve her own dreams. My father is molded into a negligent, angry man who lacked the ability to be a parent until much later in life. Other people receive similar treatment. Many of my first essays are hateful, dramatic, harsh, accusing – and terribly inaccurate. Yes, the various events happened, but when I reexamine them now, I realize the unilateral emotional truths I once accepted as fact were skewed. What unsettles me is that at one point in my life, I knew I was wrong but didn't care. I made beautiful art, and it didn't matter how many people I maimed while creating it. Writing was my place away from the world, and I wasn't about to abandon it for the sake of politeness, or love.

Thankfully, I know better now. Writing this thesis has taught me, perhaps more than anything else, that written language is a powerful entity, a living being who knows how to mend, inspire, heal, and destroy. When you hold sway over something that powerful, I've learned, it should be handled delicately, not used as a weapon, and I never again want to watch my mother clench back tears after reading one of my essays. I never want to see a mix of disappointment and sadness shadow my father's face. I never want to feel the need to hide something I've written, to skulk away from the world and exist outside of it. A few of the essays I've included here, I must admit, fall into the category I've just vowed to avoid, but I felt it necessary to capture all of the writers I've been, all of the reasons why I'll never step back into that dark room.

The purpose of this thesis, therefore, is twofold. On the one hand, it is what it seems: a hybrid collection of personal essay and poetry that tracks my ability to understand and cope with various types of loss – loss of home, youth, God, and life – as I move from a naïve childhood to an experienced adulthood to a state, I hope, that exists somewhere in between. On the other hand, my thesis is merely the external, symptomatic layer of an unwritten and more complicated metamorphosis that has begun unraveling inside of me, changing my perceptions of what it means to love, live, and die in this world. Because it is easier to see a body’s skin, however, I’ll begin there.

Death is perhaps the most difficult and permanent of the losses, a hard reality that I first brushed up against at a young age and experienced more severely later in life. Unavoidably then, “death” and the various deaths I’ve witnessed became the central topic of my thesis, branching out into less severe, though not less impactful, losses as the piece progresses. Not only was it my intent to illustrate how my physical and emotional responses to loss changed as I grew older, it was my greater desire to illuminate the forces – family, art, and nature – that taught and supported me along the way.

More dramatic than witnessing the bloody aftermath of a hunt is what still remained: my father and I standing next to one another at dusk, realizing that materialistic achievement is not as important as idling in the woods, allowing our bodies and minds to merge into a cyclic, balanced, and ancient process. My mother’s hand guiding my own small hand across the paper of time, teaching me

how to draw and paint and write and embrace the inevitability of drastic change, is more important and valuable than the discomfort I felt whenever we uprooted our lives and moved. Besides fulfilling my addiction to writing, one of the primary reasons I composed this thesis was to help others recognize that there is much more preservation in this world than there is devastation, that what we currently define as “hell” deserves a second evaluation, and that an existence we perceive as ugly and fragmented may actually be one of the most beautiful, interconnected forces in the universe.

The task, I have to admit, was not an easy one. Even now, in its “completion,” my thesis does not feel finished. I’m still learning to grasp the significance of a great loss and the moments that follow. I’m still honing and developing the technical skills required to successfully articulate what I’ve learned. Thankfully, I haven’t been alone, and I remain in good company. Many of the memoirists and poets I’ve encountered, whether introduced to me or randomly plucked from shelves, have aided my creation of the atlas I began many years ago.

Nonfiction writer Jo Ann Beard, author of my first favorite memoir, *The Boys of My Youth*, has played a critical role in helping me find my aesthetic preferences. She has a delicate, almost obsessive way of handling sensory detail. Whenever I imagine Beard, I see a thin, intensely concentrated woman lingering in a park, touching the veins of oak leaves, tasting smoke from another’s cigarette, inhaling the metallic scent of jungle gym bars, and listening to bicycle

tires skid over fallen rain. Though I've heard both critics and students claim that she often oversteps the fine line she's strolling between detailed description and unnecessary verisimilitude, I admire her attention to imagery. I love her addiction to each piece of the world.

The camper people are out of it. Their colored lanterns are dark now and the TV is on inside, the glow of Letterman and his guest reflected in the window. I can see a head framed in the light, surrounded by a frizz of hair. It's the poodle, looking at stars.

We clear the table and spread out a sleeping bag on it, flannel side up. This is the best way to watch the sky. Eric has his red flashlight and charts, I have my sweatshirt zipped and a Walkman with two pairs of headphones. It's his turn to choose a tape so I'm waiting for something discordant and spooky but when he pushes the button it's one of my favorites. *Thank you*, I mouth to him. He smiles, closes his eyes, and takes my hand. Side by side. He moves into the solitude of headphones and constellations. I am perched on planet Earth, Milky Way galaxy, who knows what universe. Way up there, satellites are parked with their motors running, and vivid rings of plasma do laps around Saturn. Way down here, there is only the terrible arch of the sky, the sagging moon, and nothing else. (Beard 66-67)

Beard is in tune with her surroundings but not overly aware. She reveals only the most telling details, and through the meticulous collection and arrangement of imagery, she conveys, rather than directly states, emotion. She gives readers permission to lie beside her, look up at the stars, and arrive, rather than be coerced, toward her revelations.

Like the essays in the *The Boys of My Youth*, many of my pieces contain large and potentially overwrought topics such as death and love. In order to avoid evangelizing, it was necessary for me to ease away from exposition and rely more heavily on description. I wanted to achieve the same effect Beard

maintained throughout her memoir, to recreate a moment with such intensity that readers are able to live the experience it as if it were their own, arriving at the moment's significance as they would naturally, through close, sensual interactions with the world.

Reluctant, however, to entirely disown my desire to over-indulge in the language that I weave into my essays, to sink my fingers deep into dark soil and haul up roots and water – the hidden, tangled concepts that exist beneath the skins of things – I have assumed Craig Childs as my primary nonfiction influence. Author of *The Secret Knowledge of Water*, Childs meditates on his experiences backpacking through Arizona and New Mexico as he charts water holes for the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. On the surface, he is a naturalist assigned with a daunting task. Inside, however, closer to where it really matters, he is a wanderer, and adventurer, a lover of sandstone walls and mesas, a deeply spiritual writer who found his God buried in the ancient Puebloans' desert sand.

Once, after a day of trekking through canyon and barren land, Childs swims through the black, icy river of a cave. When he reaches its end, where water swells into the darkness from an unknown source, only rock and the lingering stories of ancient people surround him. He is reminded of the Hopi's creation myth, how music urged their people into the world from a bottomless hole called a *sipapu*, its darkness reaching deep into the belly of the earth.

*Those people, I thought. I looked into the pool, as far down as I could see. Were they in here? But there was nothing in here. The impossible pain of the world above, the mystery and beauty and fear, there was none of this in the far back of the cave. None of the purple sky and purple asters and hot winds. No emotion or desire. I reached to my headlamp and turned it off. Total darkness moved in. It was true, there was nothing. This was the beginning, so utterly still that I could not breathe. Then I heard the drop of water. It plucked the surface of the pool with a low, ripe tone. The first act of creation. I inhaled. (Childs 116)*

Childs has discovered the place from which he first emerged. Like the ancient Hopi, he is a child of the natural world, his body born from the water, destined to one day return. He has felt existence and non-existence intertwine into a whole and rhythmic presence, like music made from discordant notes. He has found peace in that sound.

Like Childs, I'm enraptured by nature's simplistic, unfaltering balance. Whether hiking through a northeastern forest, trekking across the deserts of the southwest, or gazing skyward to find solace in the sun and stars, descriptions of the natural world serve important roles in almost all of my nonfiction and poetry. More than merely providing vivid backdrops and serene settings, nature is intended to act as a character. It is a force that interacts with the humans it encounters, teaching them how to recognize their shared origin. It is a guide, showing us that only when we accept our first emergence with one another from the same singing well, will we know how to find harmony in chaos.

Just as Childs introduces readers to the Hopi's belief that art and nature work together to birth life, the two acts of creation have intertwined in my thesis to produce its most prevalent theme. When I'm not writing about snow-laden

woods or yellow fields, I meditate on the influential art created by my parents. My mother is a painter, my father a musician, but both taught me, in their separate fashions, to view the production of art as the body's way of awakening its soul. Art, like nature and all that thrives within it, is sound born from emptiness. It is our ancient memory transformed "into incorporeal sensations, [rendered] in an older, more arcane language" (Childs 117). It is the dark silence we finally remember, the interconnected threads of life that hold us when we feel as if we might fall.

Though my thesis is composed primarily of nonfiction, the inclusion of poetry allowed me to access memories more deeply, nearer to a spiritual truth than I'll ever permit my essays to sanction. When I found it difficult to birth an idea, especially one conceived during childhood, into a piece of nonfiction, poetry granted me permission to break away from the net of reality and access my emotions through stronger, sometimes fictional, metaphors. Truth, I learned very quickly, is often malleable.

A number of poets had a hand in awakening this belief and influencing my aesthetics, but the most invaluable was Larry Levis, author of *Elegy*, a collection of unfinished poems revolving around the idea of loss, particularly death. Because a poem's effectiveness requires that it encompass a specific, often brief moment fashioned by vivid detail, I found Levis' poems helpful when deciding how to embody my own abstract thoughts on loss. Though the entire

work is easy to fall in love with, “Elegy with a Bridle in Its Hand” is, by far, my favorite piece in the collection.

The lyric poem is about two old horses, Misfit and Querido Flacco, as they stand in a misty field watching the highway. Like Levis, I often write poems and essays centered around or even told from the perspective of nonhuman animals, perhaps for the same reason he chose to access the minds of horses: their unfaltering wisdom and grace in the face of life’s end.

Death would come for both of them with its bridle of clear water in hand  
And they would not look up from grazing on some patch of dry grass or even

Acknowledge it much; & for a while I began to think that the world

Rested on a limitless ossuary of horses where their bones & skulls stretched  
And fused until only the skeleton of one enormous horse underlay  
The smoke of cities & the cold branches of trees & the distant

Whine of traffic on the interstate. (Levis 54)

Despite the poem’s strength, it was startling and deeply unsettling to discover that the reason for its unfinished nature was Levis’ untimely passing. Before he could revise, he died of a heart attack. While his reason for writing these poems may have stemmed from an innate awareness of his ailing heart, however, my reason for choosing to write about loss arose from outside my body.

In the summer of 2010, I lost my stepmother to cancer. Since then, I’ve been wracked by dread and confusion, and, whether from fear’s entrapment or from my desire to escape it, I decided to stare death straight in the eyes. I had no

other choice. I had to understand it, turn it into words, and attempt to make it beautiful. As I wrote, I fled to Levis whenever I felt my anxiety surge. I fanned the pages of *Elegy* until I reached my favorite poem. I read. I watched a single horse stand beneath a sagging, slate-grey sky, refusing to move, aware of nothing but the moment beating around him.

...This one. Which was his.

And if the voice of a broken king were to come in the dusk & whisper  
To the world, that grandstand with its thousands of empty seats,

*Who among the numberless you have become desires this moment*

*Which comprehends nothing more than loss & fragility & the fleeing of flesh?*  
He would have to look up at quickening dark & say: *Me. I do. It's mine.*  
(Levis 55)

Levis knew how to break past layers of horror and catch death in a beautiful glare. Rather than dwell on the fragility and weakness of life, he teaches us that even at our end, we are strong, perhaps even stronger than when we were young.

Because most of the poetry in *Elegy* remains unedited by the author's hand, the prose often wanders onto paths that Levis may have initially intended to remove. I like to imagine, however, that he wanted his language to be left wild and unkempt, unbound and unburdened by rigorous revision. More than any other aspect of writing, I love the feel of language in my hands, how words can be molded and shaped into something akin to music, and it felt necessary to embrace, at least occasionally, the wildness of Levis' language and spill it into

my own work. For it is in wildness, he seems to say, that we live. It is in our refusal to allow fear to erode us that we claim ourselves and determine the course of our lives while we still hold them.

I'd like to believe that my writing, my often unkempt meditations on large topics such as death, could sit comfortably on a shelf beside the sobering works of writers like Jo Ann Beard, Craig Childs, and Larry Levis, but I recognize my skills and vision as a novice writer are nowhere near the levels that belong to these weathered artists. One day, perhaps, when I'm ready. For now, however, I'm happy following them through their landscapes of stars, sand, and pasture, gazing through different lenses at the same revolving, endlessly living world.

What I do know is this: No matter what I write, I will always write for others. Like the writers who have influenced me, I want my work to maintain its accessibility, to be easily read and understood by both writers and non-writers alike. I've become deeply disheartened by today's writing trends and find it disconcerting that highly abstract and modernistic styles of writing have filled such large spaces in today's literary world. It's difficult for me to find value in empty spectacle, inaccessible images, and themes that are impossible to translate.

Though there is great potential beauty and worth in meaninglessness, as our lives are flecked with insignificance, it's not a realm I feel comfortable writing within, perhaps because, at one point in my life, I handled language with selfish hands. Words meant more than the people I wove into my essays, and I didn't care who staggered away, wounded. Over the long years, however, as my

writing and perspectives unfurled from the slinking creature of slander it once was into an entity more graceful and kind, I finally recognized that the act of creation – whether pressed into the shape of paint, words, music, or earth – is a means of communication. It is a method of casting our gathered wisdoms into the hands of others, while we still can. It is our greatest act of love.

## Freeze Frame

Unleashed, Buster ran across the neighborhood lawns with his ears blown back, mouth opened, teeth bared, tongue dangling like a pink sock in the wind. My mother and I were standing on the opposite side of Hilltop Road when he angled toward us, leapt from the grass, and wove between a line of parked cars into the street. As his back paws touched pavement, a pickup truck spun around the corner. I turned to say something to my friends and didn't witness the impact or see Buster's body tumble and skid.

I was six years old and had never before witnessed a violent accident, only falls from rusty bikes and knees banging against sidewalks. It never occurred to me that the truck and Buster would eventually collide on their crossing paths, so when I heard a thud and the screech of tires, I wondered if I'd imaged the sounds. Seeking an answer, I looked up at my mother instead of the road. She was screaming, staring wide-eyed toward the middle of the street. I followed the line of her gaze.

The truck was gone. Buster lay on the pavement, clawing at asphalt and opening his mouth. With his back legs bent beneath him, it looked as if he were paddling through a river, struggling against the grey current as it drew him farther from shore. For a few moments, the world seemed to crawl, and when I looked away from Buster, there was no sound, only images blowing slowly through the air: a yellow school bus pulling away from the curb and folding flat

its red sign, sweet gum trees hanging their shadows over lawns, my mother's hands covering the bottom of her face, children with backpack straps looping around their shoulders, a hot and very bright sun.

When time snapped back into its normal pace, we remembered how to move. My mother rushed from the sidewalk and kneeled beside Buster, resting her hands on his body and cursing in the direction the truck had fled. Our neighbor, Jan, sprinted down the street toward our house, soft legs and arms churning through warm air, her children staring anxiously after her. I pinched the ends of my tee shirt and moved to my mother's side. Beneath the bare sun, the back of my head felt hot and exposed.

"Will he be alright?" I asked.

"I don't know. Honey, I don't know." My mother peered through the large frames of her glasses. She looked desperate and afraid, her face stretched into an expression I'd never seen. Whenever I asked her difficult questions, such as how to solve addition equations or whether there were ghosts dwelling in my closet, she usually always knew the answer. Now, her uncertainty made my stomach ache.

A few parents and their children lingered on the sidewalks by the bus stop, whispering and covering their mouths. Most of them walked down separate streets toward their homes, peering over their shoulders. A few asked my mother if she needed help, but she told them my stepfather was coming soon.

Buster now lay still with his head on the ground, breathing heavily. I kneeled, touched his soft fur, felt the fast pulse of his heart. As he panted, his pink tongue pressed against the road, collecting pieces of gravel.

“What’re we going to do?” I asked.

“We need to take him to the vet,” my mother said, glancing down the block toward our house. In the driveway, my stepfather had buckled my litter sister, Marie, into the Jeep and was now climbing into the driver seat. Jogging toward us, Jan’s face was red. My mother started to cry. “God, I shouldn’t have let him off the leash. That *damned* truck.”

“It’s okay, Mommy. Can I come with you?” I smiled at her, the initial shock of the accident already fading and rising into excitement. Something new and important was happening. The afternoon’s typical routine had been shattered, and I wanted to remain part of the moment. I’d learned about death during the weekends, when I was allowed to watch hours of cartoons. Wilde Coyote would leap from a cliff, a faulty rocket strapped to his back. Though he’d crash at the bottom in a puff of desert sand, he’d always recover, as whole and limber as he was before the fall. There was no difference between real life and what played on the television, no reason to concern myself with Buster, how he was going to die.

My mother touched my arm, slid her fingers down to my hand, and squeezed. She returned my smile. “Of course you can come, Emily.”

Buried under their backpacks, my friends stood on the sidewalk, twisting their shoes in the grass and trying to look at something other than Buster. Blazing toward us, the Jeep was half a block away, my stepfather a shadow behind the windshield, its surface reflecting clouds and the bright spot of the sun.

Many of the front yards in our neighborhood were filled with sweet gum trees, their branches heavy with dark leaves and spiny seed pods. After school in late afternoons, my friends and I would run barefoot through their thick shade, pointing finger guns at one another, and yell out "I got you, you're dead," so we'd know when to fall on the ground and hold our stomachs as we writhed in pain. When we pricked the soft arches and tough balls of our feet on sweet gum seed pods until we bled, we ran until the sting dimmed to an itch. Sometimes, instead of shooting one another, we'd unfold imaginary wings and soar gently over the grass, somewhere through Heaven, our feet dangling hundreds of miles above ground. Each evening, we'd run and imagine until the sky grew purplish-blue and fireflies dotted the night. When our parents leaned out the front doors and called us back inside, we'd lift our dead, winged bodies off the lawn and clamor up the porch steps for dinner, hungry and alive and whole.

On the road, Buster was calm and quiet. His eyes were open. Like Wilde Coyote or my friends and me after our dying games, there was no blood on his body. No open wounds or twisted limbs. He looked the same as he did when lying on the hardwood floors of our house, panting and licking my diapered

little sister's toes as she stepped on his face. His fur was as clean against the asphalt as it was against the grass when he stretched out in the backyard, sighing as I'd lie on the ground beside him to use his back as a pillow and watch clouds slug past. Even though I was told not to, I'd stare straight at the sun for a few seconds and close my eyes. As Buster breathed, his warm chest lifting and lowering my head, a white sun flickered in the darkness behind my eyelids.

The Jeep pulled up beside us, and my stepfather bustled out. Gathering her children by the hands, Jan walked home as my stepfather opened the back hatch and helped my mother lift Buster into the trunk. She climbed in beside Buster, and I sat in the back seat beside Marie, who made a high pitched sound when she saw me. Doors slammed and soon my stepfather was steering us toward the main road, away from the neighborhood. I wanted to know if we'd return home before dark but decided it wasn't the best time to ask, so I sat silently and looked out the window past dog-slobbered glass, pressing my fingertips against it, glad, at least, that I wasn't doing homework.

"Roll down the window, Emily," my mother said.

I turned the plastic handle and watched the sheet of glass slide down into the door, wondering where it went after it disappeared into the deep crevasse. Wind blew through the open window and stirred stagnant air. My mother's long hair caught the streams and whirled around her head. We sped past the gas station where I bought bubble gum French fries and candy cigarettes with rolled-up wads of birthday money. Houses and stores and people blurred as we moved

down the road, turned corners, and pressed into the suburbs of Virginia Beach. I tried to keep my eyes focused on one thing, but the images fled away quickly. The movement made me dizzy and tired.

I turned sideways and rested my arm against the smooth leather of the seat. My hand dangled in the emptiness above Buster. His glossy, black eyes were growing dim, as if clouds had slid into them. "Is he going to be okay, Mommy?"

"I think so," she said. His chest rose and fell beneath her hands.

My stepfather sat rigidly in the front seat as he maneuvered around cars and sped through yellow traffic lights. Occasionally, he'd ask my mother, "How're you doin' back there, Tanya," and she'd tell him she was doing alright. When he asked me, I told him I was doing alright, too, but it was partially a lie. Something didn't feel right. Buster seemed to have worsened since we left Hilltop Road. Marie smacked her hands against the plastic car seat and sang, her words indecipherable.

"Will the vets be able to fix him? He looks alright." I turned toward my mother and studied her face.

"He seems to be doing alright. I think he'll be fine. He wags his tail when I say his name, see." My mother kept her eyes locked on Buster and tried to smile. She said his name, and he wagged his tail weakly. Wind whirled or roared through the car, cutting off our words.

I searched his fur for signs of wounds. Even if Buster's body were broken inside, it could easily be mended. Split bones could be set together like puzzle pieces. The heart and lungs could be sewn if they were torn.

I imagined what would happen after Buster was carried inside the animal clinic. Like the doctors on television who surrounded human patients, the veterinarians would lift Buster onto a long, metal table. Circling him with their masked faces and gloved hands, they'd slide shots into Buster's shaved skin and attach IV bags to his legs with needled tubes. Buster would rest under X-ray machines, and grey photographs of his skeleton would glow against illuminated walls while silhouetted fingers traced the injured parts of his body. The veterinarians would fix Buster, because that's what doctors were trained to do. He'd be home by tomorrow afternoon, immobile on the carpet in plaster casts, thumping his white tail against the floor.

Outside the Jeep's windows, gas stations, grocery stores, houses, and people drifting over city sidewalks continued to rush and blur as we sped along the roads. The only thing unmoving was the sky, so I looked up and focused on its heat-bleached whiteness and high afternoon sun. Earlier in the school year, my teacher had touched the surfaces of huge charts as she taught us about the universe, explaining how trees and flowers drank the sun's light to create food. Opening her hands in a wide arc above her head, she said that all life on earth, even our human lives, couldn't exist without the sun, but she warned us not to look directly at it or spend too much time in its rays. It could blind us, burn our

skin, and – I'd learn much later, when I was older – draw all the water from our blood. In my science book, glossy photographs of the sun revealed a globe of orange fire burning against the black sheet of space. Wondering how something so vital to life's existence could also cause harm, I'd touch the cold page and want to know how hot the real surface might feel.

I held my hand out the window to feel the wind. I stared at the sun and scrunched my eyes closed. A white spot flashed against a wall of dark red. I balled my hands into fists and pressed them against my eyes. The sun's flickering shape stretched and moved as if falling down a long tunnel. When I opened my eyes, the blotchy spot was red. It danced over fleeting trees and buildings and people, following my gaze, touching everything we passed.

Back at home, our giant yard was thick with the smell of honey suckle and soil. Most of me wished I was there, swinging on the rusted swing set and running along the fence with my sister, but I heard my mother crying. Resting my arm on the seat, I turned toward her. Buster's chest rose and fell more slowly than it had a few minutes ago, and his tongue curled over the floor. My mother said his name, but his tail didn't move. The sheen of his eyes had gone flat and grey. Despite wind blowing through the windows, a bitter odor rose from the back of the car and filled the air.

"What's that smell?" I pinched my nose. "Is it from Buster? What is it?"

"It's from Buster," my mother said. She asked my stepfather if he smelled it, and he said "yes" in a low voice. The muscles in his neck and jaw stiffened.

Buster wheezed. Resting on the smooth leather seat, my arm was small, unfamiliar, and immobile. Sharp-edged patches of warm light slid over my skin, onto threaded seat cushions, and against the Jeep's plastic doors. Again, the world seemed to slow. Still singing, Marie's socked feet kicked at the air. She didn't seem to notice the smell, how each second had grown long and sluggish.

Beneath the sky, trees swayed in dry wind, drinking the sun's rays. The skin on my wrist tingled and burned in squares of shifting light, so I hid my arm against a patch of shade by the car door. I looked at the sun and closed my eyes, focused on the white globe of light floating in darkness, watched it roll blotchy and red into the world. I'd never learned why it was possible to capture the sun behind my eyelids, how something so huge and distant could move from its position behind the clouds to fill our minds, cover us, and then disappear.

No matter which way I directed my gaze, the red circle followed like a shadow. If I looked at my mother, it danced over her body. If I looked at sister or my stepfather or Buster or my hands, the shadow danced on them as well. It covered trees and touched grass and moved across brick walls of buildings and people, but the sky with its real sun stood still, like a photograph refusing to change.

The bitter smell in the car had thickened, and again I asked, "What's that smell?"

My mother didn't look at me, but her downward gaze told me she knew something. Whether from her resolve to never hide the truth from her children

or from her desire to prepare me for what was about to come, she said, in a clear and steady voice, "It's the smell of death."

I stiffened. The wind felt heavy, like something hard thrown against my body. "Why?"

"Because Buster's dying."

I watched cartoon animals tumble from cliffs, saw raccoons balled up on the sides of highways, and pretend, almost every evening, to die beneath the fireflies and sweet gum trees with my friends, but I'd never heard my mother place the word next to someone I loved. I never understood that it could become a real part of our lives, that it could happen this suddenly. Death was supposed to come only when I beckoned it with my imagination, leave when I willed it away. "I don't want him to," I said.

"I don't either." My mother slouched over Buster.

The matted material beneath his body was a tangled grey, clogged with beach sand and threaded with pieces of dry, brown grass. Dark colors swallowed the whiteness of his fur. At home, Buster was always near my mother, and he'd follow her through the house with his tail swinging behind him like a rope. After the truck that hit him had blazed away, he tried to reach my mother, but his back legs wouldn't move. I was glad she was sitting beside him now, holding his body. Though I wanted to lean over the back seat and touch him, I was afraid to feel the texture of his fur.

The road bumped beneath the Jeep's wheels as my stepfather steered us into the animal clinic's parking lot. Though the Jeep was finally still, it seemed as if the world beyond the open windows continued to slide by quickly. My mother and stepfather carried Buster inside, and we sat for hours on the waiting room's hard benches. Marie sat in my stepfather's lap, crying and kicking her feet. He'd set her down, and she'd toddle over the floor, unaware of what was happening in the other room.

Leaning against my mother's arm and holding her hand, I grew bored. It was easy to shift in and out of worry, and the sky outside the windows was growing dark. I was tired. Eventually, we were led by the vet to a long, metal table where Buster lay. Around him, the room was white and filled with hanging metal lamps. The vet cradled a small syringe in his gloved hand. I looked up at my mother.

"Say goodbye, Emily," she said, stroking my hair.

I touched his stiff fur, sinking my fingers deep into the place where I once rested my head while I watched clouds. He was still breathing. "Goodbye, Buster. I'll miss you."

We left the animal clinic and drove home. My mother cried the entire way.

By the time we pulled into our driveway, I was hungry and eager for dinner. The sky had faded into navy, and only a thin strip of pale light rose like mist above the trees. The houses and sweet gums were darkening, becoming

silhouettes, blending into oncoming night. Fireflies blinked. We'd driven home with the windows rolled down, and long before we reached Hilltop Road, the bitter odor wafting through the car had washed away with the wind, and so had the vividness of Buster's death. Already, only a few hours after the accident, my memories of the day's events, worn away by hunger and a desire to play, were fading, sliding deep into a place where I couldn't find them, where they'd mesh into the fabric of a temporarily unimportant, distant past, allayed only until something drew them from the dust years later.

When my stepfather turned off the car's engine, I flung open the door and burst into the cool, Virginia night, churning my feet over grass and opening my arms. My mother told me it was too late to play, but I knew tomorrow would come. After we returned from school and finished our homework, my friends and I would plunge into afternoon air, peg each other with imaginary bullets, fall to the ground, grip our stomachs, and close our eyes. When our parents tilted through open front doors and called us in for dinner, we'd stand up, brush dry soil from our jeans, and return home, not once looking back at Hilltop Road, its pavement still hot from the day's sun.

## Confessions of a Cloud

You imagined me dead, dangling over Virginia's eastern edge with my belly split, wispy entrails spilled over the walls of a wide and terrible sky. Other children saw soft rabbits and angels, whole things gliding over grass like dogwood seeds, but you hatched me with your mind until I roiled against dry blades of wind. I'd heard someone ask you, "What shapes do you see," then witnessed your grey, upturned eyes. I floated closer, too eager to be yours.

The first time I found you, the tips of your fingers pressed against the glass of a car door window, you sat in the passenger seat, gliding softly over the grey road, looking up at me through rivers of oil left by your fingertips, fitting me inside each small print. No one had ever gazed that long before, just to make me a part of them, and your hair was the color of sunlight. It was sunlight. It was all I could see.

You watched your dog die on a Tuesday, the first death reflected in your slate-grey eyes. I thought you were afraid and looking for angels. I wanted to be that shape for you, your cloud dog with wings. So I gave myself. Someone asked you what you saw. I heard you answer, "God," then felt you make a body of me and break each bone.

## Seahorse

When I was eight years old, living near the coast of Virginia, I found a dead seahorse on the beach and decided to bring it back to life. The tide must have lost its grip on the creature and discarded it close to a patch of dune grass growing farther up the shore. Its grey, ridged back protruded from the sand, and I plucked the tiny thing from the grains and held it against the sky. Except for a few delicate fins that had probably cracked off under the pressure of sand and footsteps, its spiny body was intact. I held it out to my mother, and she touched its tail, said it was beautiful. I agreed, pleased that she liked it, and immediately fell in love with the creature.

My little sister, Marie, stood by my mother's side. The frills of her pink bathing suit twitched in the wind as she eyed the seahorse.

I made a loose fist around it and stared at her. "It's mine. I found it." Marie crouched close to the ground and pushed her hands into the sand.

Lying flat on its side, the seahorse fit perfectly in the center of my palm. Like a mother's pregnant belly, its stomach protruded slightly. Its arched neck and horse-like face tilted forward, tugging against invisible reins. I ran my finger along the seahorse's tail, curled as if still grasping a strand of seaweed, and up along its back until I touched its two tiny black eyes. Though dry, they still glistened and stared longingly toward the ocean.

"I'm going to bring it back to life," I said.

“And how are you going to do that?” My mother said, her brown hair catching the wind and coiling over her face.

“I’m going to put it in some water.”

“I’m not sure that’s going to work, honey. You should just keep it in a box and save it.”

“No.” I cupped the seahorse gently in my palms. “I’m *going* to bring it back to life. I want it to be my pet.”

My mother and I stared at each other for a moment, both squinting in the bright summer sun. Seagulls drifted through the air above us, cracking their calls against the wind. Running over the sand in her pink jelly sandals, Marie headed for the water’s edge. Finally, when my mother looked as if she might offer another protest, she shrugged.

I plunked down beside a dune, plucked off my sandals, and stood up. The sand burned against the bottoms of my feet. Arms spread out and parallel to the ground, one hand holding the seahorse gently, I did what I called the “sand dance,” leaping quickly from one set of toes to the next. Wrapped around my skinny shoulders, a towel bobbed as I leapt toward the water, sprinting past my sister and skirting clumps of seaweed and seashells. Each time my toes touched down, heat needled into my skin, but I continued hopping forward because the ocean lay ahead of me. It was wide and cold and rippling with foamy waves that rocked back and forth against the shore. I braved the hot sand because a few hours at the beach meant dry, sticky hair and ears filled with sand grains that

could be scooped out later in the shower. It meant long, hot afternoons riding the crests of waves as my mother watched from the beach or waded waist-deep into the water.

More than any other place in Virginia Beach, I was drawn to the Atlantic Ocean, the place I'd dipped into since I was a baby. I spent nearly all of my childhood weekends by the ocean, even during colder months when beaches were empty and the sky grey. Sometimes, during mid-fall, when the wind and water were too cool for swimming, I'd beg my mother to take my friends, sister, and me walking along the beach. "I'll wear my clothes," I'd say, "and no bathing suit. I promise. I won't go in," but my mother knew as soon as we saw the ocean, tinted by the sky's red light and curling over damp sand, we'd step in. The tug of recoiling waves against the back of my legs would send me into a long trance, and I'd gaze out at the horizon. Eventually, regardless of the water's chilly temperature, my friends and I would dive in, still wearing our clothes and shoes. Like my seahorse, I'd always been a creature of the sea and longed for water, the heavy weight of its body pressed against mine.

As we swam, my mother and sister would walk the beach, following the current as it gently swept a group of shivering, blue-lipped children further down shore. My mother's long skirt billowed in the wind. I'd rise from beneath the water, froth slapping my chest and back, and look for her. On the edge of the ocean, my mother would move her hand through the air and smile.

When my mother, sister, and I reached the water, I ceased my sand dance and let my burning feet cool. The waves peeled back, leaving a thick strip of dark sand in their absence, and I walked slowly along this damp path, pressing my heels deep. Marie followed, pushing her small feet beside my footprints. We turned and watched our prominent trails disappear as the waves rolled over them. Behind us, my mother unfolded two towels and spread them over the sand. Eager to sit and examine my seahorse again, I left the ocean to sit beside her, Marie following close behind. While my mother rubbed sunscreen lotion our arms and back, I fiddled with the creature, then slid it carefully between a towel's folds.

Before jumping into the water, my mother always led my sister and me along the beach, and we looked for shells and sprawling seaweeds the waves had washed onto shore during the night tide. Moving slowly, with our heads tipped down and plastic buckets in our hands, we paused and knelt by clusters of small jellyfish. Their bodies were clear and gelatinous with sinewy red lines scribbled through their middles, and I liked looking through them at the sand beneath. Though I often expressed my desire to save the jellyfish, my mother told us not to touch them. During our walks, I saw dead seagulls with twisted wings, hollow-eyed carp and mackerel, halves of horseshoe crabs, and glossy sting ray egg sacs, but I'd never found a creature as whole and perfect as my seahorse. Unlike the other animals, which I saw often and thus assumed lived close to shore, my rare seahorse must have come from deeper waters.

I was never allowed to swim too far past the shallows, but I'd often gaze toward the horizon and look for dolphins that sometimes passed by, their bodies and dorsal fins cresting the ocean's wrinkled surface. After they'd gone, I'd jump into the waves and pretend to swim alongside them, farther into the Atlantic.

Sometimes, when I wasn't paying attention, a large swell would knock into me. When the undertows yanked my body beneath the waves and twirled me around in thick green water, a small part of me rose from behind the fear and enjoyed the feeling of being lost and turned upside down. Enveloped in soft colors and sounds of moving water, I'd hold my breath, let my limbs move freely, and open my eyes, unable to see the sandy floor or sky. Beyond the green shallows where I swirled, there existed a darker ocean, one I could only wonder about. Succumbing to the power of waves, not worrying about how much longer I could hold my breath, I'd let myself become a part of that place, the world where my seahorse once swam.

Ever since I was a baby, the ocean's cold crests pulled my young body out of the sleepy heat of mid-summer and carried me along the shore. I grew up in the sand of the Atlantic's beaches and swallowed thousands of mouthfuls of its salty water. It covered my body and filled my fingertips until they turned wrinkly, soft, and white. I knew water could fill my seahorse again, too, and that afternoon, after we'd spent hours at the beach, I hurried into the kitchen and told

my mother to pour me a glass of tap water. It was time to bring my seahorse back to life.

“Honey, it’s not going to work. You’re going to ruin it,” my mother said. She touched the seahorse, admiring it. “Keep it.”

“It’ll work. You’ll see.” I took the glass from her and carried it outside, where wooden beams stretched horizontally and vertically around the perimeter of a screened-in porch. I chose a beam to the right, where sun seemed to shine for most of the day, and plunked down the glass of water. My mother followed me outside to offer a few more warnings, but I paid no attention and dropped the tiny seahorse into the glass. It bobbed around slowly, its black eyes looking out at its strange surroundings. The seahorse turned on its side and floated to the top of the water.

“See,” I said, “it’s already moving. It’ll probably be alive in the morning.” I looked up at my mother.

“Okay,” she said, shrugging, and walked back inside the house. “But it’s not going to work.”

My mother was wrong. I knew the water would soak into the seahorse’s body and its life would return. The tiny swirl of its tail would unravel, and I’d pour sand into a tank and bury green strands of seaweed for it to grasp. Maybe, when I was ready, I’d release it back into the ocean. For most of the afternoon, I peeked onto the porch and watched my seahorse float in its glass of water.

Eventually, it began to sink. Its body grew soft and pliable, and its head knocked

against the side of the glass as he glanced out over his new home. He looked at the plastic patio furniture and toys, the swamp sprouting at the bottom of a hill, the Cyprus and cattails, the long wooden boards and rusted nails, the wide sky.

Eventually, preoccupied with toys and cartoons, I forgot about my new pet. A few days passed. A storm rolled up the coast, soaking everything with rain and dampening the thick, hot air. It must have been a comment from my mother that suddenly reminded me of my seahorse. Gasping and sprinting from the living room, I ran through the long hallway and skidded onto the back porch.

Still resting on its wooden beam, the glass of water was dingy and filled with small specks and chunks of grey. I stood in the middle of the porch, a good distance away from my seahorse, and didn't want to move any closer. My face grew warm.

My mother followed me outside and rested her hands on my shoulders. She ran her fingers through my hair. "I'm sorry, baby, but I told you," she said, "you can't bring it back to life. It's gone."

Floating at the top of the glass, my seahorse spun slowly, pieces of him falling off and scattering, like a bad version of a snow globe. As I'd hoped, he'd become limber, but the water that was supposed to bring him back to life did nothing but erode the body my mother once called beautiful.

When we'd walked along the beach, my sister and I weren't allowed to pick up the broken-winged seagulls and horseshoe crabs, the dried carp and jellyfish rotting into the sand. My mother held back our hands, told us they were

unclean and dangerous. When she let me carry the seahorse home, I thought there was a difference between what I could and couldn't touch, the way I once believed that if I pressed my heels deep enough into the sand, the waves couldn't wash them away.

"Are you sure it's not alive?" I asked, holding my mother's hand as we walked across the porch. "There's nothing else I can do?" I pressed my fingers against the side of the glass. Sun had warmed the water. The seahorse gazed out desperately, as if suddenly recognizing, through the darkness, some new and complicated monster.

## Clouds in Deep Water

Green-water oceans don't reflect  
clouds, but we throw our bodies in anyway.

Belly-down on foam boards, we fill our palms  
with sting-ray backwash. Beneath us, they paddle

in the deep-water valley. It's here, before the sandbar,  
that I lift my hands and feet. My father's toes drag against the waves.

Oily ray wings brush against his knees.  
They dive, stirring sand up from the valley floor.

I raise my limbs away from the cold-finned water. But my father  
pushes down my heels, out of the dry air, into salt-thick green.

He points to the ocean, where half of me dissolves. "Don't be afraid,"  
he says, "They are only flying past. They won't hurt you. Touch them."

I dip my arms elbow deep. I imagine clouds swept up  
from the bottom by wings, how I could learn to breathe there.

## Wing Gang

It wasn't the dusty dirt, Virginia summer sun, rusty bike rides, or backyard fences sprawling with yellow honeysuckle. It was the wings. The best part of childhood had to be wings.

I belonged to a gang of wild children. Lexee, Cole, Chelsea, Tyler, Marie, and I. We loved, more than anything, to imagine. The most common words that fluttered from our mouths were "Let's pretend." Anything might follow. It was certain, however, that we were hardly ever human.

Lexee and Cole's father was a poet. Our mother was a painter. Chelsea and Tyler's parents were abusive drunks. We had nowhere else to go except the imagination. Every morning, we climbed there together. Every night, we tumbled back to Earth, tired and bruised but happy.

I always wanted to fly, but not in the seat of a plane or the basket of a balloon or the metal poles of a hand glider. I wanted wings. Flying was my biggest dream and the dream that slid into my sleep most often. In the mornings, I'd rush down the hallway on my skinny legs, leap into the air, and strain to stay there. My friends liked the idea, and we'd spend whole afternoons jumping off brick window sills and wooden porches, attempting to fly.

My mother fed our imaginations. Once, after deciding to scrap the abstract coral she'd painted, she cut the large canvas into twelve teardrop-shaped strips. On our backs, she pinned two pieces, one above each shoulder blade. She

transformed us into a gang of fairies. We sped around the yard, sweaty hair blowing wild in the wind, flapping and showing off our pink, acrylic wings.

Later, when my sister and I still hadn't had enough, my mother made us new sets of wings. She glued bagfuls of white feathers onto poster board cutouts and bound them to our shoulders with yellow yarn. When Marie and I broke open the front door and burst into the neighborhood, running, sunlight illuminated each wispy barb.

Eventually, I simply imagined wings, beaming them from my mind like holographs. It was an activity that warded off boredom. It stifled fear. Long, thick, feathery wings of brown, white, black, or rainbow sprouted from my shoulder blades and dropped past my knees. Soon, everyone I encountered grew wings, even adults and strangers. Every person in the world, newly adorned with wings, banded together, and in my mind, we were all the same. We could all be happy. We could all fly.

## Andromeda

My sister is a narrow shape drawn  
across dusk. City lights glow on the blonde  
spirals of her hair but don't touch, not like the men  
who coaxed her from the street, notched her hips  
onto ground, and pressed her deep into roots  
of dogwood trees, roots that still thread her fingers.  
When she brings a cigarette to her mouth, she can taste  
their soil, see white blooms cling to bough,

but she feels her movements as a child,  
how she twirled alone on stage in satin toe shoes,  
arms lifted in a wide halo. When she leapt, hovering  
beneath light, limbs unfolded and curved, she focused  
on a distant point to keep a straight path.

In four billion years, when Andromeda collides  
with the Milky Way, their melding won't be a gentle  
thing, but they will remember my sister's dance,  
how, at her landing, petals shimmered from dogwood trees  
till they covered the entire ground.

## Old, Certain Light

Somewhere in space, a star explodes, unbound. Its energy ripples across billions of cold miles, smashing into a cloud of gas and dust. The cloud curls inward, into itself, into a nebula whirling against the blackness. Its center grows warm, bright, magnetic. In the heat of its gravitational attraction, masses of hydrogen atoms collapse against one another. Helium burns into the new body of a star.

~

When my father was fifteen, he would stretch out on his bedroom floor, rested his head between two walls of speakers, and let rock 'n' roll blare into his ears, felt each note pound against his chest like a stone. Behind his eyelids, notes whirled into colors, colors shifted into shapes, and the ground was solid beneath him. He discovered music's ability to carry him elsewhere, to give purpose to life.

~

Virginia Beach would expand every year until thousands of acres of surrounding forest and marsh were consumed. The summer I was born, however, the city hadn't yet encroached on the land my father had trekked across since he was a teenager. Stumpy Lake Woods and South Independence Woods still stretched, unbroken, toward the Appalachian foothills. The first day

my father held me in his arms, he assigned himself a task: Before the city destroyed the woods, he would teach his daughter to fall in love with them.

One of the first times he and my mother carried me into the forest, I was nine months old and hitched to his side, socked feet and fingers dug into his plaid shirt, brim of a bonnet shading my eyes. My mother walked beside us, her slender limbs white in the broken sunlight. She snapped photographs and paused to run her hand across the top of my head. It was early June, summer's unruly heat not yet weighing over the south, the breeze flecked with songs of warblers and sparrows.

The afternoon was calm and clear, but earlier that week, like many of the weeks following my birth, the atmosphere was uneasy. My parents had again argued about my father's distance from us, his tendency to spend most of his free time in the country, playing drums with his band. My mother accused him of spending too much time with music and not enough time with his family. My father disagreed, claiming that he only needed an escape from the city before beginning another seventy-hour week at the metal shop, a job, he emphasized, that he worked to support us.

After they fought, sometimes my mother stormed from the apartment, one arm heaving a bag of belongings, the other cradling me. She'd flee to my grandmother's, threatening to live there permanently. My father sat on the couch, wondering if I'd been taken from him for the last time. Within a few days, however, my mother and I returned.

Today, as we trekked down the trail into South Independence Woods, inhaling the scent of earth and listening to silence, my parents had set aside their quarrels to focus on their daughter. When we'd hiked a half-mile, my father extended his arms, holding me above the path. I kicked my feet and reached toward curtains of Spanish moss drifting from the boughs of a cypress tree. He lifted me closer so I could brush my fingers against them while my mother gently pinched my toes.

"Listen to me, kid," my father said. "You're going to learn to love the woods. No daughter of mine is going to grow up without loving the woods."

My mother clapped and smiled, calling out sounds of celebration, wrapping her arm around my father's waist. I kept my eyes fixed on the Spanish moss.

"From this day forth, my Emily," my father said, pulling me closer, looking into my eyes, "you are a child of the forest." He kissed my cheek, his mustache scratching my skin, and swung me back onto his hip.

For the next hour, the three of us strode down the dirt trail, my father's left arm cupped beneath my legs, his right hand occasionally sailing from my back to point at deer, rotting logs, the cold surfaces of streams. He told me their names and carried me deep into the forest, holding me steady, assuring that I wouldn't fall away from him.

~

Pythagoras, the mathematician, lived in Samos, Ionia, from his birth in 569 B.C. to his death in 475 B.C. He believed the orbits of all celestial bodies were circles, unblemished equations. Everything in the universe revolved together in unison, curling around a central core. Mathematics was the language and rhythm of the universe, the flawless answer. The universe was harmonious, actually musical. The sky sang, and like the distance between each celestial body, a space existed between each note in its song. Every note took its turn. It was perfection, and he called this perfection the absolute truth.

~

When I turned three, my family moved out of the apartment into a townhouse in the suburbs. My parents were done fighting and done dealing with one another, and they separated for the final time. My mother and I moved further into Virginia Beach to live with my grandmother. Only weekends were spent at my father's house, leaving him idling alone during the week, searching for a way to fill his vacant home, bring something back into it.

He craved music, but because his drums were miles away and difficult to move, he decided to play a lighter instrument, one that he could carry. He'd purchased a cheap Crestline acoustic guitar and a stack of Mel Bay beginner books years before I was born, but had never practiced diligently. He knew only a few tunes, including "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" and "Brahms Lullaby," songs he learned to play for me when I was born. Three years later, however, after my mother moved out and took me with her, my father opened his dusty

guitar case, sat in the living room on a hard-backed chair, and dedicated himself to learning.

For hours each day after work, he sat in front of the sliding-glass back door, bent over sheets of music, his brow wrinkled in concentration. As he memorized the instrument's shape, testing finger positions, allowing his hands to slide and stretch across the nylon strings, choppy spurts of notes smoothed into chords, and chords gave way to complicated adagios and sonatas. He eventually learned to play with his eyes closed. When he did, I envision that music and color moved through his mind, across the townhouse's dingy walls and toy-cluttered floor, and into his daughter's empty bedroom. I like to imagine that my father heard a voice woven throughout the tangled threads of music, that when he looked toward the sound, he saw only light.

~

I'd never watched my father play the drums. One Saturday, however, when I was five, my father and I left the cluttered streets and drove toward the country, where he played with his band in a rusty trailer pressed up against the woods. As he wove along the curvy road, he listened to a tape of songs his band would play that night, pounding his fingers against the leather steering wheel and tossing his head as he memorized his parts.

I sat in the back seat behind my father, hair tangling in the wind. Peering upward through the open window, I watched the tops of buildings dwindle and

give way to boughs of pitch pine and cypress. The smell of exhaust and din of engines dimmed. Bitter scents of pine and soil churned into the car.

“When’re we going to get to Jim’s house, Daddy?” I asked, but most of my words caught in the air and washed out the window.

“That’s right.” My father flashed a smile into the rearview mirror.

I asked again. He didn’t hear me and stared ahead at the road, absorbed in the heavy bass and guitar of some ‘70’s rock ‘n’ roll band, rattling his fingers against the Monte Carlo’s faded black interior, as if it were a giant drum.

The year before, I’d sat in the same seat, staring at the same window, as my father drove me back to my grandmother’s at seven o’clock in the evening, the time my mother said she’d return home from shopping. It was a cool night, the sky blotted with clouds and light rain. I watched wind blow beads of water into streaks across the glass. My stomach felt queasy, but music filled the car, my father was near, and the tires rolled smoothly along the pavement.

When we pulled in front of the driveway, my mother’s Jeep was missing. My father glanced into the back seat. “Well, she’s not home yet. You wanna go get some ice cream?”

“Where is she?” I asked. I peered through the window, searching for her. The porch light glowed from behind a trellis, slashing shadows, like bones, across the bare driveway.

“She’s shopping, but she’ll be right back.”

“Where’s Mommy?” The ache in my stomach worsened, and my eyes grew hot. “Where is my Mommy?”

“Don’t worry, kid, she’ll –”

I cried and screamed, stifling his words, and thumped my feet against his seat. Confused, my father tried to comfort me, but his efforts only made me scream louder.

“I don’t know where the hell is!” This time, he yelled, his voice filling the car like something huge.

His anger frightened me, and I wailed and kicked harder, calling out for my mother. The ache in my stomach worsened until I threw up the mayonnaise and tomato sandwich I’d eaten for dinner.

My father climbed out of the car, flung open my door, and hauled me into the night. I reached for him, my hands sticky with vomit, but he held his arms out straight, preventing me from touching him. As he sped across the street and up the driveway, I wailed. My grandmother had already opened the front door and was moving onto the porch, her soft body framed by light from inside. Handing me to her, my father said a few rigid words, turned around, and left. Afterward, I didn’t speak to him for months.

My mother eventually encouraged me to talk to him again and spend nights at his place during the weekends, but the tension, I’m told, never fully faded. Though it had been a year since the incident, I still felt nervous around my father, and as we drove along the road to Jim’s house, I was hesitant to ask

him the question a third time. I sat quietly for the next three miles. Then, the car slowed, my hair flattened, and we turned right onto an unpaved driveway. The trees surrounding Jim's house glowed yellow-green in the afternoon light.

When we stopped, my father lifted me up from the back seat to set me on his shoulders. Gravel crunched beneath his boots as we wound around the side of Jim's house and walked to the trailer, its metal walls splotchy with rust. My father set me down at the foot of its steps and swung open its squeaky door. The musty aromas of mold and dust wafted into the air as we moved inside.

Jim, the guitarist, stood in front of my father's drum set, bent over an electric guitar, watching his fingers move across the steel strings as he practiced a set of chords. The room was dark except for a hazy circle of light cast out by a fixture screwed into the corner above his head. Every few seconds, the color of the light changed, and Jim's waist-length hair glowed red, then blue, then green.

"Sam, what's up, man." Jim looked up from the strings. When he smiled, his eyes nearly squinted shut.

"Jim. Fabulous, fabulous!" My father pumped his fist once in the air, holding it above his head until he reached Jim's side. He nodded at Bill, Jim's brother, who played bass and leaned quietly against the wall. Bill nodded back, and his face turned green.

"Emily, I have something for you," Jim said, kneeling on the floor and pressing his face close. A halo of red light radiated around his head. "Cool,

huh?" He smiled and held out a rubber skeleton the size of his hand. Behind pale blue teeth, Jim's breath smelled like beer.

I plucked the floppy skeleton from his fingers, draped it across my palm. It stared at me with its dead eye sockets and large teeth. Its bones glowed green, then red, and the colors reminded me of trees and blood. It frightened me.

Dangling it from its soft wrist bones, I held it out to my father.

"Cool, kid," he said, bobbing his head.

"Cool," I said.

Jim and my father laughed. I spun away, dashed across the squares of mismatched carpet covering the floorboards, and clambered onto the end of an old, lumpy couch pressed into a dark corner. My feet barely reached the cushion's edge.

After uncapping a Heineken, my father moved behind his silvery set, twirling a pair of sticks in his hands. He struck a cymbal, then pounded the center of each drum. Jim and Bill ran their fingers across their guitars, and long, scratchy trills clashed in the air. A five-foot stack of speakers piled against the far wall hummed as the separate sounds grew louder, then eased together.

Within a few minutes, my father and his bandmates were playing a song beneath the shifting lights.

My arms shone green, then red, and then blue. Music slammed against my chest, as if sound were a solid thing and I'd become its heart. My father smiled at me, but it was difficult to recognize him in the changing light.

Sprawled on the couch cushion beside me, the skeleton grinned, and the color of its bones changed. Its pale limbs were contorted, bent into unnatural angles, and I didn't want to touch it. I imagined it alive, hopping off the couch, dancing in the oscillating light on its tiny bone feet over the caret squares, bobbing its skull to the music, looking at me with wide, hollow eyes. Outside, the trees stood perfectly still.

~

As a star ages, the amount of helium in its core swells. The star's surface glows brighter, hotter, sometimes rising to temperatures of one hundred thousand degrees Fahrenheit. Our sun is a cooler star, its outer shell currently only ten million degrees. During a solar flare, however, when portions the sun's surface brighten, its flames lick and burn at temperatures of over forty million degrees. Days later, clouds of atoms, electrons, and ions spew into Earth's atmosphere, often disrupting radio waves, severing our means of communication.

~

We lived with my grandmother in her two-bedroom townhouse when I was seven, shortly after my mother and stepfather divorced. At night, the three of us shared a queen bed in the downstairs room, its windows overlooking a wide spread of wetland that divided the distant highway from our back porch.

Wedged between my little half-sister and me, my mother slept, but with no streetlights or headlights shining in, my mother, like everything else, was

buried under darkness. Sensing her breathing and the warmth of her body, I searched through the covers until I found her. Unless I was lying next to her, holding her arm, I couldn't close my eyes.

I was afraid of sleep, of what might happen. My body could float away, lift from the bed and drift, in dream, and I'd lose myself. If I wasn't careful, I might wake up on a stony plateau, locked behind the thick walls of a metal safe, surrounded by tall flames of fire and the blackness pressing behind them. I might wake up ugly and cartoonish, bloated and beady-eyed, unrecognizable, suffocated beneath folds of yellow flesh that weren't mine. Or worse, I might wake with my skin rotted away, my body nothing but a skeleton.

"Is this your hand?" I asked, squeezing my mother's arm, anchoring my body down.

"Yes, honey, it's my hand."

~

Copernicus, the astronomer, lived in Poland from his birth in 1473 to his death in 1543. He challenged Pythagoras's theory when he discovered that stars and planets and celestial bodies did not move in perfect circles. Rather, they orbited in inconsistent, chaotic, elliptical patterns. There was, in fact, no harmony, no music, no flawless equation.

~

It was Saturday, and the air was hot, sticky, flooded with the hum of cicadas. My stepsister and I bounded from the curb and raced down Carlton

East Circle. Weaving around a metal mailbox and slipping through a line of spruce trees, we slid to our knees beside the churned soil of a corn field. Two weeks ago, we'd planted a pink wad of chewed bubblegum at the field's edge, and whenever I visited during the weekends, we checked the soil to see if anything had grown. A few feet to the right, tangling along the field's eastern border, a forest's alpine green leaves stood dark against the dusk.

My father, newly married with a young stepdaughter and with a baby on the way, still lived in the suburban townhouse he'd shared with my mother, but the area had changed in three years. The edges of Virginia Beach expanded, and most of the fields and wooded land encircling the neighborhood had been plowed and replaced with shopping centers and new roads. Only a fifteen acre swath of forest and corn field remained at the end of our cul-de-sac, and we spent many afternoons walking beneath the trees, winding along shallow creeks.

My stepsister and I dug our fingers into the soil while we waited for my father. Once he emerged from behind the row of spruce, his Led Zeppelin tee shirt catching the wind, we leapt up from the grass and followed him into the woods. Beneath the canopy's high leaves, the air was cooler and darker. Birds trilled from their perches in the oak. A few broad leaves curled to the ground. Slicing through the forest's tangled walls, taugth ropes of sunlight stretched from the crowns of sweet gum trees to the soil. My stepsister and I ran, strumming our bodies against them, stirring up black clouds of mosquitos.

We reached the top of a steep ledge. Three feet below, a thin sliver of water curled through the mud, wound north, and disappeared in a dense spread of oak and pine. Ever since I was sturdy enough to run, my father and I had leapt the creek, our landings on the far side cushioned by loose, wet ground. When I'd first jumped, I loved throwing my body against the air, aware of nothing beneath my limbs except the open fall. This time, however, I teetered on the bank's edge with my arms clenched to my side, feet screwed into a layer of dry underbrush. Below, my stepsister was already dislodging her sneakers from the mud.

My father leapt, his long hair fanning behind him, and then turned to face me. He held out his hands. "C'mon, kid. Don't worry, I'll catch you."

I hesitated, and then took a step forward. I wanted to give myself to the open air, its threads of sunlight, the nothingness beneath, but now I was afraid.

"Jump, kid," my father said, stepping closer to the creek.

Less than a mile away, beyond the forest's border, Virginia Beach loomed, its sprawl of building and highway creeping closer. Like the deep, country forests surrounding Jim's house, even this small patch of woods would be bulldozed over and replanted with acres of four-lane roads, greasy fast-food restaurants, grocery stores, gas stations, gummy sidewalks, and scrawny oaks planted in squares of soil carved out from the concrete. Not even a dim scar would remain of the creek. For now, however, sweet gum trees pressed against sky, and my father stood beneath them, asking me, despite everything, to leap.

~

A star's fate is dependent on its mass. The larger the mass, the briefer the life. Supergiants, stars with diameters up to one thousand times the size of earth's sun and masses fifty times greater, survive for millions of years. Before devouring themselves, middle-sized stars, like our sun, thrive for at least twelve billion years. Smaller ones, like the red dwarf, may burn for a hundred billion years, a length of time much longer than the universe's current age.

~

Dusk had fallen over the mountains hours ago, but I was awake, enveloped in Appalachian's solid darkness. Beyond the camper's filmy screens, the sky was clear, barren of its cold moon, and thick with stars. The Milky Way arched up from the pine-cluttered valleys.

For most of the night, I lay awake, rigid beneath the blankets, scanning the thin, brown walls of the camper, listening to animals crunch across the forest floor and cry out with sharp voices. Between their sounds, in the long spaces of silence, fear churned in my mind. I saw the metal safe and its walls of endless fire. I felt the fleshy cartoon body coating my shoulders.

I was five hours away from my mother, camping in a rented two-bed camper with my father and his family somewhere in the western mountains of Virginia. My stepmother and stepsister slept in one small bed, and, only a few feet across from them, my father and I shared the other. Afraid of what he might think, I'd never told him about my fears, how I couldn't close my eyes at night

unless I held on to someone. I tried to fall asleep on my own, but if I fell asleep with empty hands, my flesh would surely melt away. My organs would dissolve. In the morning, nothing would remain of my body except its cold skeleton.

My father startled awake when I clenched onto his arm. "What's wrong? Do you have to go to the bathroom?"

"Is this your arm?" I asked, closing my eyes.

"What? Yeah? Whose else would it be?"

"Is this your arm?" I tried to ignore the fear, convince myself the skeleton was a separate thing, detached from my body, but I could feel bones beneath my skin.

"What are you talking about?" He laughed, but the laugh was strained, the way it usually sounded when he was angry.

I asked the question again. He didn't answer.

~

In July, the constellations of Ursa Minor and Ursa Major are high and visible in the center of clear, dark nights, but during the summer of my tenth year, the sky above the freeway was a washed-out universe. Gazing up at it through the window's smudged glass, I sat in the back seat of my mother's Jeep, next to my half-sister. Except for the hum of tires over asphalt, the car was quiet. Virginia Beach and my father were two days behind us.

Earlier in the year, by the time my mother decided to move us closer to her sisters in Fort Wayne, Indiana, Virginia Beach had devoured sections of the suburbs and chiseled away at the forests bordering its western edge. Jim's woods and the small patch of trees beside my father's townhouse diminished, and the city's artificial lights spun thicker veils over the nights. Long before the trees were hacked away, though, my father and I had stopped hiking together.

For the past year, despite his efforts, our relationship had become more strained. My weekend visits to his new house on Bonneydale Road had dwindled to once or twice a month. Once, when he drove over on a Friday to pick me up, I fought out of my mother's arms and hid behind a locked bathroom door until he left. I stopped camping with him in the Appalachian Mountains. I didn't talk to him on the phone. I'd grown afraid of him, of his voice and the anger I knew it could contain, and of the days I spent in his house, far away from my mother.

Pressing my forehead against the glass, I gazed at passing cars, green road signs, illuminated billboards advertising cheap hotels, metal guardrails that seemed to slither alongside the pavement, the lights of an unfamiliar city, and the forgotten, blank sky above them. When we pushed away from the city's borders and entered open country, there they were again: thousands of tiny, illuminated specks hovering over the silhouettes of hills and trees. As the stars blazed, my grandmother, mother, half-sister, and I were cast in darkness. Only the gloss of our eyes reflected the headlights of oncoming cars.

Ahead of us, far in the distance, another city would emerge and muddle the blackness. For now, we were here, somewhere in between Virginia and Indiana, one life and the next, packed into a Jeep, watching the mountainous terrain of our old home become something flat.

The morning we left Virginia, my father clocked out of work early and drove across the city to my grandmother's townhouse to say goodbye. When he arrived, we stood under the sun on the driveway, a good distance already between us, and looked at one another. He tucked his hands into his pockets and squinted. "Goodbye, kid," he said. After he hugged me, I climbed into the Jeep and watched him grow smaller and more stooped as we drove away.

That evening on the freeway, I watched the night sky. I knew little about stars and their formations, except that the surrounding universe extended forever and the stars were somewhere in the midst of that forever. I liked to think about eternity, imagine how it might feel to travel through a place with no beginning and no end and nothing in between.

~

When a star's weakened core burns away the last of its hydrogen atoms, it dies, collapsing in on itself and expanding outward in swelling rings of illuminated gas. The dying star's outer shells are ghostly relics, remnants of the molten body that once pulsed its light into deep space. Eventually, especially when the star is small, the core explodes, pushing its nebulous rings father away

until nothing remains but a white dwarf, a pale center destined to grow cold and black.

~

A year after I moved to Indiana, while wandering around the block one night, my father passed a yard with a twelve-foot telescope angling up from the driveway. Balancing on top of a ladder, a man peered through the telescope's eyepiece, and my father asked if he'd let him glance at the sky. When he looked, he saw a swirling, speckled mass against a sheet of black. It was little more than a soft film of light, but it was M13, the first globular star cluster he'd seen.

Though he couldn't afford a twelve-foot telescope, my father eventually purchased a three-foot Orion and a subscription to *Sky & Telescope Magazine*. Every night after dinner, he strapped a red LED headlamp onto his forehead, carried his telescope into the front yard, and gazed at what he could through the city's light pollution. The globular clusters, nebulae, and planets he found were only fuzzy spots and pinpricks of white. Some could only be viewed through his peripherals, after he averted his eyes. Others could not be seen at all.

Most of the time, my father stood alone in the yard as he looked at the stars, surrounded by cool air and the trills of crickets. In the distance, cars washed over highways, hummed softly. Around him, Virginia Beach grew, crushing against the woods and edging closer to Jim's rusted trailer, swelling over the creek he once leapt with his daughters. Despite everything, a universe

moved above him, shifting itself, expanding and collapsing, angling the glow of its stars across the dusty spaces between. I knew my father did not feel alone.

~

Plotinus, the philosopher, was born in 204 C.E. in Egypt and died in 270 C.E. in Italy. He believed stars and planets and celestial bodies arose from the source, and the source was an inner core, a single essence, a unity that could not be broken down. Radiating outward from this perfect shape, a second circle contained all that emerged from the core, and the energy was our souls. Beyond this existed a third circle, and within it lay material objects, physical forms that changed and degraded, like our bodies and the earth. Though they, too, were from the source, Plotinus said we must not let them draw away our eyes, because the source is love, fluidity, light. If we looked toward the source together, in unison, we would merge.

~

Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, the dippers, were the only star formations I knew how to find on my own. "You can always find the Little Dipper if you find the Big Dipper first," my father once said, pointing at the sky. He swung his hand to the left, tracing his finger from one star to the next as if connecting dots on a coloring book's page. "All you have to do is follow the line of the Big Dipper's outer edge a little ways until you come to the star at the tip of Little Dipper's handle. Then, just follow the little handle down, and there it is. Every time."

~

I was thirteen, sitting next to my father at his dining room table, eating cereal as light crept into the morning and glowed behind drawn curtains. Stretched beneath a shelf dotted with Audubon field guides and books on astronomy and nuclear physics, my father's dog thumped his tail whenever we looked at him. It was early, around five o'clock, and I'd pulled myself out of bed so I could spend time with my father before he left for work. Two weeks before, at the end of June, I'd travelled from Fort Wayne, Indiana, to Virginia to spend July and August on the eastern coast.

I'd decided to try living in Virginia during the summers when I first arrived in Indiana three years prior, after we reached my aunt's large house in the suburbs of Fort Wayne, the place we'd stay until we found our own home closer to the city. I climbed the stairs to my temporary bedroom and lied on the floor. Painted dark purple and hung with three-dimensional pictures depicting bejeweled elephants and peacocks, the room was small and lavish. The designer bedspread and elegant, polished dressers clashed with my ten-year-old taste. Discomforted by the strangeness of my aunt's home, I thought of my father's dwindling figure framed in the Jeep's back window, how he eventually disappeared. Afraid to damage the bed pillows, I cried into the carpet. When my mother found me and asked what was wrong, I told her, possibly for the first time in seven years, "I miss my Daddy."

I now sat balled up on a wooden chair, in front of a window air conditioning unit that blasted out a steady stream of frigid wind. Next to me, hunched over his bowl of cereal, my father flipped through his June edition of *Sky & Telescope Magazine*. Scattered between the long blocks of text, large photographs of dusty, ringed formations unfurled in blooms of pinks, greens, and blues against black backdrops. The ceiling light above the table cast glares across the images, and I leaned closer to them, trying to get a better view.

“That’s a globular cluster,” my father said, sliding the magazine closer to me. In a few places on the back of his hand, scabs covered minor burns he’d acquired while welding signs at work. He pushed his finger against the middle of the globular cluster. “There’s so much gravity here. All these stars around it are being pulled toward its center.”

“It’s pretty,” I said. “Do the colors really look like that?”

“It’s a filter. The stars are actually white. The colors change depending on what filters you use. I can show you some different ones tonight, when we look through the telescope.” His spoon hovered in the air, dripping milk. He reached out with his free hand and rubbed the side of my arm. “I’m so glad you’re here, Emily.”

A small, illuminated fish tank bubbled behind me, one of the only sources of light in the house that morning. “Me, too.”

The first summer I traveled to Virginia Beach, I spent most of my days wailing dramatically into a pillow, telling my father that I wanted to see my

mother. Only a week passed before I asked my grandmother to fly out and bring me back home to Fort Wayne. The second summer, I stayed in Indiana. It was now my third summer, my third attempt to spend a few months with my father without giving up, and already, barely two weeks into my visit, I was stifling the urge to return home.

My father clasped his hand over my shoulder and looked into my eyes. His eyebrows knotted together, like he might cry. "You're not going to leave again, are you?" He stared for a long time.

Flowing from the air conditioner unit and rushing against my face, cold air tangled pieces of my hair, and goose bumps rippled over my arms. The corners of the magazine pages fluttered.

"No, not this time," I said. "It's just - I miss home."

"I know, kid. But this is your home, too."

I wiped under my eyes with my hands and heaved air into my lungs, looking up at the ceiling light and the fan blades stirring up dust. Set to its fastest setting, the fixture shook and rattled from its base, as if it might fall.

"I'm going to stay," I said.

My father smiled. After we finished eating our cereal and drinking our tea, we tied on our shoes and walked our dog through the neighborhood. As we'd done each morning since the first day I'd arrived that summer, we headed toward the pond, where we stood in the grass beneath the boughs of willow trees.

~

Even after the last of a dying star's energy flickers out and darkens, its light, a separate thing, slides across space and angles through the earth's atmosphere into a pair of watching eyes.

~

It was my second year in Indiana, the summer I decided to stay in Fort Wayne rather than travel to Virginia. Instead, my father bought a plane ticket in July and flew out to see me. When he first arrived, I hid for an hour in my room beneath a sheet, looking at the silhouettes of my hands pressed against the fabric and the light behind them, noting how parts of my body could resemble trees. My mother, half-sister, and I had finally moved into our own house, and it felt strange having my father in the place we'd searched for after leaving him. In my embarrassment, I didn't know how to react. I didn't know what to say.

When I finally wandered downstairs to sit next to him on the couch, he said, "I have something for you."

He lifted a small cardboard box from the floor by his suitcase. Plastered around the box's edges were blue and black photographs of a globe-like device with tiny, disorganized holes spread over its curved surface. Light pressed from the center of the globe, through the scattered holes, and onto a dark ceiling in the photograph's background. A parent and two children smiled broadly and pointed up at the ceiling toward the artificial night sky and a bolded word: "Planetarium."

Later that night, after we'd driven over to my grandmother's house for dinner, my father and I turned off the garage lights. We sat on the cold, concrete floor, watching the ceiling and walls as the planetarium's stars circled over cluttered surfaces. Pegboard, new bicycles, tennis rackets, and metal shelves stacked with some of our old toys circled the room. Above us, garage door mechanisms contorted our sky. Specks of light, thrown off their steady orbit, rolled over metal racks, sheaves, and extension springs. Beneath the thin opening between the garage door and cement floor, a sliver of sun blotted out the lowest stars like a city's rising lights. My father angled his arm into the air and traced his hand along a few constellations, telling me their names.

"It's kind of lame," my father said, "but I hoped you might like it."

"I love it." I gazed at the cluttered ceiling, the universe, the scattered pieces of light my father had carried halfway across the country for me to see.

~

In his house on Bonneydale Road, my father practiced his guitar at a wooden stand in my upstairs bedroom. Whenever he climbed the stairs with his instrument and stack of music books, I followed him. Stretching out on my bed and looking at the ceiling, I requested specific songs. I closed my eyes. When he played, I listened to the multitude of sounds he created with six strings, imagined, as he'd taught me, the color each note ignited within his mind.

~

Newton, the physicist, mathematician, astrologer, and neo-pythagorist, lived in England from his birth in 1643 to his death in 1727. He believed in Pythagoras's theory that the stars and planets and celestial bodies moved in musical harmony, but, paradoxically, he also believed in their chaos. He knew their orbits were elliptical but wondered why they didn't collide, ricochet into space, destroy one another. It was gravity, he discovered, that prevented them from crossing paths and allowed the universe to move without clashing. Chaos was part of the harmony. It was the stumble before perfection, the clashing of notes before song.

~

One night in July, my father led me deep into the universe, past the blackened moon and into the wide, dark spaces stretching between the stars composing Ursa Minor and Ursa Major, the kin bear constellations. They were stretched out side by side, invisible back to invisible back, tumbling toward one another as if trying to close the divide between them. My father and I travelled south, gliding between the formations on the crest of Draco, its long, serpentine body curled into the figure S. Somewhere in the distant west, close to the earth's horizon, Mars burned red and huge.

"In space," my father told me as we dropped toward Sagittarius, "there's no oxygen, no warmth. Only particles of gas and dust exist between planets and stars. Everything we're made of is up there."

Hercules tumbled past, legs and arms flailing wildly. Below, a hidden Scorpius waited, tail coiled, poised to spring. "Space is not still," he said. "It looks still, but there're explosions happening all the time. The universe is always changing. It moves and expands. Some astronomers even think there might be an end to space, that it's not infinite."

I listened and followed him as we dove through the heart of Ophiuchus. Below us, on the edge of Sagittarius, a globular cluster bloomed like a lily unfolding its petals on dark water, the gravitational pull of its center drawing more stars.

"Think about how much is out there," my father said, "how intelligent the design."

Billions of miles stretched between each star, between each star and us, between each star and our world, but we moved quickly from one constellation to the next, riding on streams of their light, my father calling out each name, until we plummeted into a line of a roof on planet Earth.

"Star gazing sucks in this neighborhood. I have to get out of this damn city," my father said, lowering his hand from where he'd traced it across the sky. The edges of the universe were buried beneath houses and the lights rising from a distant Virginia Beach. "I should take you to Skyline Drive. There's some great star gazing out there. What do you want to look at tonight, kid?"

“M13,” I said, still leaning on my heels with my head tipped back, my mind lost in the cold contours of space, its glittering giants, its distances, its cluttered nothingness, its end.

“Good one.” He strode across the driveway toward a five-foot Orion telescope and tilted it upward, pointed the lens at Hercules’s hip. “We’ll look at it through a filter. See if it makes a difference this time. Last night wasn’t so good.” He leaned over his telescope’s pointing device, a small computer that calculated coordinates, and typed in the data that would help him locate M13’s exact position. Numbers and letters scrolled across the screen, glowed red against his hands. He inched the telescope to the left.

I drew my thoughts away from the stars, growing aware of the vast front yard, the hard driveway beneath my feet, the crickets and cicadas drenching the air in their chimes.

My father peered through the eyepiece, spun the telescope a little to the right, and waved his hand in the air. “Ah, got it. Come and look quickly. It’ll move fast. Quick, quick, quick.”

I ran across the driveway. Hours ago, darkness had unrolled and settled its edges against the day’s heat, and the air cooled. Across the street from our house, windows and porch lights spilled thin pools across the dewy grass and concrete. Above earth, embedded within the sprawling constellations of two bears, the Big Dipper and Little Dipper swung like ladles from hooks nailed against the night.

We took turns gazing through the eyepiece at the fuzzy, dense spot of M13 until the earth moved and pushed the globular cluster past the edges of the telescope's mirrors.

"Can we look at the swan?" I asked. "I want to see the swan."

"Hell yeah, kid." My father fiddled with the pointing device, and I stepped away from the telescope, angling my eyes upward.

When my father first showed me the swan nebula earlier in the summer, I was crying in the living room, staring at the television and wondering if I should return to Indiana. My father leaned through the doorframe, night flooding around his shoulders, and asked me to look at something with him. When I followed him outside, the cool air felt soft against my face.

"You'll feel better after you look at this," he said, "I promise." He motioned me toward the driveway.

When I reached the telescope, I stood on the tips of my toes to peer into the eyepiece. I could barely see the formation, only a faint, white smudge, but as my eyes adjusted to night, a brighter image appeared in the magnified circle of sky. A bird-shaped mass, the soft curve of the swan nebula, drifted across the deep lake of space. Though it hovered over five thousand light years away from where my father and I stood, watching it glow, I could feel its burning, its gathered gases and dust singing and spiraling inward, transforming, over time, into new stars.

## Hypochondriac

The hot day dense,  
the girl cannot run. She feels  
her body caving in, her addiction  
come back, ever present,  
the smell of decaying meat.  
Perhaps a tumor grows  
beneath the bruise on her hip,  
its lump a little bud.  
If malignant, her head bald  
as polished stone, she'd tattoo  
a yellow lupine atop the scar.  
She wishes it would rain, wants  
purple clouds to cover the sky,  
but it's hot, dead hot, and black flies  
beat the air with plastic wings.

## The Bones

It was Wednesday again. Students had trudged down the hallways to celebrate Mass for an hour in the high school gym, and we were now halfway through the ceremony. Surrounded by Bishop Luers High School's sophomore class, I sat high up in the middle of the bleachers, hunched over, bony elbows dug into my thighs. Soon I'd have to file down to the gym floor and receive communion. I'd been dreading the taste of wafer since first period.

In the beginning of the school year, I'd started running hour-long loops around the neighborhood and had dropped from one-hundred-fifteen to ninety-five pounds. To maintain my weight, I made lists of what I ate and calculated calories, never allowing a day's total to rise much higher 1,300. The wafer would just be another burden on the list, and tonight I'd scowl as I hovered over my composition notebook, jotting down "Holy Cracker (estimated 30 calories)" beneath "Watermelon Bubble Gum (15 calories)."

On the gym floor, a priest stood behind a fold-out table near the basketball court's foul line. He held a silver chalice of wafers in the air. His belly swelled beneath his over-sized maniple. Earlier in the ceremony, as he strode in front of the bleachers and recited the day's sermon, he rested his clasped hands on top of his stomach, and the maniple hung down like a tablecloth. Priests were supposed to lead simple lives devoid of gluttony. If he was truly a man of God, as he often told us, he'd be thin, like me.

As the priest lifted the chalice of wafers above his head, he chanted in Latin, the baggy sleeves of his maniple puddling around his elbows and revealing his wrists, thick as sausage. His voice echoed against the gym's high walls and ceiling, their surfaces hung with ten-foot black and red banners commemorating the sports teams' wins since 1986. Whether he was offering the chalice of bread to God or to the scores of track and football teams, it wasn't clear.

Before Mass, the basketball backboards and nets had been hauled up to the ceiling, and now they hovered horizontally above the floor, suspended by thick cables. Lines of robed, high school choir members shifted on tiered platforms beneath them. Jody, one of the singers, smirked at someone in the congregation and rolled her eyes. It was an expression I'd seen on classmates' faces as they passed me in the hallways or approached me after being selected as my lab partner during A.P. Chemistry class. Even though the look wasn't directed at me this time, I still imagined the backboards swinging down and bowling Jody onto the court.

Except for a few friends, the majority of my classmates at Bishop Luers didn't care for me, and although it was primarily my fault, I still felt bitter. The decline of my reputation had begun in sixth grade, shortly after my mother moved us to the area from Virginia Beach. By the end of my first week at St. John's middle school, I'd established myself as the weird girl who severely lacked social skills. Once, a classmate's parents forced their daughter to invite

me and my friend to a basement sleep-over. One of the girls had smuggled in an R-rated movie, but my friend and I, in order to guard our innocence, decided not to watch it. Instead, we sat upstairs in an unoccupied bedroom, which was neat and fragrant, unlike the 80s-themed, girl-cluttered basement. Kristen and I hardly spoke. We sat cross-legged on the floor, facing one another, and flipped through my copy of *Einstein on Peace*, trying to define large words. We'd occasionally turn off the lights, curious to see if my baggy, glow-in-the-dark Einstein t-shirt cast enough light to read by. It didn't.

Poor reputations don't dissolve after eighth grade graduation, even if the habits that caused them do. Instead, they intensify and spread, especially since ninety percent of St. John's students filter into the halls of Bishop Luers. Sitting next to my classmates in separate desks, knowing what they knew – how I once refused to talk to boys, how I chose to eat lunch in the rectory alone instead of the cafeteria, how I often forgot to wear my bra during P.E. days, and how I cried whenever I was the last person selected onto a team during gym class – made me uncomfortable, and now I was wedged on a set of bleachers between two rows of uniform-clad teenagers, my knees inches away from their backs and my back inches away from their knees.

As I sat hunched on the bench, ribs and backbone jutting up beneath my red polo shirt, I felt self-conscious. I pushed back my shoulders and sat up straight, careful not to bump into Dan Ley, a popular boy who sat behind me,

laughing. Like mine, his polo shirts were always un-tucked and draped across his narrow hips, a detention-worthy crime at Bishop Luers.

“C’mon, man,” Dan’s friend, Matt, said. “Just get it off.”

“No, you do it.” Dan shifted on his seat and accidentally kneed me in the spine. “Oh, sorry.”

“It’s alright.” I glanced over my shoulder, rolled my eyes, and scooted farther away from his legs. I bumped my knees into the girl sitting in front of me. It was Melissa, one of the rumored sophomore whores, who smeared Smackers’ sour apple lip balm onto her lips so often they looked perpetually oily and red. She gave me the look.

The priest finished chanting and set the chalice on the table, the sleeves of his maniple spilling back over his wrists. With his right hand, he drew a cross in the air above the heap of wafers, pressed his palms together, and bowed over the bowl. The wafers were now the body of Christ, and everyone in the gym said “Amen.” A few altar boys and girls moved around the fold-out table, lifting satin cloths, bowls of wafers, and glasses of wine. One stood behind the priest, holding a heavy cross, and it teetered in his hands when he strode to the front of the make-shift altar. The boy was short, his body’s shape and size lost beneath his robe as the crucifix loomed large above him.

In middle school, we used to trek outside across the grass to attend Mass in the adjoining church. We sat in pews lined up in front of a marble altar imbedded with a small block of stone containing, supposedly, slivers of a saint’s

bones. It seemed unbelievable that someone had gathered the skeleton of some ancient holy man, only to send a part of it to a church in Fort Wayne, Indiana. The bones, I decided, were from a mouse. Regardless, something about the act, the veneration of a body's skeleton, even a vermin's, felt holy, and I swear I could feel God drifting through dusty columns of light sliding through the rows of stained-glass windows. At the end of Mass, during the few minutes we kneeled in silence and prayed before trudging back to math class, I pinched my eyes closed and pressed my clasped hands against my forehead. I focused on the darkness and thought, "I love you, God. Thanks for everything." Though surrounded by my classmates, I felt protected within the church's walls, a security I didn't feel while sitting in wooden bleachers beneath a ceiling of sports banners. God, I'd always been told, could hear my prayers most clearly when recited in a place built for solely for him.

Below us, on the gym floor, the cross bearer and altar servers were arranging themselves next to the priest, who'd stepped out from behind the foul line. A music teacher sat at an upright piano in front of the choir. She pounded her hands against the keys, signaling the choir members to sing. In the bleachers, blue bulletins, filled with the day's psalms, lay on the concrete between our feet, encouraging us to join in the celebration of God. A few students plucked them up from the ground. I stepped on mine.

"It's still there. Just tell her," Matt said.

My face grew warm. I cracked my fingers and tried to distract myself by focusing on the back of Melissa's head.

"Hey," Dan said.

I looked at the girl sitting next to me, hoping they were talking to her. Beneath a heap of curly hair, she stared at the cluster of people standing in front of the plastic table, cradling chalices of body and cups of blood. The basketball backboards hovered, like two osprey preparing to swoop down on prey. Rising from the bleacher's lower rows, a line of students, their heads bowed and hands clasped, shuffled toward the priest and altar servers. They all followed the high school's dress code: a white, red, or black polo shirt with khaki or blue dress pants. As soon as one row emptied, the next row of students stood. They all looked dully the same.

"Hey." Dan tapped me on the shoulder this time.

"What?" I swiveled around, tugging on the back of my shirt to make sure my pink underwear wasn't showing.

Matt stared out at the basketball court, avoiding my eyes when I glared at him. He had a long neck and spiked brown hair. Last year, I'd been in love him for an entire month, and for a few days, he actually responded to my interests. I'd say hello, look down at my English textbook, and smile. He'd lean against the lockers, bend his body slightly over mine, and touch my shoulder. He even nodded when he passed me in the halls. After he became friends with people from St. John's, however, he stopped talking to me. Perspiration now built up

under my armpits and along my lower back as I looked at him, and I wondered if he could tell that I wasn't wearing deodorant.

Dan pointed at my ear. "You've got something on your head."

"Oh." My face grew warmer, and I grazed my fingers along the ends of my hair, careful not to lift my arm too high. When I couldn't find anything, I searched higher. My thumb knocked into a cold, smooth bump. As I drew down my hand, Matt smirked and muttered something to Dan. A red ladybug scuttled across my fingers and rolled, like a spotted red bead, down to the bones of my wrist.

"Whatever," I said, flinging the ladybug onto the blue bulletin beneath my sneaker. It crawled in circle around an icon of the cross and then scuttled under my seat.

The row of students in front of me stood up, turned to the right, and shuffled toward a long set of concrete steps leading down to the gym floor. Most people dropped their blue bulletins on the wooden bench, but a few carried them and sang as they trudged down the stairs. Behind me, Matt and Dan were finally silent. It was almost my row's turn to stand, and while I waited, I glared at the spot where I'd dropped the ladybug.

A few weeks ago, hordes of them had swarmed into the city during their spring migration. They crawled across the high school's brick walls, pooling into corners and coloring the edges of a cross that hung next to Bishop Luers' black-lettered sign. A few landed on the green shutters of my house, found holes in

the window screens, and circled over our ceilings. During after-school runs, I looked for them in soft patches of light flickering on the white trellises I passed beneath when crossing a bridge. I sometimes paused to watch them scuttle over the slats of wood and listen to the creek trickle beneath us, a sound I usually missed as I ran by. Though most people considered ladybugs a pest, I thought of them as more of an adornment than a nuisance, but not today. Today, this ladybug had sinned. It had embarrassed me.

“Go,” the girl with curly blonde hair whispered to me. She stared at the floor.

Most of our row had risen and was tromping down the stairs toward the priest and altar servers, who were plucking up wafers and placing them into the cupped hands of students and staff. A few people, mostly teachers, stuck out their tongues, forcing the priest and altar servers to reach into open mouths. I wondered if the clergy members could feel the steamy heat of breath on their fingers.

“Sorry.” I stood up and strode after the procession of identical people. Lacing my fingers into a tight fist, I bowed my head and stepped into line. Above us, numbers contorted as the sports banners rippled in some strange wind, perhaps from the movements of our bodies, maybe from something else.

As I clomped down the stairs, I thought about the ladybug, wondering if another one was scooting around on the top of my head, making me look like an idiot. Somewhere behind me, Dan and Matt were walking down the bleachers,

preparing to take communion. I was supposed to pray on my way to the priest, the way I used to when I was younger, but instead I stared at my bare arms, dimly tan from the hours I spent running beneath bright afternoon suns. I didn't think about how, every May, ladybugs drifted through Indiana air to cover us, softening all the hard edges with their bodies.

At the bottom of the concrete stairs, I stepped onto the gym floor and turned left toward the priest and altar servers. For a minute, I was forced to walk in front of the bleachers, which meant that the entire sophomore class, except those still in line, could see me and any ladybugs stuck to my hair. The line moved slowly as people collected their bread and bowed to the boy holding the teetering cross. On the way back to their seats, students chewed or sucked on their wafers. Most were polite and kept their mouths closed. A few chomped down like cows. All of their stomachs seemed to bulge beneath their polo shirts. None of it looked reverent.

In middle school, I used to pray for many of these people as I recited the Lord's Prayer each night, clenching my clasped hands when I reached the seventh and eighth lines: "And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." I believed that if I prayed hard enough for my classmates, God might one day grant me a better social life. After four years, however, nothing had changed, and I strayed from my religious habits. I stopped praying for the people I once wanted to forgive and learned how to hate and judge them instead. I counted calories and ran. I lost weight and lost myself

in the steady smack of sneakers against pavement, the hour of adrenaline and concentration, the sloughing of flesh from my body.

Three people stood between me and the altar server, rocking from side to side as they edged closer to the wafers. The mutterings of “the body of Christ” and “Amen” became clearer as I took another step forward. In the row beside mine, a boy lifted his hands to the priest, whose belly supported the bottom of a chalice.

“The body of Christ,” the priest said, lowering a wafer into the boy’s palms.

The boy filled his mouth with a pale circle of bread, kneeled, and drew a cross, his index finger pressing against his forehead, then his chest, and then his shoulders. A silver W.W.J.D. bracelet slid around his wrist and jangled. In sixth grade, I’d owned at least ten of the cheaper cloth versions of the “What Would Jesus Do” bracelets but had given all but one away. The boy stood and turned to reclaim his seat on the bleachers. The fabric of the priest’s manipule swayed from his belly as he lifted the next wafer from the chalice.

I took another step forward and pressed my elbows against my hips. I liked to feel the bones sticking out. Every morning, I’d stand naked in the full-length mirror, lifting up my arms, bending my back, making sure ribs and spine were still visible beneath skin. Then, I’d cover my body with baggy uniform clothes and have my mother drive me to school. Once, she walked into my room while I was still pulling on my red polo shirt. Leaning against the doorframe

and shaking her head, she said, "You're too skinny, Emily. You look like a damn dragon." When I walked past her into the hallway, she reached out to rub my back, but I stepped away from her and said I liked the comparison.

The girl ahead of me cupped her hands and raised them in the air. The altar server looked into her eyes, holding a wafer in front of her nose. Etched into its pasty surface was a small cross. When I was in middle school, I loved taking communion, and after I placed the thin sliver of stale bread on my tongue, I'd kneel on the padded kneeler, pray for my family, and ask God to take away my anger. Now I disliked the small pieces of bread, how they undid the hour run I'd taken the afternoon before. Sometimes, I was tempted to fold my arms across my chest, a gesture assumed by non-Catholics indicating that they were not yet ready to consume Christ's body.

A few weeks after my mother artfully expressed her concern about my weight, I'd lain down in bed a few hours earlier than usual, hungry, with an aching stomach. I planned to wake up around 5 a.m. and run for an hour before school, but I suddenly felt heavy. When I couldn't fall asleep, I sat up, arms wrapped around my waist, and looked past the bedroom window's white-laced curtains at the night. The walls of my room were painted a cold blue, the trim and furniture an ivory white, but the darkness sifting in greyed everything, and it was soft, full of cricket trills and wind. I imagined how wide it must feel to stand still within something as formless as the night. After a while, I called out for my mother, and she walked down the hall from her bedroom to sit beside me.

She touched my shoulder blades and asked what was wrong. I told her that I was hungry and wanted one of the chocolate chip cookies she'd baked earlier that day. "I'll be right back," she said. When she returned, she handed me a whole plate of cookies and a glass of milk. As I ate, she rubbed my back, her palm bumping over the terrain of bones. "Honey, this is not healthy. You need to stop this," she said. "If you don't, I will. Please. Stop doing this to yourself." When I bent over my hands and leaned against her, I noticed the softness of her body, how different mine had become.

The girl in front of me lifted the wafer to her mouth and drew a cross in the air. Turning to the right, she strode back toward her seat. I stepped up to the altar server, who was wearing the same outfit as me, a red polo shirt and navy blue pants. I didn't know her. She was younger than me, a freshman, and pretty. She reached for a wafer.

Behind me, somewhere near the bench where I'd sat in the bleachers, the ladybug crawled across the dirty concrete, probably skirting the soles of sneakers and looking for a safer place to hide, a fold in a crumpled blue bulletin or a dark crack in the steps. I should've found a way to keep it cupped in my palms until Mass ended. A few weeks ago, on the way to English class, I'd passed a cricket in the hallway but was too embarrassed to save it. A few minutes later, one of Dan's friends cackled and stomped on it, and I knew I would never forgive myself.

“The body of Christ,” the altar server said, holding the sliver of bread above my upturned hands. She stared into my eyes and waited for me to respond, never once looking away.

“Amen,” I said. She dropped the wafer into my palms, and I placed it on my tongue. Drawing the sign of the cross, I walked back to my seat. As the bread began to dissolve in my mouth, I knew: There were better places to hide than the hallways and gyms of high schools, and I could’ve brought the ladybug to one of them on my way to lunch after Mass. In front of all my classmates, I could’ve opened a window overlooking the quad and set the ladybug loose above the grass. The first time too many of them invaded our house, my mother showed me how to brush the ladybugs into my hands and carry them back outside. They crawled to the tips of our fingers, clicked open their wings, and lifted into the air.

## Old Cloud Dog's Wildflower Field

An old dog now, I stagger on a strip of gravel. Nearby, on a lawn, a child stands, her feet washed in a crowd of pale tulips, fingers pinched beneath their petals. She watches me and wants to remember who I am. To her, I am only a mesh of bone, muzzle whitened, tongue dried, fur scattered by erratic wind.

In half a year, I'll snag my teeth against roots, curl into eastern red clay, forget the sky I came from, where the child made me. I have never been afraid, so I'll shift down this road toward a field of wildflowers, nuzzle my snout into yellow pollen, bright as sun, and lie against the earth, as I never have. If I could speak, I'd lift the cloud-shadow of my head, say, "Child, even when you stopped looking, I followed you. Now sift through these wild stems, search for what you used to know."

## Color

### I

I hate the mirror in the dining room and the one in the bathroom and the full length mirror on the back of my bedroom door. I look into them and see a strange face with blue circles under small eyes, crooked tea-stained teeth, and frizzy hair the color of dry mud. Running my finger over the cold glass, I trace the face, the scars, the lips. I close one eye and the image shifts. My finger is lost against the background behind the mirror, and I no longer know what I'm tracing.

### II

My mother sits at the sewing machine in the dining room, her back to a window. She's pale, and streaks of white acrylic paint clot the dark loops of her hair. Her lips are red from nervous chewing, and the contours of her face are tense and white. A mist of dusty sunlight casts her eyes in shadow.

The oak table ripples with waves of lace. Reams and heaps of translucent fabric swallow my mother in a sea of white. She almost drowns beneath the quiet swells.

The sewing machine clicks and roars.

My mother's hands flicker below the needle. They move a thin sheet of lace across the flat surface of the sewing machine. The tiny spear thrusts white thread through a lace curtain forming under the fleeting touch of her fingers. It's

covered in ghostly leaves, and I'm afraid that she will sew her flesh into the fabric.

I stand in front of her with a glass of water trying to decide if I'm thirsty. The air smells like fresh fabric and vinegar. A finished curtain hangs from a raw iron bar at the front window. Sunlight rushes through it, and for a moment, I mistake it for a cloud.

"Those are beautiful," I say.

"Yeah, I guess." Her brown eyes flash at me. She looks down.

"You don't like them?"

"They're only temporary."

"I think we should keep them. They're pretty."

She continues sewing, her hands flashing over the lace like white lights about to burst. "These are only temporary," she says. "We'll get better ones. No sense in having nice ones if we're just going to move."

I clench the glass in my hand, gazing at the water as it shudders. Suddenly I'm parched and cold. "I didn't know we were moving again."

She pauses in her sewing and smiles up at me. She laughs. "We're always moving, honey. You know that."

I don't smile back. I don't laugh. The stagnant dust shimmers around her wild hair. I try to breathe.

I want to open the window, let in the warm, breezy air. Let it lift the thin lace curtains. The wind will move the dust. It will churn the piles of lace, and

they'll hold my mother in a cold mist and keep her there and we won't move again.

I want to open the window. But she's sealed it shut with thick, white paint.

### III

My feet are below the wooden frame of the mirror. I can't see them from where I stand looking at myself. But when I press my forehead against the glass and glance down, my toes peek up at me from a mirrored floor. I pull myself away again.

It's strange to see my entire body all at once.

### IV

I paint with my mother in an old bedroom she turned into a studio after I left. There's only one canvas, and we take turns sliding across the floor to kneel in front of the stretched fabric. Behind the curtains, the windows seep sun. The light catches our blue fingers and white hands as they move over the painting with brushes and palette knives. Blotting. Stroking. Sketching. Writing across slabs of damp paint.

My mother shows me how to turn falling water into mist. I build ledges of rock to catch it.

The paint dries. The canvas is covered in grey stones and a slate wall that stretches over the horizon and reaches for an aqua sky. Three frothing rivers

tumble over the cliff, crash onto the stones, and pour towards the center of the canvas. Become one. Catch the white sunlight. Break it. Like a prism.

V

My mother believes in change. She does not believe in roots.

She says that my grandmother married a terrible man after her father left them moneyless in the mountains of New York. This man beat his children with his alcoholic fists. He shot my grandmother's pinky off with a handgun and blamed his callous heart on the booze simmering in his stomach. My grandmother relearned how to play the piano.

My mother was seventeen when she decided to go to art school. Her stepfather sipped whiskey as his wife shuddered above the keys, and he laughed at my mother's petty dream. Through thin, yellow lips he uttered *failure*. He uttered *waste*. My mother didn't believe him. She packed her clothes and a paintbrush, moved to Virginia Beach, and married a Cuban.

But nothing lasts long.

She was tired of living on a screened-in porch, tired of the Cuban's mother and the tiny bed and his fists. She met my father, and then she met my stepfather. She left them both, and she left Virginia ten years after I was born. My half-sister was only six. We fled to Indiana where corn fields are endless.

Now my mother is coming home again.

She's looking for someplace else to paint, someplace else to exist. The color red is too bright for her. A softer shade of purple rests somewhere else.

Maybe the sun-bleached stones of Arizona hold it. Perhaps the tall mountains shrouded in blue mist whisper the hue to the hills of New York.

I think she'll keep searching forever. I will follow her.

## VI

I look for someone in the mirror. I know she's there behind the hazel eyes, but I can't break past the spheres glistening in the dim light. The face is white and empty and damp. I wipe away the rush of salt with the back of my hand. The lines across my palms are dry and grey, but there will soon be more. They'll be vivid, red, and wet as ink.

## VII

The trees on her canvases have no roots. They're the color of mossy stones, forest green and marble brown smeared across a taut emptiness. A storm of white engulfs trunks of the leafless trees, and smeared between the fallen limbs and the hungry blizzard a dark, faceless figure stands. My mother says it was a mistake, a flaw of the brush as she turned to dip the bristles in water. She didn't wipe away the smudge.

I know the figure is my mother, afraid to admit she's lost.

## VIII

I left them five years ago. I left my little sister alone between tall stalks of Indiana corn in a Catholic school with red brick walls and a marble church. I left my mother crying and believing she was the reason I ran away.

I didn't run away. I went to school.

I wanted to write, drench the pages of a journal, turn symbols into something more. I was starving for new words, and I couldn't find them where I was.

I needed to change. It'd been over four years since we moved back to Indiana from Florida, and impatience grew steadily inside of me until I couldn't stand the burning press of its breath.

Moving became a routine as simple as pouring milk over cereal for breakfast. If I don't eat, I'll die.

## IX

Ribs beneath my breasts press like fingers against a wall of flesh. I search the mirror for any signs of change. It took months of running to see the knobs of my hips, the ripple of backbone running between sharp shoulder blades, the high cheekbones lifting my little eyes.

If I keep moving I'll stay this way. The person inside of me will emerge. The bones will become sharper. I might find something that I never knew was there.

I just have to keep running.

## X

My boyfriend lies beside me on a bed. His head presses deep into a white pillow, his eyes half hidden behind heavy lids and wet eyelashes. He looks down at a shadow on the sheets. The lamp on the shelf behind me casts a mask

of light over his face. I've kissed his lips for a little longer than a year, but I realize that I've never seen this man before.

"Are you okay?" I say.

"Yeah." Derek's voice cracks.

I touch his cheek, but he doesn't look at me. I move my thumb over his eye and gently lift the lid. He turns his eyes slowly towards mine. The red veins go deep.

A small, white face in the dark pupils stares back at me. I don't know this face, but it's a parasite in the folds of his mind. I placed it there. I held it out to him, and he took it. Now it is growing and wants to escape.

Derek looks past me, but I seize his eyes with my own. I empty my mind. It fills with darkness, and I feel myself drifting into the dark spheres between his marbled irises.

I leave my body somehow, and the weightlessness is something I've never felt before.

The soft sheets are invigorating over my bare arms. The sharp angle of my knuckles presses into my cheekbone, and I move my hand. I feel the thin, black lines of the cherry blossom flower tattoo blooming above my toes.

Suddenly I'm numb. I'm nothing. Derek's eyes are changing. The world grows dark, but I can see everything. Something grows in my mind. It comes from his eyes. It rushes out in images, in words, in reams and heaps of white words.

I stand in a dark cave with towering walls that rise blue and deep above my head. Between the rough stone a silent, still pool waits in blackness. The air thickens with the scent of wet stone and lilac. I move toward the mouth of the cave and milky tendrils of light slip across the water as I drift closer. The cold bite of wind touches my skin as I leave.

There's nothing but wind. The smell of slate. Water.

A full moon hovers in the black sky. Freckles of light shimmer around the white globe, and the pool begins to move, rippling and dancing with the flicker of stars. The sky is purple and moving. Waves crash against a dark bank of sand, and it shimmers yellow.

I open my eyes, and the painting of the waterfall by my window comes to life. The water roars over stone. Reflections of rock and sky shatter in the rushing, churning, frothing pool simmering in shadows beneath the falls. I can almost see my mother's hand move across the face of the cliff and turn the water into mist.

"I love you," Derek says.

I blink, startled, and pull my body on top of his. He closes his arms around my waist. I want to hear the crack of the leather journal as it opens.

"I love this moment," I say. The vision of the purple cave swims behind my eyes.

"I could wrap my arms twice around your body. You are so tiny." He squeezes me tight. His arms are warm. I want to feel the cold air rushing

through the mouth of the purple cave. I want to see the words flowing purple over the page.

I bury my head in the pillow behind his head. I peek out from the white hills of fabric and look at the journal above the oak-framed mirror. My ribs press against Derek's chest. He closes his eyes, and the white face blinking in the darkness disappears.

## XI

The mirror wakes in the bathroom, candle flame flickering across its surface. A lightning storm stole the electricity, and my bladder wasn't strong enough to hold the mug of tea until the lights came back on.

I had to be brave and run upstairs by myself.

I wash my hands in cold water and look at the shadowed face in the mirror. The bone-white skin is smooth in the flickering flame. I touch my cheek with a damp hand, the water like paint against an empty canvas.

## XII

There is no purple paint. My mother used it on the leaves in the hallway.

"You can mix the red and blue," she says. "That makes purple." She turns her head, a paintbrush poised in her hand. Her canvas is nearly covered.

I squeeze the tube of blue. The tube of red. The pungent odor of acrylic smells like blood. I feel dizzy and use the paintbrush to mix the colors. I'm not a painter, but I make purple. I imagine the word. *Purple*.

For hours I paint, tasting the shape, the word, of each color. *Blue. Black. Red. White. Green.* My body sways in the shadows of the basement, loosening and stretching as I move my hands over the delicious face of the wet canvas, the blank page gushing with strokes and streaks of words.

The cracked window issues cool gusts of air, and the suffocating breath of paint grows thin and sweet, delicious wind rising in my lungs. *Delicious.*

My mother dips her paintbrush into a glass of water, a poet dipping a feathered quill into a well of quivering ink. A white cloud billows into the liquid, a milky mist of ink filling the emptiness with *cloud*.

I touch the bristles to the pool of black paint glistening on the palate, spin the brush until it's a sharp point, as sharp as the tip of a pen, and lift the brush to line the white rose hovering on my canvas.

I step back.

The deep purple swallows the white flower. *The deep purple swallows the white flower.* My heart is a racing, frothing river. The deep breaths of my lungs churn the water. Sun breaking through the billowing curtains catches the mist, and the colors bursting from the drops are delicious words.

I pause in exhaustion.

A small mirror rests on a wooden shelf. I catch a glimpse of myself. Streaks of paint run through my hair and across high cheekbones. A wild presence shudders behind my eyes like a grey heron spreading wide, white

wings. Glints of light flashing in my eyes and swells of paint change into words.

They grow into long lines, loops, dashes and points of golden ink.

My fingers tingle. Something moves in my chest.

For a moment, I think I'm looking at the reflection of my mother.

## Dialect of Holy Spaces

We write with the color of sunflowers,  
scrawling our hearts all over the face  
of our lover and eating pineapple  
in dimly lit kitchens  
with legs winding in and out and between  
and under the other's when one wooden chair  
becomes enough to hold two,  
    thinking the checkered floor  
may be a nice place to lie down  
    for a while, sway  
like a long, seedy flower caught in the wind.

We move across the paper of time  
knowing it will end,  
drop off to nothing,  
prove Plotinus right and the men cooped up  
in their holy rooms  
    wrong.

    This is why we root ourselves  
to chairs in kitchens with cracks -  
through which we will one day escape -  
crawling to the corners,  
    and write while bodies play  
music and read of Armageddon  
at the breakfast table topped with vases  
sprouting new flowers:

    it will all end,  
and sitting with words  
in our hands is the act of holding on  
when the spot of our world in a cocktail  
of stars is like punctuation at the end  
    of a long sentence.

## The Story Earth and Flesh

I abandoned the city's grid for tangled woods,  
traveled five hundred miles to live with my father  
beside a nameless land. For weeks, I walked

alone on bare earth, followed paths that circled  
back to where they began. I never strayed, never  
noticed how morning sun hung in the east, how

swamp's black mud settled in the forest's sunken core,  
how clutches of hemlock and red pine thinned at its rising  
edge, never needed to find  
a way home.

When my father walked beside me, led us  
away from trails, we tangled our boots in thick knots  
of fern, blackberry, cattail. He said to look

beyond trodden dirt, notice how western clouds glow  
brighter when pressed by a low sun. For the first time, I  
touched leaves of birch, maple, and oak, understood

the difference. I felt the landscape slope beneath me,  
lost in fading light. Until then, I never  
knew the woods had a name,  
my own.

## Snowy Woods

We began the hike from the kitchen, the starting point of all our treks through the woods. Hikes are usually provoked by an uncertain, hesitant remark, a “hey, the woods are beautiful today.” We know we should be spilling over that pile of homework or fixing that busted kitchen drawer filled with Tupperware lids instead of wandering along the looping, tree-cluttered trails in twenty degree weather. I’ll lean my forehead against the cool glass, peering past the hill and rusted trash barrel into the shadows of the woods, and sigh. The *clink clink* of a metal spoon against ceramic echoes through the kitchen as my father stirs sugar into his tea. He waits for an answer to the question buried beneath his remark. His face acquires the look of a child with wide, begging eyes. It’s difficult to motivate ourselves in winter, and hikes usually happen only when both of us embark on one together.

I’ll look at the open books, scattered paper, and laptop, whirring and blinking from the kitchen table. Long, sedentary hours staring into its bright screen loom ahead of me. Outside, soft snow leads into the trees. My father hums, tapping the spoon against the mug, and stares out the window.

“Yeah. Let’s go hiking,” I’ll say. “I need to stretch my legs.”

He’ll offer a celebratory “yay,” throwing his hands in the air, and gulp down the rest of his tea. We sprint off in different directions toward our bedrooms, throwing on warm clothes, pulling on boots, grabbing walking sticks,

and plunging into the thick, white world beyond our backyard. Bundled in wool hats, coats, socks, and long scarves, we won't return home for at least two hours.

Forty minutes into our hike and we're trudging through a foot of accumulation, ignoring the sun as it shifts from its high afternoon position behind the clouds and begins to sink. Soon, it will dip beneath the horizon, its rays angling into the atmosphere in such a way that edges of clouds will be dyed orange, pink, and violet. I don't understand why this happens, why a lowering sun breaks the air open like a prism. Part of me doesn't want to. I like believing the sun is filled with a desire to paint the evenings with its light for no other reason than to make the sky beautiful.

The trees, their branches like bleeding ink, press against the colors of the sky and become darker. My breath curls into the frozen air, creating clouds that sometimes hover because the day is so still and so cold that nothing wants to move. But we continue to push forward through the tangle of trees, brushing sharp branches away from our eyes and bare skin.

We've been hiking in these woods nearly every day for five years since I moved to Hastings, New York, to live with my father. Located southwest of the Adirondack Mountains, Hastings is a small town in an area of wooded land bordering the edge of Lake Ontario. Forests thrive here. My father and I started simple, following the obvious ATV and old logging trails, walking large loops and circles along designated paths. Marveling at clusters of white birch and fire fungus sprouting like red flames from old stumps, we'd often lose our way after

wandering down an unknown side path. Once we became familiar with the trails, we'd veer off the repetitious routes and stride in new directions, "cutting 'cross country," as we called it, following the course of the sun or the slope of hill. My father carried a compass at first, and we'd chart our way home, relying on the needle and the pull of the poles.

I felt too human, too full of dull senses and the need for signs and maps, stumbling through the woods, lost without a GPS, paved roads, fixed landmarks. I'd watch a porcupine waddle over the ground, belly dragging along snow or leaves, toward a patch of hemlock trees or his den. Led by his instinctual knowledge and the intimacy he shared with the woods, I knew he was never lost. Eventually, despite my belief that I'd never understand the forest the way a porcupine did, the layout of the trees and dried river beds and fields soaked into me and my father's memories as well. We began to understand the woods the way we understood our home or the little town we lived in. Like the porcupine, memory and instinct began to guide us. We'd often walk in a random direction without a compass, purposely getting ourselves lost, so we could find our way back home, relying on nothing more than our bodies' intrinsic knowledge and connection to the land.

I fell in love with the woods, the way I might fall in love with another person. I'd often hike to the edge of Beaver Pond, listening to long cattails clack against one another in the wind, and admire the sky's reflection on rippled water. Harmony, a mutual existence, a type of moving circle I became a part of,

thrived in nature, and “this,” I decided, “this is the place where my soul belongs. This is the place I will come to and become a part of when I die.”

Snow covers the ground and droops over the sloped branches of trees, their bark black in the muted light of winter. It might be November or January; I can't remember, but time, like birth and death, doesn't matter in the woods. Everything here recycles, and winter stills the forest into a world sustaining and building itself.

Splashes of light spill through the canopy whenever clouds part, temporarily peeling back their grey bodies from a muted sky, one that seems almost to glow like a blue light bulb. The warmth from these sporadic bursts of sunlight entices my father and me to pause for a moment. We tilt our faces upward, close our eyes, and let warmth swim over our numb faces.

We continue walking. Bitter air snips at my exposed skin. A thin branch snaps against my cheek, and I lift a gloved hand to check for blood.

“Ow! I hate when that happens,” I say, noticing the wool glove is clean. I scrunch my cheek, feeling the beginnings of a welt. It stings.

“Especially in winter. Everything becomes brittle. The cold makes things hard, like it's sucked all the life out of them and made them bitter,” my father says, pushing limbs out of the way with his forearms.

Many of the trees in the woods behind our house are young and small with trunks barely wider than a foot in diameter. Some are as thin as a wrist and under thirty feet high. Only a few have grown so thick that when I wrap my

arms around them, I can't even come close to touching the tips of my fingers. A giant pine's branch breaks through the canopy and seems to stir up the clouds.

These trees are laid out in large, precarious patches of coniferous and deciduous species. Cluttered groves of pine and spruce thrive in the middle of the forest. Bands of oak, maple, and birch surround this dark core.

Due to select cutting, most of these trees are no older than a hundred years. With this type of pruning, every ten years or so, loggers are hired to locate and slice down the straightest, thickest trees in the woods. They harvest mostly oak and other deciduous species, but sometimes pine. The purpose of this slaughter is to raise money for paying off taxes, and the selection and cutting of trees occurs every fall for at least four consecutive years. Occasionally, if a trunk is twisted or diseased or lives in the soft soils of the swamp, a lucky tree will be given the chance to live past the hundred year mark, but I think the trees should be appreciated for what they are, and currency should not govern their lives the way it governs ours.

We've just left Ball Road trail and are weaving through clusters of slender trees towards Emily Fields, two of the many places in the woods we've given names to over the years. During some summer a few years back, I set two flat stones in the field's long, yellow grass. They were meant to be places for my father and me to sit and watch lazy bumblebees hover over wildflowers. We never sat on the stones, but my father named the fields after me in honor of those slabs of rock. Now, they are buried in winter.

My father is ahead of me, forging a path through snow with his heavy boots. I leap from one large print to the next, a twenty-one year old woman still running after her father's path. He is the reason I love the forest.

"This is what living is all about," he usually says, taking in a deep breath and leaning on his walking stick. He looks out over the land.

"It is," I'll reply, pressing my hands against the ground, searching for some kind of beat, a throb of life, the rhythm of a heart.

We climb over low rock walls, the only remainders of the farm land that once existed here, and break through the thin border of trees. Emily Fields spreads out before us, its smooth and undulating blanket of snow woven with coyote prints, like long sentences telling the story of the pack's mating dance or their frenzied congregation before bursting into the forest to hunt and feed under the pale moon.

The sun has come out again, and we stand still for a while, simmering in its warmth. A gust of cold wind blows, and I pull my scarf over my nose. The lenses of my glasses fog.

"You know, we could be sitting at home, doing something productive. I could be practicing my guitar or cleaning up the garage, but here we are, wandering around in the woods again," my father says, cupping his hands together over the hilt of his walking stick. "But walking in the woods feels like doing something productive, doesn't it?" He sounds uncertain.

“It is productive, good for your body and your spirit,” I say, but I’ve already begun dwelling on the unwritten essay spread out over the kitchen table. The deadline is early next week, and I have additional homework and long shifts at the pharmacy to work through over the weekend.

“Sometimes I wonder what my life would be like if the woods weren’t here. Remember when we lived in Virginia Beach? My yard was nice. The house was always clean. I played gigs at restaurants. I had money in the bank. The woods have kind of taken over. I’m not sure if that’s a good thing.” My father sighs and squints.

I’m not sure either, but I’d rather be here than anywhere else. It’s a struggle to survive in the human world, working long, arduous shifts at jobs we hate, burying ourselves in debt to attend college in an attempt to establish a better life. In order to live, you must have money. In order to have money, you must veer away from the cycles and harmony of the natural world, disrupting your sleep patterns and spontaneous urges in order to mold into the structures we’ve built around ourselves. Why must we “accomplish?” Why isn’t “living” enough?

We talk for a few more minutes, mostly about how we should be doing something else. I begin worrying about whether or not I’ll be able to make it in the world with a degree in creative writing. For some reason, I feel as if the completion of an essay will somehow improve my life. It won’t. The woods know that, and I try to understand it, too.

The sun is lower, and shadows are stretching and turning blue. A dark bird wheels in the sky. Everything else is white.

“Well, I guess we should head home,” my father says.

“Yeah, I’m getting cold.”

We head back into the trees. It feels good to get my heart pumping again after standing still for so long. The part of the woods we’re forging through doesn’t have a name, but there’s a tree we call the “toll hole tree,” a skinny oak with a round opening in one of its knots. Whenever we walk by, we break off a small piece of branch and toss it into the hole. It reminds me of when I was a little girl, sitting in the back seat of one of my parent’s cars. I’d watch them toss coins into the toll booth’s metal basket so the gate would lift and we could continue driving. Today, I don’t toss anything into the “toll hole tree,” but it lets us pass regardless.

Now ahead of my father, I lead the way back to a trail that will take us home. The steady crunch of boots through snow and the *wisp wisp* sound our snow pants make as we walk is soothing. When I think about the unwritten paper and the long years of school and work I have spread out ahead of me, I grow tired. Regardless, I continue my steady, straight path toward home, toward all the things that have been left unfinished.

The *thunk thunk* of my father’s walking stick quickens its pace as we breeze around slender trees, tripping over logs buried in snow and pressing sharp branches away from our cold skin. I gaze downward. For a moment, I no

longer see the forest – long, black trees weaving through brittle air, gentle paw and hoof prints, the sky spinning and wheeling ahead with its parting clouds and birds. I only see whiteness, a blankness, a thin but impenetrable barrier. My heart rate quickens. Sweat pools on my forehead. I begin chewing on the insides of my cheek, a nervous habit I've acquired when anxious.

For a moment, I look up, locating our position and deciding in which direction we should veer in order to return home. I pause. In the distance, I notice a small red spot in the snow. It's the first bright color I've seen, a stark contrast from the dark trees and blue shadows of the woods.

"Dad, what's that? Do you see it?" I ask, stopping for a moment to take a deep breath.

"Wild," my father says, pausing beside me. "I don't know."

We tromp ahead and stop, kneeling down, when we reach the site of the red blotch. My father leans his walking stick against a tree, and we bend close to the ground, examining the strange, bright shape in the snow. It's blood, a small and random spot of blood, and the thick white around it is smooth and unbroken. No footprints or sign of struggle are evident.

"Weird," my father says, and I agree.

I narrow my eyes and continue examining the deep red spot soaking into the snow, illuminating and defining the individual crystals of ice. The smooth layer of accumulation is unmoved by the violence that must have occurred only moments ago when a small animal's skin was torn, spilling its life into winter.

My heartbeat has calmed. My breath slows, and plumes of steam swirl around us as we kneel in silence above the result of this startling event.

That's when I notice them: the faint imprints circling the blood, the delicate impressions of wings. The wings seemed to have curled toward one another, as if they arched forward and connected at the tips, forming a semi-circle over the uneven spot of red. Only edges of the primary feathers touched the snow when the bird swooped down, breaking through the trees, and dipped towards the earth to snatch a small creature in its sharp talons. The prey was probably a field mouse. The predator was most likely an owl, but I imagine it was the same dark bird looping over Emily Fields.

My father and I form the base of the circle. Suddenly we are a part of this moment, the delicate feeding of a bird, the quick end of a mouse. This image of death and the life that sprung from it, blooming like a flower in the center of a delicate circle made of wings, is suddenly beautiful in a place that rises and falls, awakes and perishes, without hesitation. The steady gong of clocks, ticking off hours and days and years, counting down futile accomplishments and money that is gained and lost, is absent in this open world of birch and pine. Nothing begins, and nothing ends. Nothing is given and then taken away. Life circles back into itself. Hawks unfold their golden wings. A life withers. Deer and coyote and birds make prints in the snow, mapping their meandering paths through trees as they follow food, life, and death. Spring will bring them all back.

Only the snow, covered in blood and circles, muffling out sound and sense of place with its white perseverance, lingers now, and we forget about the broken drawer and homework, the human world with its straight paths and sudden ends. We remember the hawk and how it wheeled and spun through the air beneath clouds, drawing circles around two humans lost in the chaos of their riddled world, and suddenly carried them home again, into the snowy woods, even if for a moment.

## Natural Remedy for Loss in Winter

Find a bay window's wide sill, preferably one  
near a highway. This will help you remember your beginnings  
and where you are now. Let the window overlook  
a snow-slicked hill, its ridge lined with evergreens and the dead  
bodies of sparrows. Wait until clouds pull back. Wait  
for the sun. When it comes, clear the clutter of dried flies, old photos,  
early drafts. Forget everything you've lost. Lie down  
in the sun to heal. Let it seep through the pane, become your bones.

Lives are linked fragments in one body, the sunlight its blood.

## Our Acrylic Blood

Near the end of my senior year of high school, a psychology teacher assigned the class one final assignment: find yourself. The project, he explained, would challenge us to discover the sources of our identities, the experiences and people that had built us into our unique selves. Once we found them, we'd present our findings to the class in any medium and format of our choice. Twenty teenagers, slouched in their seats, squinted up at the teacher, confused.

Later, at home, I sat cross-legged in the middle of the living room, pulling up carpet fibers with my fingernails and transferring my gaze from the blank sky beyond the bay window to the blank page of a notebook. Our overweight house cat sat like a black lump at the end of the couch, her breath hissing out softly. She'd been there all day.

I pointed my pen at her. "You don't even know how lucky you are. You don't have to go to school. You don't have to *find* yourself. You're already there."

One of her eyes peeled open into a yellow slit and then closed.

"In 1986," I wrote across the top of a page, "I was born in Virginia Beach during the summer. In seventeen years, I've lived in four different states. Within those four different states, I've lived in six different houses, three townhouses, and five apartments. I blame my OCD on a nomadic, disheveled lifestyle. My favorite color is blue, but it used to be green. This is stupid and

means absolutely nothing.” I scribbled over the words, unsure of how to translate these ideas onto a poster board using pastel, the format and medium I’d chosen. The poster board rested on the carpet by my side, covered in cat hair and dust. I stared at it, trying to imagine the tangled map of my life drawn out in oily smears of color and shape, but no images solidified.

I gazed out the window. The season’s loose pollen had gathered on its torn screen, and sunlight pushed through the glass, illuminating specks of dust drifting through the living room. A pale yellow glow filled the air, and I moved my hand through it, searching for the sun’s heat, breaking apart taught ribbons of its light. The cat yawned, her pink tongue uncurling between rows of white teeth. Outside, sprouting along the edges of the forest-bordered road, violet ajugas swayed in the wind.

Every so often, a moment’s mesh of color and light reminded me of my mother’s abstract paintings, of how she stood in the basement of her home in Fort Wayne, Indiana, her newest studio, and ran her bare fingers over a canvas, smearing purples and yellows and pinks into wind-blown fields and open skies. She’d been an artist her entire life, and when she was seventeen, she left her mother’s home to trace her way across the east coast in search of her own identity. The birth of two daughters failed to sway her course. By the time I turned thirteen, my mother had shown me a significant portion of the country. Our various homes, the tiny apartments and rickety houses she’d relocate us to

every three years or so, were always filled with her creations and the supplies from which she'd built them, reminders of why she'd travelled so far.

Last year, a few months before I turned seventeen, I too left my mother's home, having decided to live with my father in Central New York, a wooded area of land bordering the southeastern edge of Lake Ontario. It was a little over five hundred miles east of Indiana. I missed my mother's long, paint-spattered hair and the afternoons she stood in the basement, circled by crushed tubes of Artisan paint and glasses of dyed water. She'd hover in front of her canvases for hours, moving her fingers or brushes and palette knives over the flat surfaces, filling empty space with color. The aroma of paint seeped into her clothes, hair, and skin.

I turned away from the window. The cat purred. I pushed aside the notebook and pen and slid the poster board in front of my folded knees. An open box of pastels spilled over the carpet. I picked up a yellow one, peeled off a strip of its sheath to expose more of the tip, and pressed it onto the poster board. I began to draw: a woman's face, long hair, soft arms, and round belly.

"Start with a light base," my mother once instructed me as I colored.

"Then slowly add on darker and darker layers of color."

Though my mother knew how to draw, she rarely worked with pencil or pen, methods, she believed, that prevented her from escaping realistic interpretations of a subject. Lead and ink were too dry, fixed, and thin. Instead, she used acrylic paint, a thick, easily manipulated medium that allowed her to

express her perspectives through abstract images and color. Raised swirls and streaks and blotches of color formed pink meadows, orange canyons, and red seas that seemed to have pushed out into the waking world from a dream. When I started to create my own art, I rarely painted, but the techniques my mother taught me reflected her movements across the canvas. She taught me how to draw like a painter, and some of my work was similar to hers: strange, indecipherable, places drawn up from another world, as if we were the only ones who understood what the images meant, who knew where the images had first been conceived.

I filled in the woman's body with yellow pastel, pressing down harder when I reached a spot I wanted to highlight. I hoped eventually to indicate contour and distance with subtle changes in color, and yellow represented the body's closest surface. Yellow's subtle darkening to orange, red, purple, and blue would produce the illusion of a three-dimensional image. In the end, if this woman became real and I was able to touch her, my fingers would slide over the lightest surfaces first: her shoulder, the outside of her right arm and hip, the large belly with a child forming within.

My mother received her Master's degree while we lived in Virginia Beach and had worked as an art therapist for a short time. Occasionally, when I was a little girl, she'd bring me to her studio, where she helped groups of adults recover from traumatic events or cope with psychological disorders and addictions by encouraging them to paint, sculpt, or draw out their inner

frustrations. We'd all sit together at long, square tables, absorbed in our projects. The air smelled like glue, clay, fabric, and paint. The people in the room hunched over their small creations, completely absorbed in the movements of their hands and the figures forming beneath them. When I wasn't binding clumps of fabric into the shapes of animals, I sometimes drew maps of imaginary countries and traced wandering black lines from one end of the land to an X on its opposite side, a figure that always indicated where a pirate's treasure was hidden.

It may have been within my mother's studio that she first showed me the color wheel, a circular display of various hues arranged and fanned out like peacock feathers around a small center. The size and complexity of the wheel depended upon the number of hues included in the arrangement. Every color was a symbol, my mother explained to me, a subtle revealing of the subconscious. She could analyze a drawing or painting and understand what stirred within the artist. She always believed that art swelled out of us from an invisible place somewhere deep within the body. Paint, pastel, clay, fabric, and pencil were a human's way of transforming these unseen concepts into something tangible and visible. Art, she understood, was an outpouring and embodiment of one's inner self.

"Start with a light base and then slowly add on darker and darker layers of color." I sat on the living room carpet, remembering these words, and drew the woman for hours. I chose darker hues of pastel to layer carefully on top of

the lighter ones, creating shadow by pressing down hard at the edge of the figure and slowly alleviating the pressure as I moved inward. The woman had purple, blue, orange, and yellow skin, closed eyes, and wild green hair that looped and stretched beyond the borders of the poster board. I imagined the child growing inside her round, yellow belly. It was a girl, listening to the *whoosh* of blood in her mother's heart, feeling the gentle rock of her body swaying in front of a canvas as she painted. I imagined the girl could see her mother's art before she spilled paint onto the canvas, while the colors and shapes were still forming and becoming solid inside her mind.

My mother taught me how to shade incorrectly with pencil when I was eleven, a year after we'd moved to Indiana. I sat cross-legged on the kitchen floor with a sketch book open on my lap. Our dog was stretched out over the brown tile, and I used his legs as a model for a creature I was drawing. Above the creature, in the night sky, I began composing a full moon, but I couldn't get the image to look realistic. It lay flat on the page like a shape in a coloring book. When I complained, my mother sat beside me. She folded her fingers around my fist, controlling the pressure and direction of my pencil. Instead of showing me the technique of cross-hatching, etching quick, trellises-like strokes along the edges of the figure, she tilted the pencil, used the side of its point to color in shadow, adjusting the pressure as our joined hands moved closer toward the center of the circle. Together, we shaded its edges until the circle became a three-

dimensional moon. "See how the moon sticks up from the page," she said.

"Now it's the real thing."

I practiced this technique as I blended layers of pastel over the surface of the large poster board. Using my fingers, I softened and unified the divisions between dark purple and pale blue, pale blue and light green, light green and yellow. Color filled the grooves and creases of my fingertips and hands. Sometimes I'd roll a pastel between my fingers and then run my fingertips beneath the woman's eyes or lips to form subtle shadow. Occasionally, the whirled lines of my skin's pattern imprinted the woman's shoulder, cheek, or belly. Instead of smoothing them away, I left the fingerprints where they were.

"Do you know," my mother once said, "that all of the paintings I created were of places I wanted to exist?" When she told me this, I imagined her stepping barefoot out of the real world into one of her orange fields, palms open, hands extended outward. She moved slowly, closing her eyes. The strands of her wind-blown hair tangled in pink grasses and caught pieces of the yellow sky. Her dress brushed against the deep purple grass, and acrylic paint smeared over her clothes and into her skin. I was there with her, moving through the landscapes of her paintings, receiving the acrylic blood that seeped into her palms.

I unrolled more paper from the pastel, coated my fingertips with its waxy color, and pressed my fingerprints over the drawn woman's skin. I finished her face and neck, the contours of her round arms and arched back, the body that

would always surround me, a body that I might one day surround. Swaying back and forth, using a medium almost as pliable as acrylic paint, I started with yellow and let the color slowly bloom into blue the way identity slowly unfolded into the world through art. Maybe blue meant “beginning.” Maybe it also meant “end” and whatever is in between. Maybe it is the color passed from mother to daughter, the blood before it’s exposed, the habit of life’s continual division of one thing into many, the individual’s desire to trace drifting and broken paths across our history’s blank canvas until we finally know who we are.

## Moss Trail

I died a cloud, awoke an owl, small and angelic toe prints etched into my hollow spine, my only task, to be a bird. It is my forty-second night alive in this way, and I can fly. On the wooded trail below my bough, a man and girl startle a dusting of leaves upon seeing me, and wait. I know instinctively to hide, to keep silent and still. When the humans' boots sink into moss, as deep as rain into stone, talons into flesh, the bones of my wings remember to open. Drawn across the canvas of evening, a wet and withering red-gold against hemlock and pine, I arc across the trail, slice sky into strips, the last of day's light bending against feathers and falling in shards.

## Light Trembles

I

I broke a boy on his bedroom carpet.

Not the sweet kind of break, but a cold kind,  
replicating the way ice moves into cracks  
and widens them.

The snow was not falling softly,  
and I was not unbuttoning my jeans.

When he hit the floor, folding,  
knees cracking on the way down, he clawed  
through his tangled black hair and cried.

I will never forget the way his white knuckles  
crept between the smooth, dark strands  
and destroyed them, or how I looked down  
at the beige carpet, tore fibers with my fingernails.

The room's vanilla light  
made the air taste artificially sweet.

II

At home, my stepmother cries and vomits  
on her pillow. I sit at the table, waiting  
to pour milk over cereal, procrastinating.

Snow bleaches morning.  
Sauce-filled pots leak into clean water.  
The shattering sound of cancer stands in the room.

When I finally move up each step  
and push open the old bedroom door  
to check on her, it looks as if she's lying in pieces  
spread out all over the tangled blankets and towels.

I ball up her clothes  
and wash them.

She asks me for a glass of water.  
I'm afraid it might dissolve her.

### III

On the drive home,  
north of the boy's cracked city,  
I unwound a felt necklace from around my fingers  
and held it between my teeth.

He'd slid it across the linoleum, along with the paperback book  
and card and wired roots and key chains  
I made him.

*These don't belong to me anymore, he'd said.*

My boots left shallow footprints in the powdered snow  
as I sprinted across the wooden boards of the porch,  
shoving white beads into my mouth.

If I'd let myself bite down hard,  
they might have cracked.

I crushed the taste of his skin against my teeth  
and drove away.

### IV

Years ago, I lay on a grey couch,  
its texture like carpet, waiting for a fever to pass.

The heat felt like cold blankets of snow pressing down.

My stepmother, before her illness, sat beside me, watching  
the television's light radiate a suffocating gas.

*Will you get me some water, I said, cradling my sore belly,*  
and she growled, slid out of the room like a knife, the entire house

rumbling beneath her thick legs.

She returned with a cup filled half-way with warm tap water and slammed it onto the coffee table, then walked away.

V

I remember the question.

She begins to deflate again.

Yes, of course, I'll bring you water.

I'll bring you anything.

*I'm sorry*, she says.

For what?

*For everything.*

And it smells like sour milk and chocolate in her hair.

VI

One night, he begged his way into my house again,  
and I embraced him on the steps and told him he'd lost weight.

He pressed his hands into my back, told me he loved me  
and is empty and wants to move into me again,  
his breath filled with the scent of wine,  
the pungent aroma of marijuana in his hair.

He felt like cloth and bones  
and I fed him chocolate and pretzels and tea,

and pushed him away,

and wanted him to drive home in the freezing rain cracking over the night.

VII

*I'm sorry for all of this, my stepmother said, her eyes the color of death. The snow rattling down like lost dust illuminates that nothingness pounding out of her thin skin.*

Her cheek touches my lips.  
She is not gone, but I want to bring her back.

VIII

I am sorry for all of this, but how do I tell someone I don't love them anymore?

VIX

I say it. Just like that.

And think of carpets and the crumbling that brings us to them.

The broken pieces that build us.

Snow that freezes us softly into our graves.

The way we never come back.

## Smoke

I hardly ever see her outside, my neighbor, Nichole, except in the mornings when she has her first cigarette. She sits on the front porch, slouched in a plastic lawn chair, legs crossed, squinting into the new sunlight. Her frail skeletal frame seems to sink into the folds of her pink bathrobe and disappear, the way colors are absorbed by shadow. Her angular, bony face oscillates back and forth as she scans the neighborhood, jaw clenched and blonde hair wrenched into a high pony tail, giving her cheeks the tight appearance of surgically lifted skin. The only hint of body weight and softness is her swollen pregnant belly.

A cup of coffee rests beside her on the wooden railing. She clutches the mug with a skinny hand, and the two of them exhale together: the mug trailing out soft steam, and the woman spewing grey clouds of cigarette smoke into the summer air. Trimmed evergreen bushes, a freshly mowed lawn, and a heart-shaped flower garden filled with small rose bushes, all planted by her husband, seem to tilt away from her, as if repelled by her sharp presence, like a child leaning away from a vaccine needle.

Sometimes, early in the mornings before her boys hop on the bus and after her husband, Rob, returns home after a long night driving eighteen-wheelers along Highway 81, the faint pierce of Nichole's screams needle through the thin walls. She yells as much as she vacuums, at least once every two days, and it leads me to believe the two actions are somehow related. I often listen intently to

the incessant drones as they float across the street, trying to decipher which noise is worse. She looks placid on the front porch, inhaling her cigarette smoothly, but beneath the fuzzy pink robe she's boiling, probably over a few loose socks on her son's bedroom floor or a dirty dish on the counter. Regardless if cleanliness is the issue, her sons and husband must shoulder this verbal abuse daily.

Maybe it explains why Rob is always outside during the day, even after his night shifts, pattering slowly around the front yard, back hunched. He mows the grass at least twice a week on his John Deere riding lawn mower. In the evenings, he watches his two boys play basketball in the street. He's planted and killed at least an entire forest's worth of saplings and rose bushes, probably on purpose. It gives him an excuse to leave the house, sit in the grass and dig holes in the dirt as opposed to staying indoors with his wife. Sometimes he scrapes stones from the grass with a wooden rake for hours or stares out into the road like an old dog without a home.

One evening, while trying to make a phone call, I somehow tapped into a conversation occurring between Nichole and another woman. Both of them were complaining about their husbands, and Nichole was leading the race with "that damn Rob is a pain in my ass."

"Hi, Emily," Nichole says from the shadows of her front porch, slowly waving her stickly arm back and forth. This is her typical line, the only two words I'll hear from her in the course of a week.

“Hi, Nichole,” I say, darting my hand at her. This is my typical line, the only two words I’ll mutter to her in the course of a week.

She stares for a moment, but we don’t say anything else. I look down at my book and read a line about water holes in the deserts of Arizona. When I glance back up, she’s gone, most likely sucked back into her tightly sealed house with its locked windows and chronically drawn curtains. Even the design of the screen door resembles iron prison bars. When the front door is hauled open, it makes a sucking sound, as if the dark hallways of her home are a vacuum, threatening to swallow the individual standing in front of it.

The vacant and shadowy corner where Nichole’s empty lawn chair sits seems to hum with negative energy, so I collect my empty mug and book and make my way inside, glancing up at the giant spider webs stretched out between the various angles created by the roof and vinyl siding. Fat, black spiders sit in the center of the webs, their symmetrical and angular bodies like something lifeless and mechanical.

In the kitchen, my stepmother, Shawn, is eating a bowl of cereal and reading a book at the dining room table. The sound her chewing makes is hard and hollow, like shoes over rocks in an echoing tunnel. It’s as if she’s empty.

“Nichole’s smoking again,” I say, dropping my book on the table.

Shawn doesn’t look up from her reading as she responds with a one syllable sound and continues chewing, her small hand holding a spoon

awkwardly. This is the typical extent of our communication. Sometimes we'll look in each other's eyes and say "good morning," but it doesn't happen often.

Our silent and bitter relationship is the product of my inability to agree with the negligent way she chooses to lead her life and, consequently, the lives of our family. Once, while I was out of town for the winter, after my younger sister Julia lost her glasses and had to wear an old pair of mine, it took Shawn an entire month until she finally decided to take her to the optometrist. The unnecessarily long span of time Julia was forced to strain her eyes severely damaged them, and, at age thirteen, she began wearing bifocals. I don't know why I didn't blame my father. Shawn was just an easy target.

She never seems to offer a positive or encouraging word. She hardly tells us, "I love you," and when she does it's because one of us said it first, which is becoming a rare occurrence on my end. I've grown tired of Shawn, and most of the time, I avoid her as much as I try to avoid the woman across the street.

The moment I regret the hostility I've carried for my stepmother will occur on a Wednesday night when I arrive home from work and discover her van in the driveway. It should be parked in the Home Depot's employee lot, the way it's been every Wednesday night for the past seven years, while she pulls late hours in the lumber department. My father will stand in the kitchen, light bleeding awkwardly on his face, accentuating the wrinkles and dark circles under his eyes, and tell me Shawn has cancer. And there's nothing the doctors can do, because she's ignored the symptoms for too long.

~

When we were new to the neighborhood, Nichole was the first person to scratch across the hot road and introduce herself, but it wasn't so much of an introduction as it was a verbal slaying of our neighbors. Only my father was present for Nichole's first show, but I could imagine the way she must have hauled herself across the street with a type of business-like urgency, taking long strides on her spindly legs, shoulders curled forward and arms crossed over her chest. She'd jab her skinny finger in the direction of the person's house, and my father would listen to her passionate gossip amidst the furious batting of her eyelashes.

One day, before we set up a land line, my father knocked on Nichole's door and asked if he could look up a number and use her phone. "Sure," she said through a thin smile. She led him inside and laid a phone book out on the polished kitchen counter.

"The first thing I noticed," my father said afterward, "was how spotless her house was. Only crazy people have homes *that* clean. It smelled like Pinesol. I knew *something* was wrong when I walked into that house and smelled *Pinesol*."

As my father flipped through the phone book, mumbling irritably that he couldn't find the number he was looking for, Nichole moved up behind him and pressed her body against his back. Sliding her hands beneath his arms and leaning her head on his shoulder, she began ruffling through the pages. My

father grew rigid and demanded to know what she was doing. Just then, Nichole's mother burst through the door, eyes wide and fiery.

"And who is *this*?" her mother asked in a jagged voice.

My father tore himself from Nichole's grasp, brushed past the fuming mother, and sprinted across the street to safety. That was the first and last time he entered Nichole's house. He used another neighbor's phone and, eventually, learned our neighborhood wasn't as frightening or sinful as Nichole declared.

I'm not sure when or why Nichole's passion for fabrication began – some people claimed it was schizophrenia or bipolar disorder – but I believe it was a cowardly and vicarious criticism of her own flaws. Like a spider, the woman trapped people in her sticky net, making trouble for them.

~

My family's home directly across the street from Nichole's, we often run into one another while sitting on our front porches. From such a distance, it's difficult to tell what she's looking at with her dark eyes, or if they're even looking. Sometimes I wonder, as I prop my feet up on the banister and hide my face behind an open book, if there are eyes at all, or if there are only caverns dug into the thick powder foundation she layers onto her skin. Her eyes are disturbing up close, lashes caked in mascara and gathered into a few triangular clumps. On each individual point, she applied a small ball of purple makeup. I imagined countless tubes of mascara collected in her bathroom drawers, and I couldn't imagine how her skin could withstand such chemical bombardment.

How she managed to cheat on her husband, to find another man attracted to her, for over a year baffled me, too.

One summer, Rob knocked at our door around 10 o'clock at night, bobbing up and down like a child who's just found a quarter on the street. He wanted to let my father know Nichole had left him for another man. The next morning, he celebrated by telling all the neighbors. He began staying inside more often. He smiled. He walked straighter. The grass grew taller and sometimes his lawn lay strewn with the yellow heads of dandelions. It was beautiful.

Then, that winter, Nichole came back, and I don't know why. Rob migrated outside again, snow-blowing the driveway, sidewalk, and front lawn five days a week. He and his eldest son shoveled the roof every time it snowed, even if the sky only dropped an inch of accumulation. When the temperature plummeted below zero and the sky was frozen and clear, he'd haul on his blaze orange jacket and stride into the woods, rifle slung over his shoulder, to hunt. I never knew the details of what happened inside that sealed house across the street, but if it made a guy trudge out into crotch-deep snow in negative degree weather to kill something, it must've been serious. My father and I call him "The Real Outdoorsman," the unfortunate husband, the Great Avoider, the man who's married to Nichole Damewood.

~

My father cranes his neck, right arm slung around the back of the passenger seat, as he looks behind him to check the road, and backs out of the driveway. We're on our way to the ice cream shop in Central Square. I look back, too, and see Nichole sitting in her lawn chair, cigarette in her hand, belly no longer rounded. Her baby's name is Ryleigh, and she's one year old and alive, even after nine months of smoking vicariously through her mother.

"I'm still surprised she didn't kill that baby," I say, shaking my head.

"I think her evil would've killed that baby faster than cigarettes," my father says, straightening the steering wheel. He starts laughing. It's the type of sharp, loud, brief laugh he lets out when he's pissed, attempting to slough off some anger in a more productive way than punching someone.

"What?" I look at him.

"She just flipped me off." He steps on the gas, and we drive down Melody Avenue.

I look back quickly, catching Nichole before she slips out of view, and sure enough, there it is. A long, artificially tan middle finger stabbed between the wooden railings of the porch banister.

Earlier that day, my father stood by the mailboxes with Nichole, trying to be polite as he expressed his concern over the fact that her beloved dog was beginning to bite children in the neighborhood. She crossed her arms, shook her head, and blinked her thick eyelashes at him. "Those kids're taunting and kicking her," she said. "They deserve it." At that moment, Nichole's yellow lab,

Ruger, the child biter, ran up behind my father and nipped him in the calf. He picked up a stone and smashed it into the dog's side, sending the lab wailing and running down the road with his tail tucked between his legs. Nichole loves that dog, and after my father nearly cracked its ribs, she screamed and spat, blonde ponytail whipping behind her head. Jabbing a fingernail at my father, she said, "When Rob gets home from work, he's going to break you in half." She spun around and stormed back inside.

"I want to get a chocolate milkshake before I kick his ass," my father says, and he lets out the laugh.

In the end, however, he doesn't pummel Rob, and I watch from behind a crack in the living room curtains as Nichole's husband becomes smaller, more curved, and hunched in front of a tiny, animated guy with a milkshake. All the energy she pumped into him seems to seep out like helium seeps from a balloon. Rob turns slowly back toward his house, scuffs across the perfect yard, pauses at the front door, and disappears inside. When my father walks through the side door into our kitchen and tosses his empty cup in the trash can, he says, "Poor guy."

A week later, after the wailing siren and flashing lights of an ambulance dance through our windows from across the street, I peek out between curtains again and watch as Nichole cries into her hands. A round man in uniform stands beside her. She points toward the house and paces over the perfect lawn, pausing every few minutes to hide her powdery face in her palms. Her black

mascara runs down her cheeks, and her blonde ponytail appears limp. Clutching Ryleigh against her hip, she climbs into the ambulance and the entire scene disappears as it blares down the road.

The next morning, Nichole loads Ruger into her black Explorer, drives away, and returns home a few hours later with an empty leash. Apparently, my father was right. Ruger bit Ryleigh in the face, and Nichole decided it was best to euthanize the dog. Beneath the curling smoke and thick foundation, under the screams and negligence, and behind whatever force produced a drooped and broken husband, a little bit of love, her concern for the baby, revealed itself.

Three years after this incident, I look back and wonder why the disease growing in Shawn's womb can't be euthanized. I wish we could scoop it into our arms, dump its ugliness into the back a car, drive away, and return home with the satisfaction of having destroyed a violent creature, but we can't. I can't protect Shawn the way Nichole protected her daughter, and the realization of this hopelessness burns, especially when I know the situation could've been prevented if she'd taken herself to the doctor much sooner, when the symptoms, pains in her stomach, first began seven years ago. Now, she's dying cervical.

An surge of compassion welled up inside me the night I discovered Shawn had cancer, and since then, it continued to bloom and unfurl and press outward, like flowers pushing up after a heavy snow. "Before things get bad," I decided that night, "I'm going to love my stepmother," and I did. I started talking to her. I hugged her. During the day, I'd bring her tea and a hot turkey

sandwich and curl up next to her in bed while we watched home makeover shows on television. Whenever she had a doctor's appointment while my father was at work, I'd drive her there, holding her hand the entire way and switching CDs so she could listen to her favorite music.

One day, while we slid through the town of Fayetteville, on our way to the wound clinic, Shawn held onto my hand, looked up at the sky and waved her free arm in a semi-circular motion in front of the window. "I've never seen images in clouds before, but I do now," she said. "I hate this disease, but I've learned to see so much more since I've had cancer. I don't know. It's strange and beautiful in a weird way. But what I really appreciate the most is how close we've become."

She cried, and I held onto her hands. "I really love you," she said, and I said it back, squeezing even tighter, holding on to warmth and movement and life they contained before everything seeped away.

Now, I kneel on the blankets beside her as she lies quietly on a ROHO mattress. A plastic grey box, adorned with three black knobs and a dim screen, is hooked to the end of her bed frame. The machine hums and clicks as it pumps the mattress full of air, some of which escapes through a series of small holes on the surface and presses up against her. The ROHO prevents bed sores. At this point, we only hope it makes her feel as if she's floating and not falling. Yesterday, the oncologist sent a nurse to our house to draw Shawn's blood for

testing. Later, he called and asked for Shawn. "You're going to die in three days," he said.

Carefully and quietly, I place my hands on her shoulders and head. I touch her ears, hold her hands, kiss her lips. My sisters and I learned how to give her a sponge bath today. Her skin is white and wrinkled and cold. Her breasts are small. Her hair is wet, and her eyes, though open, do not see. The irises are a flat blue color.

Hospice started coming two weeks ago. The tumor in her abdomen is eating more deeply into her organs, and the nurses are aggressive when fighting her pain, but gentle when changing her clothes and bandages and diaper. They speak in soft voices, even when Shawn kicks and screams and refuses to roll over. Every night, a nurse sits in a hard, wooden chair with her hands folded on her lap, and watches Shawn sleep. I kissed one over-night nurse on the top her blonde head. She smelled like cigarettes, coffee, and flowers. She told me it was okay if I wanted to fall asleep. I wondered if she had a family and if it was difficult spending nights with dying people while her children and husband slept, alive and warm in their beds.

I sat on the couch in the living room, looking through the large bay window at Nichole's house across the street. It was nearly midnight, and her car wasn't in the driveway. I used to wonder where she went during the nights. She once worked for UPS, carting cardboard boxes across the warehouse, and I

assumed she'd acquired a third shift position or found another man to sleep with.

~

After Shawn was diagnosed, I learned how to open myself up to other people. My tolerance grew into acceptance. My acceptance grew into love. When I'd wander around the block, glancing up at large clouds or listening to the sound of my sneakers shuffling over the jagged road, neighbors would stride up to me and ask about Shawn. Slightly unnerved by the fact that I'd have to repeat the same dark lines over again, I'd hesitate but continue once I understood their inquiries were gestures of compassion. I'd remind myself of the hospice nurses, the time and energy they sacrificed for my family, how these selfless acts were always carried out with patience and kindness. They helped me understand that death is an end to this life, and while we're all still here, able to move and breathe and live, we should care about one another. If there's a purpose to life, it's to love, and for the first time, I believed in unconditional love. I wanted to celebrate its existence by showing others this type of care, and many of those people were my neighbors, including Nichole.

After she learned about Shawn, she'd call out to me from her front porch, the smoke swirling from her cigarette becoming almost, in a sense, lovely, "How's your mom doing?"

Normally, I'd correct her by saying "you mean my stepmom," smile and wave, offer a quick explanation, and continue my walk. After I turned the

corner, I'd look back and she'd still be gazing at me. The dark hollowness of her eyes, however, began to acquire a bit of brightness. Perhaps that brightness was always there, but I'd just recently learned to see it.

Slowly, after a few more brief encounters with her, I began to wander across the street on my own and talk to Nichole. The image of her as spider, sucking people dry in her webs, completely slipped away when she told me she was a Hospice nurse.

I was standing in our driveway, hands tucked into my pockets, leaning against a car when I found out. Nichole had wandered across the street, with Ryleigh skipping close behind, and leaned against my car while we spoke. The bare sun swam over my skin, and it felt good to be surrounded by warmth. Nichole's makeup sparkled in the light. She asked the same questions about Shawn, and I provided the same answers. Then, she told me. I don't remember what sparked our conversation or what inspired her finally to reveal herself, but I remember something shifting inside of me when she said it: "I'm a Hospice nurse." Suddenly, I realized where she had been all these evenings, closed in a home with a dying person, like me, looking out over the night. Now Nichole loomed before me fully human, a mother and a lover, a person capable of compassion.

~

Ryleigh's four years old and healthy. She has long blonde hair and blue eyes, and when she looks up at me and says "Hi, Emily, I went swimming

today," I forget about the dark vacuum of my home for a moment. Sometimes she gives me a little hug, as gentle as light.

"How's your mom?" Nichole shifts all of her weight to one foot and crosses her arms. She looks into my eyes. I love the violet color of the makeup balls at the end of her lashes. Color doesn't exist in my home anymore.

"Not good. She can hardly get out of bed. She's in a lot of pain," I say, crossing my arms, and looking across the street toward my house. The grey branches of a diseased tree sag over the roof. I'm standing on Nichole's porch with a notebook, making a list of gift baskets the neighbors volunteered to build for Shawn's benefit on Saturday.

"What do the doctors say?" she says, and I notice she has beautiful cheek bones.

"She's on her way out," I say, fingering the cap of my pen. "I don't want to talk about it with dad right now. He's crumbling."

"Of course he is. It's never easy, Emily. I've been doing this for years. I love my job but sometimes it gets to you. You know, I don't mind the gross stuff, the bandages, the bags, blood, but watching people die is hard."

Having been introduced to the cold, raw side of life myself, I listen to Nichole. I imagine her sitting in a wooden chair, enveloped by the darkness of a warm bedroom, dim light from a lamp tainting the air. Her hands are folded in her lap, and she watches a woman struggle with her breathing beneath sheets and blankets. For a moment, I remember Nichole pregnant, envision her palms

cupped over her round stomach, searching for her baby's kicking feet. I think about how she and her love for Rob brought Ryleigh into the world.

"You know," Nicole continues, "you're dad probably doesn't want to understand, but I think it's good to try and get ready. Because it will happen, even if you're not ready. Men are like that, though. They want to fix everything. He can't fix this. You're doing a wonderful job caring for your mom. But if there's ever a time you need to get out of the house or go for a walk or go buy groceries, just come on over or give me a call. I don't mind sitting with her. Even if I'm not up in her room, I can just be there, listening. I'll do whatever I can. How old is your mom?" Nichole is wearing a pair of pink plaid pajama bottoms and fuzzy slippers. Her lipstick is silver. She still refers to Shawn as my mother. I don't correct her. I no longer want to.

"Forty-eight," I say. I wonder if the dying tree above over our home will crack, crushing through the shingles and beams, Shawn lying beneath them.

"God, that's so young. Oh my god. I'm not even forty-eight yet. Oh, she's so young." She narrows her eyes and turns her head to gaze across the street.

"I'm glad you're healthy," I say.

"Oh god, no. I smoke and I drink. I don't take care of myself at all. I wouldn't be surprised if one of these days I get sick."

I don't want that to happen, and I shake my head and look down at my feet.

“You know, we have big packets, big thick packets I can give to you,” Nichole continues. “They talk a lot about death and what to look for. There are stages. You can always tell when they’re close to dying. Do you want me to print you out one of the packets? You know, you can keep it in an envelope in your room. Don’t show it to your dad just yet. You can read it. It might be good if one person kind of knew what was happening. Emily, I’m so sorry,” she says, her silver lips curling into a frown.

“That would be nice. I appreciate it.” I clutch the notebook to my chest, the pages cool and dry against my skin, but I don’t want to make a list of gift baskets for Shawn’s benefit. I don’t want to have a reason to hold a benefit. I don’t want to read this packet about dying.

Ryleigh’s voice echoes from inside the house, her face behind the screen door white as light. “Mommy. Mommy. When are you coming back inside?”

“Ryleigh, baby girl, I’ll be there in a bit. I’m talking to Emily,” she says, and looks back at me. “Call me when you need me.”

“I will. Thank you,” I say and look down at Ryleigh, who’s smiling up at me with her tiny lips.

“Hi, Emily,” Ryleigh says. She presses her face against the screen and laughs. I wish I could reach out and hold her.

Nichole unfolds her arms and pulls me into them. I close my eyes, lean into the warmth of her, and breathe in. She smells like cigarettes, coffee, and powder foundation. I don’t smell flowers, but I think of the violet ajugas

growing by the side of the road. They are the same color as the makeup balls on the tips of her lashes.

I remember when Rob knocked on our door late that night years ago, rambling on about Nichole's absence, her scattered mind, and the man she'd been sleeping with for months before he found out. I stepped outside for a moment to ask my dad if he'd like dinner and overheard Rob say, "She's crazy, but I love her."

~

Shawn is barely breathing, and her breath smells like moth balls. I'm alone in her room, leaning against the ROHO mattress piled in twisted sheets, stroking her damp, tangled hair. I whisper to her over and over again how much I love her. She responds, mumbling the words back, and I cry.

Her skin is tinted blue, and her eyes are closed. Suddenly, I notice a small, dark spider darting back and forth between the bridge of her nose and the oak backboard, moving quickly with its mechanical legs. It's building a web. It must think Shawn has died.

My body grows rigid. I suck in a gulp of air, and my breath trembles as I push away the web, crushing the spider between my fingers. My hands shake. Recoiling, I dart from the room and lean against a hallway wall. It's cold and smooth against the backs of my arms. I drive my fingers through my hair, trying to press the image out of my mind. It won't leave. It will never leave, and it continues sucking me back in to that room.

Nichole feels this every day. She washes the dying with warm water and soapy towels. She stands by their beds and comforts them with her slender fingers, checking temperature and pulse, the firmness of skin, the matted color of the eyes. She knows that when their skin beads with cold sweat, their fingertips turn blue, they will die moments later.

Maybe Nichole coats her eyelashes with mascara to counteract what she sees every night. Maybe she smokes to push out the air of someone's labored breathing. Maybe she cheats on her husband because she wants to keep a safe distance between herself and those she loves, so that when spiders begin connecting webs to life and reeling in death, she'll be able to push them aside and not run away.

## Address to the Crayon Dragon

If sky and its clouds are paper, I drew thousands of you  
from the dark spaces beneath. Land  
on my palms. Redden with desire to be immortal

as I, your mother. See how my wings mushroom from my shoulder blades,  
like ancient bodies rising from the bones of a young earth.  
Your claws, you should know,

hold a human world close to the molten life of beginning.  
You are as old as blackness burning behind dying stars. Beside  
the last ruined mountains,

I will rip soft flesh from my spine,  
wear your reptilian skin.

Wax blood of my hands, I want to inhabit  
your stories, but I grow old,  
out of my imagination. You burn

away in shifting light, turn holograph, and fall. Into the soil  
of my shoulders, wings rot back into bones  
I knew were never unburied, but wanted  
at least to imagine.

Above us, clouds gather in an empty sky. Within them, shapes are born.  
My fingertips trail the surface of dogs blown into pieces, of fish  
decapitated,  
of broken winged birds falling through clutches of loose feathers.

On my back against earth, I know I do not belong  
here. Like you, my body will fade with changing light,  
shed flesh, and become a softer thing.

Come back to my palms.  
Be whole. Wind your tail around my wrist and bind  
me to ground. I am not ready to die.

Sky is an in-between place. Fill it with the color of your burning scales.  
When I drift there, show me your wings. Remember the child

who drew you from blackness, molded the wax  
of your limbs, let you shine even in death.  
Take my body to the mountains you promised.

## Xanthoria

I didn't have to inhale the air because wind blowing inland from Lake Superior pushed it into my lungs. There were no barriers between my body and the water, only a wide expanse of dark volcanic rock emerging from the northwestern shore of Presque Isle, the 323-acre where I stood, watching the water. Ten-foot waves rose and curled, the turquoise color of their cold walls deepening as they arched forward to pound foamy crests against the edges of Black Rocks. Anchoring my sneakers against ground, I let gales tug back my hair and press the clothes to my body. My ears ached. Only a few miles away in downtown Marquette, the air was calmer and warm, but I wanted to be in the wind. I needed abandon, the will of something else guiding me.

It was mid-September in Upper Michigan. Layers of cumulous clouds moved through the sky, a few of them dark and heavy with rain. Others reflected the sun and glowed like patches of soft, elfenbein light. Only moments before, it had rained, but strong northeastern winds moved the clouds aside and opened the sky above. Between rolling white caps, the usually grey surface of the lake was slashed with teal, burgundy, and mauve.

Two years ago, a few days after I'd moved to Marquette, my mother and I sat on the edge of Black Rocks. The lake was calm and cold, and we were stretched belly down on the warm shore after swimming. We touched the dark rock beneath us and ran our fingers over its thin, scrawling inlays of pale stone.

Orange lichen bloomed in patches across its surface. We asked one another what they were, but neither of us knew the rocks we touched were ancient remains, ribboned with carbonates and minerals, patched over with *Xanthoria parietina*.

“This place is so beautiful,” my mother said. “I’d love to live here with you. It’s the first time I’ve felt alive in so long. The water makes me want to paint again.”

“Why did you stop?”

“I don’t know. No money. No time. No energy.” She sat up, hugged her knees, and looked toward the water. Long, greying hair hung to the middle of her back. Recently, she’d spent a year jobless, traveling across the country, and living with a friend’s parents in California. After she returned to Indiana, she found a full time job and quit painting.

Moving to sit beside her, I looked at her clasped hands, their skin loosened with age and knuckles swollen. She used to stand in the basement for hours moving her hands over large canvases, filling emptiness with color and swaying back and forth across the cement floor as if she were dancing. When I was eleven, my mother taught me how to shade with pencil by guiding my hand across the paper with her own. She’d lean over my shoulder and tell me, “The creation of art is a body’s way of pouring out its soul into the world.”

“Mom, you should paint. It’s who you are.”

“I’ve just lost the passion for it. Time to grow up, I guess,” my mother said, frowning. Gulls cackled from a rock island twenty feet out. Together we watched them lift and drift slowly through the air.

The days that followed slid by quickly. My mother left Marquette. I went to school. Two years passed. During that time, my mother tried painting for a few months but eventually stopped. Over the phone one day, she told me she felt empty.

The icy gales rushing inland across Black Rocks and into my lungs had grown stronger. Rain clouds crept back into the September sky. I wrapped my arms around my waist and stared at the rock beneath my feet. The imbedded ribbons of white and pink carbonates and the orange lichen unfurled across their surface. I’d recently learned about the rock’s birth, how it had bloomed outward from the earth over one billion years ago. The mid continental rift had split an arc through North America that stretched from what is now the northeastern corner of Kansas, across Minnesota and Wisconsin, and down into the heart of Lower Michigan. As the earth moved, molten stirring beneath its crust shifted and emerged in a rush of volcanic activity. The cooled lava was buried beneath ten thousand feet of sediment in present day Missouri, but on the edge of what is now Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, the outflow eventually pushed into the open northern air, visible and bare.

I realized the rock I once perceived as pure black was actually tinged with emerald olivine. Comprising over two thirds of Presque Isle, the strips of this

glossy mineral glistened in the sun, spilling from behind parting clouds. Billions of years ago, this wind-beaten volcanic rock was a scalding mass that oozed red from the earth's core before it cooled into something black and quiet and still. For years, Black Rocks twisted slowly with time to mesh with the changing terrain, watching as water poured into the emptiness. Now, it was an old body, wearing away beneath the pounding waves.

I kneeled close to the ground to escape the wind. Across the rugged expanse, *Xanthoria parietina* shined bright against the blackness. Together, with illuminated veins of olivine, the orange lichen burned like ancient molten rock that was once pushed from Earth's internal darkness and poured into the world. Wind continued to press against and into my body, the way my mother's hand once pressed against my own as she taught me how to shade, and I could hear nothing but her voice and the wind's relentless roar as I looked out over the glowing surface. Black Rocks leaned toward Lake Superior, its rising waters shimmering with color. I ran my fingers over a bloom of lichen, surprised my mother hadn't known its name.

## The Artist's Last Hour of Day

My mother and I follow the dry  
foreshore, our brown hair flags wind-blown east  
and west. On the shore, the sand molds  
our feet, we trudge through shards. Our heels burn,  
and the sun's low, but my mother won't  
slide into water. As though caught by something  
she doesn't understand, she stands still.  
I want to shove her into the waves, to places I think  
she's afraid to know, let foam paint her  
feet, color her. Before I can push, clouds pull back  
from the moon, night tide lifts to her  
ankles, knees, thighs. Turns out, I'm wrong, my mother  
has always known that water would rise,  
that the Atlantic, thick as canvas paint, would find her.

## Scattered Like Stars

*Across the dark –  
through it – the occasional handful of notes: someone  
else out there, singing? or myself singing,  
and the echoing after? I didn't know,  
or want to.  
-Carl Phillips*

### I

Marie, my little sister, was a small, barefooted girl singing to the warm summer air, her toes clutching the seat of a swing. She loved to stand on the strip of pliable plastic, her one-person stage, and grasp the chains with her hands, pulling herself forward and back, forward and back, forward and back again in fluid, effortless motions. Her soft, brown curls floated in the wind. She squinted her eyes against the tiny flecks of sun reflecting off the blades of grass. Drifting in a breeze created by her movement, Marie's lavender dress fluttered gently, quietly.

She turned her head slowly, gazing at her surroundings, but she didn't notice my mother standing beside her on the porch, video taping her swing and sing as the warm wind rippled through her hair. Instead, Marie seemed to focus her eyes on some distant place, somewhere beyond the edge of the yard, somewhere no one else could enter or understand. She looked past the white honey suckle flowers scattered across the wooden fence. She gazed into the green, sunlit world, beyond the edge of the bright sky, and beyond the edge of

space looming and whirling behind. She sank into it, as though lowering herself into a warm bath. She let it envelop and take hold.

Years later, when I watched this video recording, I became captivated by the moment, her movement, that voice, the way she fit softly into the surrounding environment. The green, the light, her skin, her hair, the wind, the sky, the voice – all of it sliding together and becoming whole. Marie was only three years old, pouring out loud and unrecognizable words, but she sang as if she were singing a song she'd known and sung forever. Blades of bright grass looked up at her. They leaned toward her. They listened.

## II

Twice in my life, I've realized the immensity of the universe, its long endurance before and beyond my life's insignificance. I stand outside. The sky is unbearably clear. Streetlights are absent in the deep country, and the stars are unblemished. When I tilt my head back and look up, I don't see the flat, black wall of tiny lights I'm accustomed to. I see an unfathomable depth, an enormous and spacious place stretching endlessly. I am drawn there and can almost hear the stars filling the darkness with their immense burning.

## III

Marie was now twenty-one and living with her boyfriend, Joe, in Indianapolis, Indiana. I was twenty-four, living with a roommate, and attending graduate school in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. I'd driven eight hours south to Markle, Indiana, a small village tucked between the state's wide

cornfields, to visit family. We were spread all over the Midwest, but we'd converge in Markle during the holidays, at my aunt's house, where my mother lived. Winter would arrive in a few weeks. Thanksgiving hovered two days away. Night draped over the mass of us gathered in the large front yard.

We were bundled in oversized coats, hats and gloves, jumping up and down in our boots and thick socks, trying to stay warm. Gushes of bitter wind blew in from the road and flat fields. Marie and I were laughing, bouncing over the cold grass into the cobblestone driveway, bumping into one another. My uncle stirred a fire spewing from a large metal barrel. Fur-lined hoods and layered bodies were silhouetted in the flickering, orange light. The flames leapt, sprouting sparks into the inky sky. A figure lit a firework on the driveway. It fizzed hot fountains of red, orange, and blue. Someone snapped the shutter button of a camera, and a blinding flash of light illuminated the world.

Marie's phone rang. She slipped into the darkness to answer it. It was Joe, lost somewhere on one of the long country roads. She told him to look for the house with large windows, fireworks, and people gathered out front. I wanted him to stay lost. I wanted him to drive past the house and keep on going.

My mother had recently told me Joe broke up with Marie earlier that month. She cried. He cried and made a big deal over it. Then, he took her back shortly after, as if nothing foul had passed between them. The ordeal left Marie unsettled.

“You know how stingy he is with money. He’s just using her for rent,” my mother said. “Everything is split half and half. Period. That’s not natural. Not in a relationship. He’s holding on to her for now, but once the school year’s up, he’s going to move up to Traverse City. He’s going to leave her. I can feel it.”

“Is she okay?” I’d said. It was a dumb question.

“I don’t know. You know how she is. It’s so hard to get her to talk about stuff like that, but I can only imagine she’s very upset.”

I’d nodded and tried to believe none of it was true. I didn’t like Joe, but Marie loved him.

Wandering along the edge of the driveway, Marie walked toward the road and away from the group of shivering people. Her body grew small and her voice faint as she drew further from her family.

A dark car shot through the darkness, slowed down, and turned. The headlights were sharp, thick columns that slid over the grass and speared Marie’s legs. She followed the car as it slowly crept along the cobblestone drive and then parked alongside the house. Joe piled out, and Marie wrapped her arms around him. He plopped a limp, muscular arm over her shoulder and swallowed down a gulp of beer from a can in his left hand. I moved closer to them. Marie became a speck in the night, almost invisible against the blackness rising above the corn fields and the man looming above her. Someone pushed

the shutter button of a camera. A blinding flash illuminated the world, but I could still barely see her.

#### IV

She sang. She talked. She “never shut up,” some people joke when they reflect on Marie’s energetic younger years. They’ll smile and look up at the sky and remember the clean, light brightness that comes packaged with childhood.

Even now, nearly eighteen years later, that part of Marie hasn’t changed. When she’s in the room or on the other end of a phone, her voice will be the one heard most often. She’ll talk about books, movies, music, and restaurants. She makes fun of my sloppy sweatshirts and baggy jeans. She agonizes over her perfect hair and flawless skin. As she walks through Michael’s, wandering up and down the long isles of art supplies, she’ll argue with herself for hours over which paper and which white flowers would look best pinned onto the collage of photos she’s making for our grandmother, so the bare nursing home walls of her room won’t look so desolate. Marie and I weave through long conversations, pulling warm pieces of our childhood from the depths of our memories. I love her voice. It fills empty space with light. Each word becomes a small fragment of brightness. It is a welcomed voice, and I am drawn into it, but it is rarely used to articulate the stories that aren’t so funny and warm.

When challenges tinge her life, Marie becomes silent, tense, and hesitant. Her face is calm and composed, her hands relaxed, her movements smooth, but she is different. She averts her eyes. She sifts through her words carefully,

offering only a few and hoarding the rest. I'll urge her to say more, but she changes the subject. For a moment, she'll crack and a shard of panic will flash over her, a telling word might slip through her lips, but it is only a fleeting moment, a moment so brief I'll wonder how I ever noticed or heard.

## V

I drive south through Michigan toward Indiana. The grey highway hums beneath the tires of my car. Six hours of blurry hills, signs, orange cones, long guardrails, gas stations, and the curved arches of exits and slip roads still loom ahead of me. I chew on my lips some of the time. I blast the radio, replaying the same CDs over and over, but I hardly hear the lyrics. I barely hear the individual sounds: the thrumming drum, the deep-throated bass, the silvery strum of guitar and mandolin. I blink my eyes and another hour disappears. The world flashes by quickly, sun spills through the windows, but I don't see any of it. Blackness pushes into the edges of my vision. A heart pounds in my chest. I can't breathe. I have to pull over, look into a field littered with Styrofoam cups and plastic bags, and eat a hardboiled egg.

After I return to the highway, whirling mists of thought curl around my mind with the cold wind, gushing through the open windows. Graduate school. I don't want to be in graduate school. It's deadening me. But I love it. I want graduate school more than anything. My girlfriend's going to leave me. She hates me and hates that I moved to Michigan, far away from her in New York, to attend school and write. She loves me, she's proud of me, then hates me again,

and I don't even know how I feel anymore. I don't want to be here. I want to be here. I can't make up my mind. The sky is wide and open and full of space. Then, it is a thick, heavy blanket, wrapping me in its suffocation.

## VI

Most of the time, when I tip my head back and look up at a night sky, all I see is a flat blackness. A sheet of paper covered in salt. A dusty black cloth. A cliché of diamonds splashed over velvet. A porch light flicks on or city lights swell up like weeds, and then I can't see anything. The immense burning is nothing but the hum of an impenetrable silence, a muted star.

## VII

The bathroom door was closed. Marie stood behind it, straightening her brown hair and decorating her eyelashes with mascara. The morning grew old, and I waited for her to finish primping so we could roll out into the world and begin our day. The sun smeared everything with its light, and I wanted to move into it. I was jittery and impatient and drank too much coffee after breakfast. My heart rattled in my chest. I leaned my elbows against the metal kitchen table and rested my chin in my hands, drumming my fingers against my cheek. I sighed. I chewed my bottom lip. I stomped my foot.

The sink faucet began to run. Marie sang. Her voice lifted through the rush of falling water and pressed through the wooden door. I couldn't decipher the lyrics, the individual words, but her voice was clear. It moved back and forth

between silence and sound. I stopped chewing my lip. I stopped stomping my foot. I listened.

Soon, the door cracked open and Marie stepped out, a cloud of flowery perfume floating after her.

“I heard you singing,” I said, teetering back on my heels.

She smiled and looked down at the tiled floor. “Oh,” she said, turning her head toward the living room and walking away, “I didn’t think anyone could hear me.”

## VIII

I am her sister. We grew up together. We imagined and played and wondered and lied and sang and danced and wept together for the first thirteen years of her life and the first seventeen of mine, before I moved to New York to pursue my undergraduate studies in creative writing. We travelled across the country together, pulled through a scattered childhood of spontaneous moves and not enough stability to hold on to one thing for too long. So, we held on to each other. She was my best friend. She was the little sister who mimicked my actions, wore my clothes, and obeyed all of my ridiculous demands. I should understand her as much as I understand myself, but I don’t. Neither does my mother. Neither of us can break past the silence long enough to know what hurts her.

She’s struggled through college for the past two years, leaping from pre-med to business and finally to culinary studies. Soon, she might move to Florida

to live with her father and start again. Joe tells her that she should already know what she wants to do with her life; she shouldn't be so indecisive. She should also, according to him, get a job and exercise more. "Well, I think Joe should stop being such a prick," I'll say. "You can do whatever you want." But Marie only shrugs. I don't know if she feels scattered or spread over too much space, but sometimes it seems as if she is clinging to a dissolving ledge with a single hand, waiting for it to crumble, release her fingers, and let her fall.

## IX

It was Spring Break at Northern Michigan University, and I'd driven down to Markle, Indiana, to visit my mother and sister again. Marie was driving up from Indianapolis in a few days and would wind through the long roads flanked by flat, corn-filled land. Bits of snow filled the soggy rows of the fields. The long stretches of white looked desolate. They were slices of emptiness and the cold surrounding ground was dead and trying to push back into life. The air said "grey." More snow would fall.

My mother and I sat in my aunt's living room at the large slate table, waiting for Marie, leaning over a massive pile of puzzle pieces. Scattered haphazardly over the table, they looked like large stars tossed across a flat black sky. I was impatient and distracted by the tedious task. The print on the box read "1000 Pieces," and I felt as if I were broken into pieces by my own tattered relationship and struggles with college. The stress of graduate school in northern Michigan had scraped me down to a tired, dwindled sack of frizzy hair,

frayed nerves, pale skin, and bones. It had barely been a year since I'd moved to Marquette, a place over five hundred miles from where my girlfriend still lived in New York, but already the vast distance was proving unbearable for her. She yelled. We fought. She cried. She threatened to break up with me every weekend. I had enough puzzles in my life. I didn't want to work on another.

Too anxious and flustered to piece a massive mess together, I was hesitant to begin, but eventually I sunk into the act. I made myself sit on a chair and concentrate. I forced myself to look, to *at least* look. Eventually, I made small connections, noticing how one green edge fit with another green edge to form the fringes of a bush. This red wiggly line tied the last knot in a tangle of radio wires. One black piece completed the wing of a crow. Broken images that once seemed too complicated to merge began to fit. My mother and I pieced together opposite edges of the puzzle.

"You know," I said, leaning on my right elbow, "putting a puzzle together is kind of like meditation. I didn't want to do this at first, but now it kind of feels good." I fit another few pieces together and chewed on my bottom lip. Graduate school didn't seem so horrible.

"You know why?" she said, digging her fingers through the wooden tray where we piled the loose pieces. She found a few edges, dropped them onto the table and continued searching.

I matched two more pieces together. "Why?"

“Because putting a puzzle together is like accomplishing little, tiny successes, and little, tiny successes make you feel good.”

I linked two long rows together with a single piece and offered a celebratory sound. I thought of my girlfriend’s voice and how, even when it was flushed with anger, I still loved its sound. Night and all its stars began seeping through the large windows. I breathed in. I breathed out.

“It’s good for self-esteem,” she continued, linking tiny images together. “Keep on going, and it’ll build to bigger successes.”

Using my index finger, I pressed on a corner piece. I leaned closer to the table. My legs were folded beneath me. My knees ached, but I hardly moved, suddenly absorbed in the tedious task. Looking for patterns in the chaotic swirl of color and shape, I found them. I pushed them together.

“You should apply this to every part of your life,” my mother said.

I swear, as soon as she finished her sentence, I clicked in the last piece and completed the puzzle’s bottom edge. Later, I’d think of Marie. I’d wish she could’ve sat at the slate table, completing the bottom edge of a broken image, listening to our mother’s words, letting them sink deep inside until she understood them completely.

X

I wanted to know what world Marie slid into when she sang as a child. “Where is this place? What is it like,” I wanted to ask. She wouldn’t have

answered. She would've kept swinging and singing, and maybe that would've been enough.

## XI

My mother and I were in Barnes & Noble, wandering around with cups of hot tea. We strolled through the music section for a while, listening to the lazy drone of conversations and dim noise falling through the speakers. I was wearing too many layers, felt heavy, and eventually piled a heap of sweatshirts on the carpet. My arms were filled with books.

Something about being weighed down and over-layered reminded me of graduate school and bad relationships. I felt frazzled. I felt the edge of an approaching anxiety attack work its way into my lungs and chest. My muscles tensed. Shelves and carpet and books and people were on the verge of spinning.

I hurried over to a music kiosk, scanned the barcode of a movie soundtrack, slipped on the padded headphones, and sunk into the sounds moving through the speakers. Soft voices and strums from a guitar slid inside my ears. Darkness came in thick layers as I closed my eyes. When I opened them, slightly ready to face the world, my mother was waving a yellow CD case at me. It was *Bananaphone* by Raffi, a Canadian singer Marie loved when she was a child. Marie and I used to sing Raffi's songs together. I hadn't seen any of his albums in stores for a long time. I'd almost forgotten about him, but there he was: Raffi, a bearded man with a large grin and bright eyes, smiling from the cover, surrounded by the vast yellow of a giant banana.

Later that week, after Marie arrived from Indianapolis and I'd given her the CD, we were driving home from a long day out in the city. It was cold and windy. The loud world with its buildings, stoplights, and crowded streets sped by the windows. Looking through the glass, I let myself grow sluggish and numb under the dizzying movement. The radio was turned off. I chewed at my lips, consumed in thought. I don't remember what we were discussing, but Marie paused after something I said and moved her hand to her chest.

"It hurts when you think you've found that one person you'll be with forever, and you're wrong. I don't want to feel like this inside anymore," she said, turning her face toward me for a moment.

I looked at her, shocked she'd offered so much. I didn't know what to say, so I muttered a flimsy "It will be okay."

Marie held on to the steering wheel a little tighter. "Yeah," she said. "I guess." She stared straight ahead. A red light signaled us to stop.

"Marie, it will be okay," I said again. I patted her arm. Really, I wasn't sure, but I wanted to say it. I had to say it, so that it might become truth. "I can't believe you told me that."

"Yeah, well, you know." She smiled. It was something flimsy and uncertain.

"You can keep talking about it."

I saw her shoulders shrug in a long, calming, silent sigh. She stared forward for a moment and seemed to settle into something, a sort of resolve, a

comfortable chair she'd finally found. Her smile grew a little stronger. I'd pushed her to talk, and this time, she didn't look away. Instead, she looked at me. For a moment, her eyes focused on something beyond me, something beyond the edges of the car and the swirling world and the vast sky with the stars whirling and burning and roaring behind. Then, she returned. She focused. She looked into my eyes and kept them there. She let me look inside hers. Large, calm, and brown, they seemed to grow larger and larger. Their smooth, shiny surfaces reflected pieces of light streaming through the windows and windshield. I became a part of the swirling chaos, the stars, and the endless and burning depth of space inside them. Yet everything felt still, motionless, at rest. We were here. Simply here. Marie was going to be okay. We were both going to be okay.

In a soft voice, I told her she could talk to me whenever she felt ready, but she patted my knee, looked forward, and turned on the radio. She told me to put in Raffi. For the rest of the ride, even near the end when she slowed down and let the thawing fields and lines of dark trees linger in the windows, we sang, following Raffi, "Cause it don't matter to me - whatever you happen to be: an eagle, an onion, a pig, or a grape - as long as you're you I'll still love ya," together with our voices.

She's four years younger, but sometimes she's the older sister. Before I was ten, and probably long after, I was afraid of night's heavy darkness. I'd take Marie's hand and pull her with me, so I didn't have to walk through it alone.

### XIII

Pulling into the long, cobblestone driveway, my mother and I returned home after a day of shopping. Cornfields and forests spread across the flat, dark land. Glimmers and slashes of light, reflecting off a cold pond, flashed through the night. The world seemed to roll slowly. The car pressed up the gentle slope, stones crunching beneath its tires, and eventually stopped.

Gathering our bags, we bustled out into the chilly night, winding along the curving driveway leading toward the back of the house. I linked arms with my mother and stepped carefully and slowly, as if blind.

"Look up," my mother said.

I tipped my head back. The sky was as clear and black as a pupil. Not one cloud lingered, and the stars were vibrant and growing brighter as my eyes adjusted to night.

"It's been so long since I've looked up at the stars," I said, spinning in a slow circle.

"Stay out here for a bit. Sit and watch," my mother said.

"No," I said. "It's cold. I'll just stay in for the night."

I helped her carry the bags inside her bedroom and saw my reflection in the glass of a large window. Darkness leaned against it. The air of the house

was stuffy and warm, and I wanted the cold tug of open air. I pulled on an extra sweatshirt and warmer gloves, and wandered back outside.

Night pressed against my skin. A tinge of fear scratched at the back of my neck as I peered down into the woods, imagining large, wild animals lingering at the bases of trees, watching me with their reflective eyes. Pushing aside my thoughts, I found my way back down the driveway and onto the front porch. Light blared through the windows, blotting out the stars. I climbed back into the darkness, far from the long, safe glares of the house, and leaned against the side of my mother's car, still clicking and rattling from its long drive.

I looked up and away from the imaginary creatures I feared, letting my eyes adjust to the faint light of stars. The longer I gazed, the more the stars revealed themselves, as if pushing aside small blankets of blackness. My feet were aware of the stones beneath them. My skin tingled in the cold air. My distracted mind caught up with my body and where it stood. Now. In the cold. In the darkness. Alone and unmoving in the chaos.

I gazed into the sky, deep into it, and, for the second time in my life, I understood it for what it was: not a flat photograph, but a space that sinks and rises and swirls and sings and expands out and further out than my mind will ever fully understand. I saw the stars, their ancient and lingering light, their quiet burning in a place far from this world.

Farther out in the yard, somewhere near the raised garden beds, an animal stirred, crunching through the cold spring's frozen grass. My shoulders tensed

for a moment and then relaxed. The animal and I were enveloped by the same immensity. We were both small and insignificant in the darkness. I felt strangely united with the creature.

Spread out under the night, the sodden corn fields and ponds seemed to stretch on forever. The stars and fields filled everything, like blood filling a single body. The division between sky and the earth faded. I became invisible. For a moment, I was *nothing*, and my eyes opened. The world was whole and unbroken, a thousand pieces becoming one.

#### XIV

To recognize something is to find it in the darkness, suddenly grasping it and heaving it into light, admiring it for the first time, for the second time, for the thousandth.

#### XV

My mother and I gave up on the puzzle days ago, leaving it loose and uncared for in its wooden tray. But Marie sat in the darkness at the slate table every night since the first evening she arrived, the light from a tall lamp looming over her head like the moon. When we weren't sitting near her, Marie played music from a laptop or listened to her iPod, singing along with the lyrics. Sometimes, she'd sing without music, and her voice alone lifted through the large silence. She leaned closer and closer to the table. Her face was adorned with the same countenance she carried as a child when singing from her swing.

Everyone and everything seemed to slip past the edges of her vision, and she slid somewhere farther and further away.

She leaned farther over the table, a mass of puzzle pieces scattered like stars before her steady hands, and pulled the wooden tray onto her lap. Her face filled with deep concentration. Her eyes narrowed as she focused on each piece, searching for connections, looking for ways to organize the confusion filling the space in front of her. Piece by piece, she slowly made the image whole. She linked together the scattered parts. I passed from the brightness of the kitchen into the darkness of the living room, and I listened.

## An Erosion

Beneath curls of light steaming through basement windows,  
my mother paints, her canvas framed by hallway dimness.

I watch her brushes bleed against white. In the magenta bowl  
of her palms, grey maps highways, thousands of miles

she's travelled across country, never to find home.  
My hands hover above her fingers, their lines empty roads.

She kneels, pushes her palms against mine. "I want to know,"  
I tell her, "why you're stuck in these grooves." The paint is wet.

Grey rivers slide across my arms, stretch into the hallway's  
hollow darkness. "Our canvas is a sea," she says,

"and our fingers rain. The entire earth is our home."

## Endless Sand

Utah's sky, a sheet of skin, domed over the mesas, its color bleached by sun and heat. The land was blood and bone, volcanic rock and violet-stained slopes, grey patches of sagebrush and cacti, red sand rising into hills pale as skulls. In the middle of it all, my father and I sat rigid in our seats, overwhelmed, slicing southwest on a highway through 111 degree air. Fixed to the car's windshield, a Garmin guided us toward the city of Hurricane. We'd traveled over eighteen-hundred miles since we left Marquette, Michigan, three days ago. We still had over a hundred remaining. It was early July, nearly a year after Shawn, my stepmother, passed away, and our first time in the desert.

"I'm not sure I like this," I said, cracking my knuckles against the steering wheel. For the seventh time in ten minutes, I checked the engine's temperature gauge. The air conditioner was cranked up high.

My father sat in the passenger seat, marveling at the terrain through insect-speckled glass. With his slender build, Zappa-inspired goatee, long "rock 'n' roll" hair, and Pink Floyd tee-shirt, he appeared to be no older than thirty, though he'd turned fifty in February. It was impossible tell that he suffered from chronic stomach pain and rheumatoid arthritis, that three stints had been inserted into his heart after doctors discovered an eighty-percent-blocked artery, that he may have died if they hadn't caught it so soon, and that he arrived home from surgery to a wife bed-ridden with terminal cancer.

Aiming his camera at another bone-white hill, my father said, "This place is like a beautiful hell." He snapped a picture, and the desert swelled and dipped and swayed, rippling its jagged back, as we sped past.

Yesterday, we took turns driving as we wound along the curves of I-70 through the Rocky Mountains, radio turned off, fingers clenched around the steering wheel. Whenever land plunged into a steep grade or sheered away at the edge of the interstate, we held our breaths and pressed on the brakes. Grey pinnacles of granite and metamorphic rock towered above the guardrails, new masses emerging with each bend, stone layering over stone like folds in a cloth. As we moved into the range's foothills, evening fell. The sky dimmed to mauve, then navy, and the terrain's creases smeared into a single silhouette, the outlines of a hundred human faces.

One of the profiles belonged to Shawn, her chin tilted toward the stars, dark hair thrown back in a shadow across the road. The image reminded of the portrait hung on my grandparents' wall. In the photograph, Shawn seemed to look beyond the edges of the frame, toward a picture of my father. Even when their relationship was strained, my father's love straying toward another woman, Shawn's eyes, like the ones in her portrait, were always focused on him. Eventually, her face, like all the mountains surrounding us, shifted and stretched and disappeared as we drove into the desert.

By the time the mountains had flattened, it was night. Blackness crept over distant hills and washed against the car until only a blotch of pavement was

visible in the headlight beams. Even my father and I were dim shapes, our heads and backs aching from our first trip through the Rockies. With memories still pressed by images of jagged stone and its faces, we drove thirty miles to Moab, found a hotel, and woke up to the red, barren sand of Utah. After strolling through the city for an hour, we piled back into the car, another three hundred miles remaining, and continued west.

We'd been on the road all morning, watching the temperature rise as the land grew bleaker. It would be another two hours until we reached our hotel in Hurricane, and the surrounding desert would crawl outside our windows for the rest of the ride. I decided I should try to get used to it.

"You start walking out into this heat with nothing and there's no way you're gonna make it," my father said, his words sputtering out quickly.

"There's nowhere to go. Look at it." Wide-eyed, he leaned forward and tossed his hands in the air, tracing the desert's angular body. "Where the *hell* are you going to go? *Where?*"

"I guess - nowhere. You'd just - not live." I took a deep breath. My palms were damp. "This place is terrifying. So tempting, but terrifying."

"Like something beautifully destructive. Ah, that's it!" He leaned back, nodding as if he'd discovered the only answer to an impossible equation.

"Beautifully destructive."

I had always thought of my father as a big kid, someone who refused to abandon the energy and fearlessness, sometimes carelessness, that often dimmed

after childhood. He knew how to maneuver through woods at night without a flashlight, coyotes stalking alongside him on their silent paws, growling whenever he stood still. He wasn't afraid to veer off a path, hike illegally into canyons, and ford white-water rivers just to know what it felt like to stand in a sacred place. He'd taught me about bravery and was one of the reasons why I decided to travel into the desert in the first place. I could tell he wanted to park on the side of the road and wander into the land, but I could also sense how tightly he clung to the safe confines of the car. If we were driving through a state father north, we'd probably park and stomp through the trees for a few hours. But we were in a different type of country now. We'd both spent most of our lives in the Midwest or northeast, where the land was thickly wooded and the water and wind, even during the warmest summer months, was often cool. We'd never hiked on the edge of a beautiful hell before.

"I always imagined mesas as some kind of rare formation. I never thought there were this many," my father said, aiming his camera. Wind blew back his hair as he rolled down the window. Hidden in the collage of volcanic rock and brush, a wooden shack slumped against a hill like someone who'd long ago given up her fight with the desert. "Look at that sand. It's like giants poured buckets of it over huge tables. I bet if you started digging into those things, you'd find fuckin' pyramids."

"Maybe." I'd need more lessons on courage before I hiked up the side of a mesa and fished through its snake-riddled sand.

My father snapped another picture and closed the window. I looked at the lower right corner of the Garmin. One hundred and seven more miles until we arrived in Hurricane. The animated eagle my father had chosen to represent our position on the map lifted and lowered its wings over a black road. Wondering if the bird was hot, I again checked the engine's temperature gauge. In its pale sky, the sun burned huge. One hundred and six.

"It's so wild here," my father said.

I agreed, wishing I were as fearless as him.

Shawn had once told me that she fell in love with my father because of his sense of adventure, his optimism, his ability to turn any situation into something good. When they first met, my father was newly single, and Shawn was a beautiful girl with blue eyes and long dark hair, though not the woman he planned to marry. After they discovered she was pregnant, however, he knelt by her feet, sang the Beatle's song, "Julia," to her belly, and asked her to marry him. They were together for seventeen years until he lost her. My father, I realized, had already walked through hell.

Focusing on the slope of a mesa, I tried to bury my eyes inside the earth and imagine the people who once lived here: dark skin, black hair, hands and feet dusted with sand, bodies capable of carving the desert, knowing its secrets, testing its anger. Beneath the sun and with little more than bare hands, the ancient Puebloans pressed their painted fingers against sacred stone and chiseled climbing paths into the sides of cliffs. They combed through jagged canyons to

find water, carve cities into sandstone walls and build dwellings on the flat tops of mesas. They found food and water. They learned to survive.

Beyond the gut-spattered windows, mesa and rocky hill stretched far past the horizon, like the choppy waters of an ocean. I knew there were small towns and ranches nestled between the huge waves of land, but from the barren highway, I could perceive none of them. There was nothing and no one for thousands of miles. My father and I were part of a hasty stream of civilized people, packed into air conditioned cars, driving naively along a line of paved heat through a wide, dry, and endless sea. All of the desert's water had been boiled away billions of years ago, and there was nothing left.

Earlier that day, we'd pulled off the highway and followed a sign that led to one of the highway's scenic view areas called Devil's Canyon. We climbed a rusted ladder over a barbed wire fence and clamored down to the edges of a wide chasm, its sharp, white walls smeared with streaks of red and black. Sun crushed its rays against our hair. Dry wind pressed the moisture from our skin. The air was difficult to inhale. I imagined the temperature escalating to a degree so scalding the heat sucked all the moisture from our bodies' cells and killed us right there. After my father and I wandered through dry bushes and climbed into the parking lot, we noticed two boys, both about twenty years old, pacing around the sidewalks. An old, black sports car sat in the lot. Its back window was blown out, and one of its back tires was mangled.

My father watched the boys, his eyes burning with the same concentration he'd shown my stepmother while she lay in her bed, sick, thinning, struggling to breathe, struggling to live. He wanted to save them, the way he wanted to save my stepmother but couldn't. We were ready to clear out the back seat of our car and bring the boys to the closest town, but a man in a highway service vehicle piled out of his truck and walked toward them.

If the boys had chosen to drive a lonelier road, far from the knowledge of others, they may have become ghosts, destined to linger forever in this burnt place. Like the ghost of my stepmother, lost to us in a world that had suddenly become violent and cruel. I felt alone on this road, too aware of life, of how easily it is frayed and broken. Did these boys know that they'd pressed themselves closer to death simply by sliding into their black car and blazing, thoughtlessly, into the desert?

I fixed my eyes on the pavement and tried to stop wondering what would happen if my car broke down and everyone else in the world decided to stop driving through Utah on I-70. Out here, there was no satellite signal. Cell phones and laptops were useless. Juice boxes, water bottles, and cans of Yoo-hoo were piled in the back seat, but it was only enough to last us a few days. The heat would surely knock us into the hard sand and strap us down for the circling vultures to consume. We were doomed. We needed to get out of this place, and quickly. I drove faster. I clutched the steering wheel. I was being ridiculous.

I took a deep breath, relaxed my hands, and eased up on the gas pedal. "This place is beautiful," I said. The words were forced, but I let them settle in the air.

"Yeah, it is." My father snapped a few more pictures before zipping the camera back into the case. He threw the case to the floor by his feet, then picked it up again, unzipped it, pulled out the camera, and took another picture, his routine for the past thousand miles.

"This doesn't even look real," I said. For a moment, I wondered if we were really driving through the middle of all this. All this red. All this sand. All this death.

Two nights before, we'd stopped in Iowa at a cheap hotel after the first long day of driving. After hauling our bags into the room, I crumpled onto one of the beds. I stared at the ceiling, ate some fruit, drank some water, and fought away sleep by searching for faces in the swirls of ceiling paint. My father paced back and forth across the carpet, rambling about something.

"My fucking stomach. Where's that wine?" he asked. He tore the plastic package off one of the hotel's complimentary cups.

"Should you drink wine when your stomach's messed up?" I asked.

"Fuck it." He opened another cup and handed it to me. "Here, you have some, too."

We drank our Sangria wine, a bottle I'd brought from Michigan in anticipation of needing alcohol after driving for days in a stuffy car. The wine

was warm and tasted bitter. I tipped the rest of mine back into the bottle, and my father poured another cup.

“We have to be back in New York on the tenth,” he said, ceasing his relentless pacing to sit on the bed and lean against a pile of pillows.

I looked out across the small divide separating his bed from mine, and narrowed my eyes. “What? Why? That’s going to leave us no time in Utah.”

“I promised your sisters. Being home is more important.” He stared at me, eyebrows raised and eyes wide.

I remembered, and my body suddenly felt heavy. July tenth. The day Shawn passed away. My father, sisters, and I had woken up exhausted that morning, a strange feeling curdling in our stomachs. I called work and told them I wasn’t coming in. Three hours later, I held my stepmother in my arms, surrounded by my sisters, and felt her die, her blue eyes growing dim in the sunlight.

“Oh my god,” I said, sitting up. “Oh my god, of course. I’m sorry. Shit. I’m sorry. Jesus, why did I forget that?” I raked my fingers through my hair and sat hunched on the edge of the bed.

“I miss her,” my father said. His lips stuck out like a child’s, and his chest heaved with each strained sigh. He closed his eyes. “I think of all the stupid shit I did with Jerri. What was wrong with me? I had Shawn the whole time, but I couldn’t see her, how wonderful she was.”

A year before Shawn was first diagnosed, my father had fallen in love with another, much younger, woman, a painter named Jerri. For a year, he was unfaithful, stealing away over the weekends to spend time with her, losing sight of his wife, his family, his morals. I discovered his relationship with Jerri and met her. Wracked by an intense dislike for Shawn, one that stemmed from my irrational teenage years, I supported my father's decision, even encouraged him to leave my stepmother. Something, though, stayed him, and only months after Jerri finally moved away, doctors diagnosed Shawn with cervical cancer. My father and I, shamed, found ourselves again. We found Shawn, who had forgiven us, who took us back, who said she'd never stopped loving us despite everything, and we did what we should've done from the beginning: We loved her.

"It was a mistake, Dad. You learned that, and so did I. You were there for Shawn. That's all that matters now," I said.

The ceiling lights hummed, and the air felt dingy, heavy. We spent the next hour sitting side by side on my father's bed, one arm wrapped around the other's shoulders, talking about Shawn and crying into the stuffy air of the hotel room. My father drank his wine. I curled up on the bed and imagined our country, the millions of miles of road stretched over its surface like veins. The land rolled and flattened, dipped below the sea and rose into jagged, snow-capped peaks. People in cars pulsed along the treacherous highways, filling the pavement with light when night settled over them. Somewhere at the ends of

those roads, in the wooded and water-bordered sections of the country, were my mother, sisters, grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles, friends, and boyfriend. Their land pressed against the desert, the desert pressed back, but neither gave way.

“We should enjoy this trip,” my father said. “We should soak in all of this time we have together and live in the moment. We’re here. I don’t want to ever forget that.”

“Me neither.” I looked at him. We were father and daughter, still alive in this hostile world.

By the time we’d reached the border of Utah, we’d held to our oath, but as the desert swelled dry and red in front of us, fear had started to scratch its way back inside. The city of Moab had been a relief, but the two hour drive to our destination in Hurricane crept by slowly, taunting us. Hot air sucked water from our skin. Sun beat through the windows and swarmed over our arms and legs. Vultures whirled in the empty sky, searching, I imagined, for the dry body of a modern day human, one who thought she could understand the elaborate mazes of the land, its secret stashes of water, its harsh will, its rare and violent gifts. Eventually, however, the vastness of the desert fell behind, the city of Hurricane rising over the horizon. Department stores, laundry mats, hotels, and Mexican restaurants rolled into view. My father and I, for the first time in two days, relaxed into our seats.

“I never thought I’d say this,” I said, “but it’s really good to see civilization.”

My father threw his head back and laughed. “No kidding.”

We found our hotel, piled out into the hot afternoon, unpacked the car, lay wilted on our beds in the air conditioning for a few minutes, and wondered why in the hell we decided to spend four days hiking through an oven filled with sand. We canceled the last two nights of our reservation, instead deciding to spend a few days in the Rockies at the end of our trip, and trudged back out into the sun in search of hats, beer, and a scenic place to enjoy them.

After buying a six pack of beer at a gas station, we found a Dollar General, two straw hats, and a woman with long blonde hair tied into a ponytail that swung over her shoulders when she spoke. Her tan skin looked like loose, cracked leather. She may have been sixty or thirty, I couldn’t tell. A lifetime in the desert sun had made her age difficult to decipher, but her hair rippled like water. She moved and spoke with the fluidity of a teenager. The skin around her eyes radiated with wrinkles, but her pupils were bright, blue, and clear, the way my stepmother’s once were.

My father asked if she might know of a good place to sit, drink beer, and look at the mesas. She danced behind the counter, swinging her arms and hair back and forth and twirling in circles as she gave directions. I wondered how anyone could feel so young and simultaneously live in a place where death would take you if you didn’t step carefully. It lingered in every UV-infested ray

of sun. It hovered in the dry air. It stirred in the sand, coiled in the bodies of snakes, and loomed over the sides of trails that dropped into canyons. Shawn couldn't escape it, but this woman behind the Dollar Store counter was alive, bobbing her head and spinning behind the counter. She wished us a good trip as we waved goodbye, spilled back out into the heat, and headed toward the park she'd directed us to.

"No, no, no," my father said after we'd turned left after the third light and driven a mile. "This is no good."

The park was an empty square of grass, littered with a few picnic benches and swing sets. No mesas were visible. Only the crumbling, sandy buildings of Hurricane could be seen, and, already, the relief of entering civilization was growing stale. We were both hikers, nature lovers, country-bred, and though the desert had frightened us earlier, we were filled with a desire to leave town and stretch back into wilderness. We continued driving down Main Street, for the first time without our Garmin.

After passing through a small neighborhood and emerging onto a road bordered by barren lots and empty houses, we turned left and parked the car when the pavement faded into sand and stone. The land, blanketed in patches of sagebrush and volcanic rock, sloped downward. My father and I stepped out of the car's air conditioning and back into the desert's dry wind. Now that we were free of the vehicle's fast race across the long southwestern highways, the desert

no longer rolled past like a dead, dry sea. My father and I stood still and breathed in the desert's dusty smells, its heat.

Ribboning across the hills, lines of the violet, red, and black painted the pale sand. Far below us, a wide, silvery river spilled from behind the foot of a hill, wound through the canyon, and was consumed by the desert again. Juniper and cottonwood, their leaves waving in the breeze, grew thick along the river's rocky banks.

My father and I found a slab of concrete surrounded by gravel and unscrewed the caps of our bottled beers. We sat beneath a sheet of shade cast down by a triangular stone memorial. A gold-inscribed plaque adorned one side. It was dedicated to Parley P. Pratt, explorer, leader, head of the Southern Utah Expedition in 1849, and severe underestimator of the desert's will. He and his crew perished in one of Utah's frigid winters.

"It snows that bad down here?" my father asked, pressing down his straw hat when a gust of wind tried to lift it off his head.

"Yeah, I guess so." I tried to imagine a place as hot and dry as this covered in a blanket of snow.

"Huh." My father took a swig of his beer.

We spent a half hour snapping photos, drinking, marveling, melting ice cubes on the cement, and trying to keep our straw hats from blowing off in the gusts of hot wind. I looked out over the horizon, the colors of its distant hills and mountains growing darker in the sinking sun. The land seemed softer, less

foreboding and sharp than I'd perceived it from the car hours before. For a few minutes, my father and I ceased our rambling, and only the sound of blowing grass sifted through the silence. Even something as delicate as snow could fall here.

We stood up, stepped out of the shade, and wandered past the edges of the gravel. Dry brush moved against our ankles as we pushed out into a wilder part of the desert. I stepped carefully, scanning the ground and its patches of brush for snakes, wondering if this would be my last walk. Though a part of me wanted to remain in the shade, safe on the square of concrete, most of me wanted to follow my father as he walked further into the canyon. He stepped over a small fence and discovered a trail that led down to the river. I was nervous and a little cranky, but I followed, wary of the heat but drawn by the colors, the water, the smells of dust and stone, the rippling green and brown of the land.

We hiked deeper into the canyon. The wide, switchback trail grew narrower as we edged closer to the water, and thick patches of sagebrush, juniper, and cottonwood crept closer to our bodies. My father handed me a stick, and I beat back the low bushes before I stepped through. I screamed and whined whenever I pushed through a dense expanse of brush, but I decided it was an excited wail, a proclamation, a sudden realization that I didn't want to be anywhere else but here.

"This is wicked," my father said, his arms and face illuminated by the sinking sun's pink light.

“This is totally wicked.” I smacked my stick against another bush. Fat flies bit at the backs of my legs and arms. Heat rippled over my skin. I looked over my shoulders for mountain lions, down by my feet for rattle snakes, and up at the sky for vultures. Beneath the heat, my brain felt like a clump of dust, but it was a welcomed sensation. It slowed me down. I needed this place. I needed the weight of the past few years to dry and lift, like water evaporating into clouds. The desert stretched out its red wings, and I stumbled inside, still alive.

After weaving through one last clump of cottonwood, we emerged into the open air hovering over the river bank. Water frothed and bubbled over stones. Tiny brown spiders scuttled over and under the sand and pebbles. A beaver paddled upstream, clutching a leafy branch behind its large teeth, and took shelter under a rock when he spied me stepping through the river with my camera. Earlier, my father watched a road runner dust over a portion of trail on its skinny legs. River rushed by. Mesa stretched toward the cloudless sky. Black, violet, rock, red, sky, leaf, blade, and wind dotted and splotched and inked up the dry-as-paper land. We were a part of it.

After snapping a few more photographs, we gazed and stood silently for a moment. The cold water swirled around my ankles and cooled my blood. My father slid his bare feet back into his socks and shoes, and we began our climb up the canyon wall toward the car. The heat seeped into us, and I glanced over my shoulder to check on my father. I was worried about his bad heart, his stomach, and his arthritis, but he smiled, his face as red as the sand, and continued

climbing. At the top of the canyon, we hollered out a sound of celebration. I closed my eyes and felt the desert sliding through our skin and into our blood. Our lungs were filled with its air. Our legs were caked with its sand.

“I feel healed,” my father said after we’d slouched back into the car and drove away from Confluence Park. His face was red and puffy from the heat, and the wrinkles splayed over his forehead and around his eyes seemed to have sunk a little deeper. His hair frizzed out like a wild clump of grass. His eyes were bright, blue, and clear, like the river, like my stepmother’s, like the woman’s were at the Dollar store as she danced and twirled behind the counter.

## Stone and Water Lily

Rapid current brings snapped twigs, leaves, fish.  
Stones, like clenched hands, persuade

sand into swirls and rivulets. I live there with them,  
hard and growing dull under the rush of things,

of living briefly, of loving death.

I have forgotten how to gather stones  
in my palms, fling them, make music with water,  
like a child pressing instrument keys.

I remember a time when I sat at the auburn-glazed  
piano with my grandmother, her fingernails as hard as stone,  
how she penciled capital letters on each white key,

imaged me into a young composer.

Today, I make small, silent ripples in the sand,  
tiny pulses that dilute before someone touches them.

I once saw an old woman and child lean over a bridge,  
toss pebbles and lily seeds into the water.

One day, the old woman will lie limp in the river, small pieces of her  
breaking off. Lily seeds will find stones, map them in thin roots, unfurl,  
impossibly, above the surface, moving like open hands through detritus.

The child will grow, turn her grandmother into song.

## Echo Lake

Over five hundred miles of highway stretch between the Upper Peninsula's trails and the wooded paths winding behind my home in Central New York. If I were asked, however, to identify my current location by the appearance of the surrounding land, I might forget my life in Michigan and, instead, answer, "I am home."

Ever since I moved to Marquette three years ago, it's been a habit of mine to seek out sections of forests that resemble those surrounding my hometown in rural New York. Nearly every afternoon for the seven years that I lived in Hastings, my father and I hiked along the trails behind our house, often naming our favorite sections of the woods: the Shire, a boggy valley with dozens of fallen trees, their roots and the soil packed around them arching into small caves; Carpet Trail, an overgrown logging road carved through the forest's center and covered in hills of moss; and Beaver Pond, a marsh surrounded by cattails and poison ivy, where a colony of beavers lived. Memories of home and family – shapes, sounds, and smells of northeastern forests – suddenly appear beneath the shadows of Michigan trees whenever I yearn for the past.

During a late September around dusk, amidst 271,000 acres of preserved Michigan land, on a small section of wooded trail curling between the edge of Echo Lake and Lake Superior, I found one such place.

I was part of a small crowd of hikers. Hours ago, we'd packed into a bus and ridden to Echo Lake to study the wildlife and flora and find inspiration to write. Now, it was near the end of our trip. The air was cold and misted with rain. My back and calves ached. Our guide, a slender man with terribly long legs, had walked at a pace some of us could only run. Most of us hadn't heard half of what he'd tried to teach us.

Beside me, James, one of my classmates, gripped the straps of his book bag and stared at the ground, his narrow face half-hidden beneath a wet baseball cap. We'd walked silently next to one another for the past ten minutes, only murmuring a few words when one of us discovered something interesting.

At day's end, down a slope to my right, Echo Lake's darkening waters reflected the veiled sun's mango hue. Ripples traveled across the lake's surface. Something moved. I stopped to peer between the trees and identify what may have caused the disturbance.

"Did you see that?" I said, lifting onto my toes.

James looked up from beneath the brim of his hat and squinted through the trees. "Where?"

I crouched to the ground and pointed as the group of students ahead of us reached a bend in the trail. Beneath my boots, the dirt path was soft. A low cover of long-leaved aster grew along its edges. Rising from beneath the canopy of wide leaves, ferns arched and bent beneath light-dappled shadows. Though the bracken fern was much smaller than the five-foot ostrich ferns that uncurled

in the northeastern woods, the texture of its fronds brushing against my palms felt the same.

At home, whenever my father and I hiked to middle of Ball Road Trail, our curiosity continually guided us to turn left down a path that wound through an expanse of fern and eventually led to the edge of Beaver Pond. As we walked along the narrow trail through Fern Gully, I'd open my arms and run my hands across the ferns. Sometimes, I'd snap off a frond, shove it in my ponytail, and focus on the weight of it tugging against my hair.

Even the northern hemlocks, rising like pillars along the shores of Echo Lake, were reflections of the ones that stood beside the path my father and I once followed as we stepped out of Fern Gully. We'd make our way down a steep hill toward the marsh, keeping our eyes tilted upward in search of the round porcupines we often saw balled up in high branches of hemlocks. We rarely saw the animals, only gnawed twigs on the ground, and we'd continue our trek through the valley.

Closer to the marsh, the trail was overgrown, but my father and I knew the slope of the land, the location of rotting stumps, and formations of trees that served as landmarks leading to the water's muddy edge. The beavers living in our woods were often hunted illegally during the day by land owners. Although typically diurnal, this particular colony learned to emerge only after darkness slid its protective veil over the pond, and so did we.

With our backs pressed against tree trunks, my father and I drank beer and waited for night to coax the beavers from their huts. For an entire summer, this was our routine, and every night, shortly after the last of the sun's light bled from the sky, we'd watch for ripples on the marsh.

When concentric circles spread across the water, blurring the moon's reflection and knocking gently against shore, my father and I would cease whispering. With our eyes adjusted to darkness, we gripped low-hanging tree branches, leaned far out over the water, and waited. Small, dark bodies glided across the marsh, gathered floating branches, and crept onto shore to eat cattails or gnaw trees. In the forest's blackness, surrounded by the smell of water and drenched in the sounds of animals cracking through the leaves to gather wood for their water-bound homes, my father and I settled into the mud and listened.

Over time, the land owners caught on to the beavers' tactics, stalked out into the night, broke holes in their dams, and shot the animals when they paddled out of their huts to mend the damage. The beavers disappeared. For weeks, my father and I watched the empty waters, still hopeful, sometimes waiting for hours before finally giving up and trudging back home. Eventually, we decided to stop the half hour hike to Fern Gully. It was too difficult to walk through the valley and sit, disappointed, at the edge of a drying, silent pond.

At the edge of Echo Lake, James and I peered through the trees, searching for the source of the ripples. The crowd of our classmates and their voices were

fading farther into the mist. A few feet from shore, a dark shape slid through the water.

“I see it,” James said.

We stood still on the edge of the trail, and then together we leapt into the darkness of the trees and bound through the woods toward the lake. Cold air rushed against my skin as I jumped over a log and skidded across the wet leaves. James landed beside me.

We stood up, side by side, our eyes already adjusted to the fading light. Only a single line of trees blocked our view, and through the wide openings between hemlock and maple, we watched a beaver weave along the water’s surface. I wondered if the creature’s lodge was piled on shore, if it was somewhere close, and what it might feel like if I could lie against its gnawed branches and tree trunks and listen to their sounds, the way I did when my father and I finally found them again.

## Husky Undomesticated

I run in my heavy paws.  
Winter peels away like skin.

The last of the sun needles into grey hills  
of snow, carving them jagged, and street corners  
and lawns become the soiled, wild  
shoulders of hunted polar bears.  
Shovels slice off their claws.

The bears stretch out in the streets, but I can't  
get my teeth around them.  
These tethers are tight.

I can only run straight ahead –  
through crowds and rope, din, bells, flashing  
lights, boots, hot chocolate, cigarettes, drunkenness,  
illusion of weekends, illusion of time,  
illusion of freedom, illusion of freedom ending,  
illusion of currency and of depression and pills  
to dilute them, illusion of owning me, illusion of owning  
anything and of losing everything, children with their heads  
slung over slopes of snow, laughing with their beautiful teeth  
and bright sounds, destined  
to become their parents,  
the stoic creatures with weathered skin and grey hair  
and next morning's  
hangover and prison and cancer billowing up  
inside, tired and wondering if it was all worth it to watch me run –  
run through these dim isles of man.

Human smells blow  
through doors and die. Trees narrow in, and the moon spills  
clean, blue light on the polar bear backs. I want  
to be somewhere quiet and unbound and filled  
with only the ancient scents of animal  
and ice. I want to gnaw these straps and run.

I'll take you with me, human,  
because I know you want less.

We'll follow the wild bears north, where claws  
grow long and black  
and these tethers  
are nothing but wind.

## Old King

It was a Saturday afternoon, and every Saturday afternoon, my mother or grandmother drove me far out into Indiana country to ride horses at Free Wind Farm. Set back over a half mile from the road at the end of a long, cobble-stone driveway, the barn looked like nothing more than a small square of white in the distance. I loved watching the place and its yellow surroundings grow larger and more vivid as we moved closer and eventually parked by the main entrance.

Indiana's country was mostly flat, and fields of pasture and corn extended outward for miles around all sides of the barn. The sky above the land was as wide and open and vacant as the fields. Fort Wayne, the city where I lived, lay somewhere in the east, invisible, over ten miles away. Except for dirt roads, a few houses and distant barns, nothing resembling civilization could be seen from Free Wind Farm. Sometimes, after my riding lessons, I'd lean against the flaking barn, listen to the nicker of horses and the drum of hooves over earth, and look out over the emptiness and wind-blown grasses.

St. John's Middle School and the church, where I spent most of my time during the school week, couldn't be seen either, and as I stood on the edge of a wilder earth, I'd imagine them gone, faded from existence. Still, I could see them in my mind: brick and swarming with angsty pre-teens, each building rising from the sidewalks, dark and ominous, and slamming against the sky like a fist.

Inside, young people sat in hard-backed chairs and pews and learned how to spell, complete algebra equations, and believe in God.

When I'd started attending the private school, I hardly spoke. I preferred silence. I chose seats that were tucked into corners by windows or against the farthest edge of the room, where I couldn't be seen, where daylight or shadows would blot me out. Sometimes, instead of taking notes while the teachers lectured, I doodled images of people leaping off the paper's top line and tumbling down into the margins. The leap and fall would spark a transformation, and by the time the person reached the bottom of the page, they'd turned into a wolf, bird, or horse. As I doodled and daydreamed, my teachers wove myths about "God's wrath" and how to properly "earn our way into the Kingdom of Heaven."

My mother was wary of Fort Wayne's public schools, so she'd decided to send me to St. John's for a better education. The tuition was high, but "it could be lowered," the priest told my mother the summer we moved into the predominantly Catholic neighborhood, "if your children were baptized." I was one of only a few girls in the sixth grade not yet baptized and, therefore, I believed, doomed to enter Hell. So, next year, over Easter weekend, in front of my classmates, my head would tip over a bowl filled with holy water, and oil would drip down my forehead. I would be reborn, saved from the jaws of Hell, accepted by God, and granted the two-thousand-dollar deduction in yearly tuition that other non-Catholics missed out on.

I loved the God my teacher's had shown me, but I feared him even more. I spent much of my time repenting and praying for forgiveness. I wanted to make sure, when I died, that I'd earned my place in Heaven.

At Free Wind Farm, things were different. There were no crosses hung on cold marble walls, no pews or desks, no lectures or sermons about the soul's damnation. I loved the dirt and hay that collected on my body when I walked into the barn. I loved the clapping of metal shoes, the flutter of birds in the rafters. I loved how the dusty air between the walls smelled like manure, sweat, and leather, how frail bars of afternoon sun sliding through the high windows lit up the masses of dust and flies. Feral cats, their jaws full of mouse, mewed and skittered across the floor, skirting pools of water on their muddy paws. Outside, beyond the stable walls, in the middle of yellow fields, animal bones, soulless, lay in the grass. Our Catholic God would not allow them to enter Heaven, my religion teachers preached.

My boots, their treads clogged with grassy manure, scuffed over the floor as I walked past rows of stalls and peered into their darkness. Most of them were empty, but a few were filled with large, dozing horses. Once I reached the dry erase board, all the stench and sound and image had soaked into my skin and hair. In a single breath, I sucked them deeper into my eleven-year-old lungs.

On Saturday afternoons, my existence was dedicated to the world equine. Even in my young age, I understood the importance of Free Wind Farm. Birds flitted out from under the eaves of the roof, leaving their tiny, white eggs

vulnerable and exposed. Cats crept around corners, muscles tense and drawn, ready to pounce on anything small that moved. Sun sank, and greying horses nibbled up grass as they balanced precariously on arthritic knees. I knew every Saturday afternoon at Free Wind Farm would end. Sunday would arrive. Monday and middle school and God would creep in like a mist, but for one hour of my life each week, none of that mattered.

When I reached the dry erase board and tipped my head back to check the pairings of student and horse, “Emily” was scrawled next to “King.” I smiled, clutched my velvet-covered riding helmet. I didn’t have to ride Ciba, my usual partner, the caramel-colored Appaloosa that flattened her ears and nipped at the air whenever I passed her stall. King, however, was a large, brown thoroughbred, the oldest and gentlest of all the horses, and unruffled by my presence. His old age made him slow, especially in his tedious and deliberate gait, which often felt as if he were picking a path across a stone-scattered river, careful not to stumble and let his rider fall. It was rare when our names were together on the board, but when they were, I stared at the pair of words for a few minutes to make sure the match was real.

I spun on the heels of my boots and headed back toward the front of the barn and into the tack room, a space packed with cotton saddle pads, chaps, English saddles, and bridles, all drenched with that wonderful leathery scent. I stood still, closed my eyes, and inhaled. Then, I balanced King’s tack over my shoulders and arms and rushed to his stall. It was near the end of the rows, close

to the back entrance, where sunlight spilled across the barn's cement floor. Thin strands of hay glowed on the shimmering surface. Whenever I brushed and saddled King, we could both look out the back entrance at yellow fields.

King looked as if he were waiting for me, brown ears perked forward and black eyes staring between the stall window's bars. When I opened the door and stepped inside, he clomped around to nuzzle my shoulder with his soft, round nose. I cupped my hands around his muzzle just below his eyes and leaned against his neck. I knew I was safe there, pressed against his warm coat and the calm that rose from within his steady body when he walked. Soon, I would be seated on a saddle with reins in my hands. King would be beneath, tossing his thick mane and snorting into the dry air. Together, we'd ride into fields that opened and extended all around us like unfolding arms, reaching to embrace us.

During the week, when I was hostage at St. John's Middle School, my sixth-grade class attended morning Mass every Wednesday and Friday in the church. During one sermon, Father John tucked his hands into the folds of his robe, placed them on his protruding belly. He stepped smoothly down the white stairs, lifted his head, and proclaimed, "Look at this church. It's filled with marble and gold. This is the true house of God, a worthy and rich home. Why would he not want to dwell here? Look. Look at what we've built for our savior and our king." I could think of many reasons why God would not want to live in St. John's Church, or any church. The insides of the building, which were indeed filled with marble and gold, were also freezing and uncomfortable. Thick,

awkward globs of velvet cloth drooped over huge statues of Saints during the holidays. Polished stairs leading to the altar were decorated with colorful potted flowers, but I could never smell their fragrance. The pews were straight-backed and hard and filled with those awful pre-teens. The speakers were always broken and crackly. We sang songs for God, but the lyrics were cliché and empty. When everyone had to join hands and pray, my classmates held mine loosely.

Because I wasn't yet baptized, I couldn't eat the stale wafers. Most of the time, I stayed seated on the wooden pews, glancing at cupped hands receiving communion and staring at the marble statue of Jesus that sometimes, I swear, breathed. If I felt brave, I'd join the line on their way to communion, but when I reached the priest, I'd have to cross my arms over my chest.

After setting down King's bridle and saddle, I unlatched the door and stepped partially inside his stall. Gathering the brushes and picks I'd need from a little wooden box nailed to the outside of King's window, I moved carefully around him. His muscular body was filled with enough strength to crush me against a wall, but I wasn't afraid of him. He was as careful with me as I was with him, and he let me smooth down his brown coat, untangle his snarled mane, and scrape clean his mud-and-manure-clotted hooves. Even though I was eager to ride, I worked slowly and meticulously, careful to brush his coat and pick his hooves until they shined. Finally, I tossed the cotton pad and saddle on King's back, tightened the girth, slid the bridle over his ears, and led him from

his stall toward the barn's large back door. He moved slowly, but his hooves thrummed and echoed like a church bell.

There was something sacred about leading a horse into the world, and I could feel it as we stepped into the heat of this sunlit Saturday afternoon. We were two quiet beings dusting our boots and hooves over a dirt path. We could not understand one another's language, but I was "Emily" and he was "King," and together we were one being making our way toward the opening of a circular arena. I didn't feel alone. I didn't worry or care about what the other riders thought of my long, unbroken bouts of silence. King was the only companion I needed. I could hold his reins in my hands and lay my palms on his back, and he would not flinch. Neither of us could stand in the arena without the other.

Ty, the instructor, leaned on the wooden fence bordering the arena. Her blonde hair was tied back into a thick ponytail and tucked beneath a Stetson hat, and the faint wrinkles around her light eyes made me think she spent most of her time smiling.

The wind rose slightly. Ty gazed out toward the open fields that swam in rivers of air. Small, brown birds lifted and scooped through the whirling wind. Each individual blade of yellow grass rippled with sunlight. Flies buzzed lazily. Heat and dirt and the approach of summer drenched the day with their aromas. Ty looked at me and smiled. "It's a nice day. How 'bout you and King take a

break today and ride through the fields. Another girl and her horse are going with you.”

I'd been anticipating this day ever since I first began riding at Free Wind Farm a year before. Only experienced riders and their horses could venture through the fields outside the arena, and Ty trusted us. I nodded and quickly pulled King toward the mounting block, where I stepped into the stirrup, gripped the saddle, and hoisted myself onto his back. The leather saddle creaked as I settled into a comfortable position.

“Start along this fence and don't venture too far past it,” Ty said, tracing the distant fence with her outstretched hand. “And have fun, kiddo.”

King and I followed another horse and rider away from the arena and into the long, dry grasses. Eventually, we turned left and broke away from the fence. I wanted to feel alone and lost in a wild place, and it seemed the other girl felt the same way, so we kept quiet and didn't look back toward the farm or at one another.

King and I gazed ahead toward a horizon unburdened by cold, brick middle schools and churches. We drifted farther into the fields and moved closer to the white piles of bones and the souls of animals still dawdling within their ribcages. I'd often lean forward to wrap my arms around King's neck and breathe in his scent. When I whispered into his old, greying ears that I loved him, he'd snort in reply and walk more quickly. Dust kicked up from his hooves and surrounded us. Sometimes I'd fall backward, let go of the reins, and lean my

head against his broad back, allowing King to walk wherever he desired. The sky was wide and borderless. The air was hot. King's body was soft and warm and alive. His eyes were open, and I imagine, along with the reflections of the wind-swept fields and sky, I was reflected within them, too.

Together, slowly, we edged further into the fields. The grasses swayed like a body of water, and King, as always, continued his careful walk across its surface. The farther we pressed into the fields, the quicker his steps became. He seemed younger, stronger, more alive. We were in his territory, the land of his wild horse ancestors, and I wondered if he could hear their ghosts still running past, brushing the long grass with their knees, thrumming the ground with steady, certain hooves, calling to him, telling him he would be galloping with them soon. I wondered if King was moved to follow, abandon his body, and meet his horse god.

If I had died then, I would have never wanted to leave the fields. I'd want to continue riding along through yellow grasses on the back of a horse, become a part of the earth, rather than the clouds, and let the dry, piled heaps of my bones nest my soul against the dirt. The fields were King's territory, but he let me walk with him even though I wasn't one of his kind. I didn't have to cross my arms over my chest. I didn't have to pray for forgiveness. I didn't have to repent. "My home," King seemed to say, "is also where you belong."

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