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Buoys

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BUOYS

By

Erica Marais Mead

THESIS

Submitted to
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ABSTRACT

BUOYS

By

Erica Marais Mead

Buoys is a collection of four nonfiction essays that deal with transitional periods in the author's life. The author attempts to make sense of her own identity by examining complicated issues that have risen not only from her own present and past, but from those of her grandmothers' and mother's as well. On her journey toward self-acceptance, the author notes parallels and comparisons between their experiences, relationships, and interactions with common landscapes. Throughout the collection, the author works in a segmented/lyrical form in order to mirror the fragmented, complicated, and often chaotic feelings that arise from these subjects.

The title *Buoys* refers to the transitional state that is expressed in each of these four essays. Whether it is the confrontation of body-image, the aftermath of child-loss, the acceptance of genetics, or the loss of childlike innocence, each of these essays focus on a time in the author's life when she must choose to either sink or swim. Just as buoys are objects that are both below and above water, self-acceptance is not quite reached at the end of these essays, but the healing process has begun.

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2011

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all the women who have touched my life, especially

Mom, Laura, Grandma Mead, Grandma Minor, Julie, Zooey, and Esme.

Dad and grandpas, too.

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This thesis uses the guidelines provided by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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INTRODUCTION

For as long as I can remember, I've tried to find myself in my family's past. Some of my clearest memories from childhood are my trips to my parents' hometown of Grand Marais, Michigan. The first thing I would do upon entering one of my grandparents' homes was run to one of the large bookshelves and take out the family albums. Poring through the old photographs, I'd try to find a common thread between the lives of my relatives and my own. "Doesn't her nose look like mine?" I'd ask my father as I pointed to a picture of my Great-Grandma Mead. "That dress looks like something I'd buy now," I'd say to my sister as I came across a photo of my mother in her teens.

However, it wasn't until a recent trip to New Mexico that I started to contemplate exploring this interest in my family's past in my own writing. This past summer, my mother, sister, and I went on a road trip through New Mexico as a bonding experience that would hopefully give me some writing inspiration at the same time. During this trip, the three of us decided to climb El Morro National Monument, a large sandstone promontory with a pool of water at its base located about two hours from Albuquerque. We knew the climb would be difficult, as my mother just had double knee surgery the previous two summers. What was once cartilage in her knees was now metal, and my sister and I were

nervous that our mother wouldn't be able to last the entirety of the two-mile hike. Nonetheless, she was determined and made the two-hundred-foot ascension faster than we anticipated. As we neared the end of our climb, I allowed my mother to go ahead of me. Sweat dripped down her freckled back as she held her arms out to her side, clutching air. With her right foot resting on the final bone-white upper step, she struggled to lift her left leg from the previous step to meet it. Slowly, her left leg pushed off the step, muscles in her back calf trembling as it rose to the top. Breathless, she then turned around to watch me climb. As I ascended, my eyes met the two long scars on her legs while the bones in my own knees snapped at each step. I slowed down and thought about whether those scars would be my own someday. Was this what future climbs would be like? Was this hike a test for her? For both of us?

As I started to examine my life after the trip and mine my personal history for possible material for my thesis, I found myself coming back to those scars often. In that last moment of my climb up El Morro, I saw three very distinct elements come together: landscape, ancestry, and my present self. In trying to make sense of my own life, I realized that I was unable to completely extract my identity from my mother's—her scars were my own. Every time I tried to answer a question about who I am today, I found myself looking back to the physicality, emotions, struggles, and triumphs of the women before me. As I

made the movement from my interior landscape to the exterior, my mind wandered over to our common landscapes—the shores of Lake Superior, my grandparents' homes, and family get-togethers, searching for parallels in the ways in which my grandmothers, mother, and I interacted with these environments. How could their experiences, their actions, their history, help me make sense of my own experiences, actions, and history? How could our common history help me make sense of my own interior life?

The stories that began to arise from these questions contained complicated issues buried deep in my consciousness—emotions, actions, and experiences that I had tried to conceal with simpler prose, less complex subjects, and heavily veiled poems. I found that in order to move forward not only in my writing life, but also my personal life, I would need to remove the veils and confront these issues head on through a collection of memoirs. While I questioned whether these essays would be self-obsessive, too emotional, too *confessional*, I thought back to the writers and the texts that mean the most to me—Elizabeth McCracken's *An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination*, Lit by Mary Karr, *The Blue Jay's Dance* by Louise Erdrich, Alice Sebold's *Lucky*, and *Catcher and the Rye* by J.D. Salinger. In each one of these memoirs or stories, I found that there was some honest unveiling of emotions by the writer, some conjuring up of secret lives, some unexpected rise of complication in order to understand the

present self. It was due to their acts of unveiling that I as a reader was able to connect to their writing. Writer Patricia Foster argues for the relevancy of this type of emotional writing in her essay, "The Intelligent Heart." She writes,

...the intelligent heart, in the end, is something elusive and longed for, the thing that can't quite be attained. The real problem for most of us is that the intelligent heart remains buried for years, letting us grind out bare, quixotic but emotionless forms, forms that please our cerebral betters, that thrill grant committees, that delight bored academics. These are forms that grow hairy with stylish weight, but that live, we secretly know because of lack. And there is safety in lack. Safety in style. There is even, I admit, a kind of awe (Root 304-305).

I had plenty of ideas that were more cerebral or stylistic, but in the end, I found no real emotional connection to them; I didn't think anyone else would either. Perhaps those pieces would've been a safer bet, but I no longer wanted to bury my complicated emotions, experiences, or "intelligent heart" beneath form or lack of content, but to instead let them rise up in order to write something that felt a little dangerous, and at times, a little scary. In turn, I hope this collection will serve as a point of connection for others facing similar circumstances, just as the work I've admired has done for me.

One of the writers with whom I most deeply connect to is Annie Dillard. In her memoir, *An American Childhood*, Dillard, too, writes in a motion that examines her interior life, exterior lives, and the common landscapes surrounding them. For example, when confronting the idea of aging, Dillard

moves from observations of her own skin during childhood, to the skin of her parents and grandparents, to the skin of all humans inherited from “Adam and Eve” and then back to herself. She writes,

We children had, for instance, proper hands; our fluid, pliant fingers joined their skin. Adults had misshapen, knuckly hands loose in their skin like bones in bags; it was a wonder they could open jars. They were loose in their skins all over, except at the wrists and ankles, like rabbits. We were whole, we were pleasing to ourselves (Dillard 295).

In my essay, “Buoys”, I similarly confront my issues with body image by moving from an interior life that questions my insecurities, to childhood memories involving swimsuits, to observations and interactions with adults concerning body image, and finally back to my interior life. Reading Dillard helped me understand the way in which the peripheral, childlike observation of adults can often contain more weight than our simply our own memories or present-day experiences. By shifting the narrative stance from me to those around me, I was able to create essays that had multiple layers and multiple meanings.

Another writer who had a profound influence on this collection was Louise Erdrich. Like Dillard, Erdrich’s prose relies on keen observations, often focusing on singular objects found in both the natural and unnatural world in order to explore more complex feelings. Because feelings were so complicated through most of *Buoys*, I felt that strong imagery would help me achieve the distance necessary to keep many of the pieces from being emotionally

overwrought. Additionally, Erdrich makes a strong argument for sharing not only our own stories, but the stories our ancestors as well. Many of her works span and connect multiple generations. She states in her memoir of early motherhood, *The Blue Jay's Dance*, that

We are all bound, we are all in tatters, we are all the shining presence behind the net. We are all the face we're not allowed to touch. We are all in need of the ancient nourishment. And if we walk slowly without losing our connections to one another, if we wait, holding firm to the rock while our daughters approach hand over hand, if we can catch our mothers, if we hold our grandmothers, if we remember that the veil can also be the durable love between women (141).

By choosing to tell the stories of both my mother and my grandmothers, it has not only helped me to make sense of my own life, but has allowed me to remove the veils that have clouded all of our lives. Through this attempt to make sense my own experiences and suffering, I now understand theirs, thus creating a deeper connection with them through my work. I hope that their journeys will serve as a source of strength and a source of nourishment for other women as well.

Because of my desire to make sense of my identity through the past of the women around me and our common landscapes, I am drawn to the work of writers who have done the same in their own writing. Terry Tempest Williams has been a great influence on this collection as well. In her memoir, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, Williams attempts to make sense of the

deaths of her mother, grandmother, and other women as a result of cancer by examining the Utah landscape that surrounds them, contemplating on the desert and the Great Salt Lake. In the prologue she writes,

Everything about the Great Salt Lake is exaggerated - the heart, the cold, the salt, and the brine. It is a landscape so surreal one can never know what it is for certain. ... Most of the women in my family are dead. Cancer. At thirty-four, I became the matriarch of my family (Williams 4).

In the essay, "The Rope In", I attempt to make sense of my own miscarriage, as well as the miscarriages of my mother and maternal grandmother by not only examining our losses, but by also contemplating on the landscape of Lake Superior. I write,

They say 'Lake Superior never gives up her dead.' Captured bodies tend to sink because the lake's cold water slows the movement of bacteria. The bacteria in warmer waters create enough gas to make corpses float after a few days, but the dead rarely resurface here. Those who die are usually lost forever in the water.

The path to understanding, in both cases, is marked not only by the memories of the women that walked before us, but also by the landscape in which they walked. *Buoys* is not a collection about me, but rather about *us*.

I titled this collection of four nonfiction essays *Buoys* to represent and reflect the movements that occur within them. The buoy itself is a figure that is in an interim state—both above and below water, much like the personages I depict. In addition, buoys often serve as a warning sign for unforeseen hazards

or dangerous currents. These essays describe a small gesture, or found object, as a point of warning or reflection to keep me afloat in my struggle for self-acceptance. Whether I am facing body image, dealing with child-loss, accepting genetic traits, or losing childlike innocence, there is a sense of hope reflected at the end of each of these essays.

The title *Buoys* also reflects upon the prominent role of water in much of the collection. As an Upper Peninsula native, I have been in or near the waters of both Lake Superior and Lake Michigan for most of my life, as have most of the people and experiences I have encountered; I am unable to extract this landscape from my memories. Like buoys, sometimes they drift, and other times they stay stationary, but in the end, the personages I depict never give up on the landscape that surrounds them. Regardless of whether the lake is facing the calm of a summer day or the cruel winds of November, these personages stay with the water, both literally and metaphorically. I've found that the ebbs and flows of waves most effectively mirror my own feelings when meditating on the experiences shared in these essays.

Throughout this collection, I made a conscious effort to experiment with form and technique. While in the past I had relied on a linear narrative approach, I found that the fragmented, often chaotic nature of my subjects called for a more complex form. The sense of loss and confusion that I wanted to

express could not be contained in a clear, chronological narrative. After experimenting with several forms, I turned to the work of nonfiction writer Brenda Miller, who has written extensively both about and in the form of the lyric essay. In the essay “A Braided Heart: Shaping the Lyric Essay,” she describes this form as one that has

a tendency toward fragmentation that invites the reader into those gaps, that emphasizes what is unknown rather than the already articulated known. By infusing prose with tools normally relegated to the poetic sensibility, the lyric essayist creates anew, each time, a form that is interactive, alive, full of new spaces in which meaning can germinate (Forché 16).

Using this form allowed me to include disparate strands of experience such as prayer, photographs, quotations, and multiple vignettes spanning a great deal of time in order to create multiple meanings out of the complex experiences this collection explores. The essays in *Buoys* are told in the way in which they appear in my mind: through chance associations and intuitive links, while still following a connective thread.

While many of the essays in *Buoys* depict a sense of struggle in the aftermath of chaos, what I want the collection to ultimately convey is a sense of hope and a sense of strength. As my mom stated when I finally reached the top of El Morro, “We made it. Together.”

BUOYS

Once I push open the door and the air hits me, my damp hair turns to frozen ropes. I never bother to blow-dry it or even wrap it in a towel. I need to go. I walk toward my car waiting in the parking lot. My wet body shivers as I struggle with my frosted doors. It is late October and the temperature and sun drop earlier in the day. A static parking lamp and the moon are the only light I have to guide my weak hands. They are sore from pushing my body off the ends of pool lanes. I'm not as quick as I used to be.

After I shoulder the cold door open, I take a thin towel from my duffel bag and place it on the driver's seat to keep the water from seeping, to keep me from freezing for those first few minutes while my heater warms up. As my hands cup the steering wheel, I see a group of laughing women heading toward the front doors of the YMCA. Against the moon their gray hair shines like silver and although their outline appears heavier than mine, they look lighter.

I've seen these women naked. Without going back inside, I know these silver women are the same women who walk around the locker room without any clothes on. Sometimes the women and I walk through the locker room door at the same time. They will say "thank you" when I let them go first and I will feel safe until we go to the benches in front of the lockers. They will ask me what

I do for a living, and coo when I say I'm a teacher, and say my college students are lucky to have such a pretty instructor, while their J.C. Penney's sweater, then faded tee shirt, then stretched and discolored bra come off one by one until I'm having a conversation with a pair of nipples. I stay clothed, pretending to search my duffel bag for *keys-goggles-bobby pins-giant sunglasses-a trap door?* until their swimsuits are on and I can hear their flipflops safely plodding across the community shower floor. Then I will change. If I'm wearing a long tee shirt, I will keep it on, slip everything else off underneath and finally pull up the straps as my tee tumbles over my head and down. If I don't have a long tee on, I will walk to one of the two bathroom stalls with my duffel bag and change next to the toilet so that only my feet are showing.

I leave the locker room with a towel starting at my kneecaps, and ending all the way up over my chest. Even though we're supposed to put our towels and keys on the bleachers by the locker room, I keep my towel around my waist until I get to the end of my chosen lane. Once my lane is chosen, I sit, dip my feet, then shimmy my toweled body across the tile. My towel slowly works its way up until my shoulders are in the water and the towel is above my head. I keep it at the foot of the lane while I swim. Sometimes the other swimmers splash it while they do turns, but it's okay because even if it gets wet, it will be

waiting for me when I'm done. When I'm done, the towel and I do the same dance in reverse.

I shower with my swimsuit on and my back turned while the silver women shower naked, talking and laughing and lathering up wrinkles and gray hair and loose skin. I'd like to turn around and strip down and get really clean for once, but instead I stay with my back facing them. Once in awhile, I'll turn around to check if they've left. When my shower is the only one left running, I grab my towel, run to my locker, and throw the clothes I came in on over my swimsuit. I might stop for a moment and think about going back to the warm beat of the shower because once I leave, I know will face that heavy walk in the cold, ropes of wet hair slapping me on the back like waves against buoys.

1.

When I was seven, I went to my aunt's wedding reception on the river. It was August; I was tan. My mother had made me a two-piece skirt and top set with blue and white carnation print on the front. My hair was in two smooth braids, and she let me wear a little bit of blush. I felt pretty.

After eating hors d'oeuvre of tiny meats and chips and dip on paper plates, I found a pink balloon lying on the ground near the crepe-papered door to my aunt's cottage. The tape had fallen off. I picked it up. I tossed it in the air

and watched it come down. My hands waited for the womb of captured breath to dance on my fingers. I pumped it back up, then repeated. With each pump the balloon went up and forward a few inches. I walked with it, pushing it up and letting it come back down, blurring out the chatty guests around me. I smiled, but didn't look away. I had to keep it floating in the dusky sky—I was the only one that could. I kept moving forward, catching and pumping along the lawn, gliding through tables until one of my feet touched air. My eyes left the balloon and saw water, saw my mother's face without turning around.

I stayed beneath the surface for a minute before my father heroically fished me out, even though I was capable of standing with my head above water. I walked up the steps from the dock, wet, my clothes sticking to me like two sides of a deflated balloon. The white on the carnation print took on the color of my flesh and I felt naked.

. The looks the guests gave me were more embarrassed than sympathetic. I'd failed at drowning—I was just a girl who fell in a river. My tiny breasts poked out like two buoys floating above water in the evening air. I gasped and crossed my hands over the flesh-colored carnations and turned back at the water, watching the balloon float away through the lily pads congregating around the dock, past the houses on the shore, underneath the railroad bridge.

2.

I used to stuff the top of my too-large neon green swimsuit with my dad's knee length baseball socks when I was ten. The suit said "AWESOME!" in fake patent leather across the chest. I wanted to look like the girls on the Three's Company episodes I watched on my parents' television. I used to stand on top of their water bed so I could see my full profile in their dresser mirror once my suit was stuffed. The padded railing along the edge was my runway and I walked up and down from the headboard to the corner, from the corner to the other corner, and back up to the headboard, while flitting my wrist and twisting my hips. Every once in awhile one of my feet would lose balance and I'd slip off the vinyl that covered the padding on the railing. I'd tip into the large pad of water and create waves underneath the comforter and sheets.

I could fill out each letter of "AWESOME!" by seventh grade, but no one could really tell underneath the plaid uniform we had to wear at school. Sometimes I'd jump back up on the railing to admire my new profile in my parents' dresser mirror, but I rarely fell into the bed—my feet were longer, more stable.

That year for our Valentine's Day dance, I wore a tight and shiny red silk shirt and the black Calvin Klein jeans I begged my mother to buy for me. I wore high heeled brown loafers—I was two inches taller in them and my legs looked

longer. At previous dances I usually stayed in the corner of the cafeteria, sitting in a folding chair while I waited for a boy in our class to ask me to dance. They didn't. But for some reason this time Jimmy, then Chris, then Andy, and even Joe approached me one by one. I felt beautiful.

I took a break during a bad country song and the girls in my class lead me into the mint green bathroom. We always played Bloody Mary in the large mirror at nighttime school functions. "Look! Your boobs are showing!" one of the girls squealed. The air conditioning had made my breasts poke out in the spots where the "W" and the "M" would've hit on my suit. Mom hadn't bought me a bra yet. The girls laughed and talked, and brushed their hair, but all I could do was whisper *Bloody Mary* over and over under my breath and in my head at the pace of a freestyle swim. She never appeared.

I folded my arms over my chest and called my mom on the cafeteria's kitchen phone. She bought me a sports bra the next day. The "AWESOME!" suit went in our rummage sale that summer.

3.

I almost qualified for the Michigan state swimming finals when I was fourteen. My friend convinced me to join the local YMCA's swim team. I wasn't built with a swimmer's body; I'm curvy and five foot six. My arms and legs are more squat

than gangly, but I have strong shoulders. I reach fast and hard. My hands slice water and my legs kick quick and I make up for my size.

My coach pushed me toward the breaststroke. He thought I could use my hips and my strength, rather than speed. But I couldn't manage to coordinate my arms and my legs in the correct movement; they were always slightly out of sync. My legs would flop and I'd pant, awkwardly presenting my breasts to the diving board over and over. I came in last every time and had to pull myself up and walk in front of everyone waiting to start the next race. I made sure to leave a towel at the end of my lane. I needed to find an event that would get me out first, or at least in the middle of the pack.

I chose the backstroke. When I was on my back, I didn't have to look at the other swimmers or my coach or the spectators on the side of the pool. I just had to watch the white ceiling, moving with each arm pull, each leg kick. My ears stayed below water and all I could hear was my own thoughts and the sound of my arms rotating through the water. It felt more like a dance, than a swim.

I practiced every day, my time steadily improving until I was at a speed of 32.6 for the fifty meter backstroke. I was the fastest girl in my region. In order to make it to the state finals, I had to shave two tenths of a second off my time. My coach's solution was for me to master my turn. My turn consisted of reaching

my arm out, hoping to hit the wall with my hand before my head crashed against the pool's tiles at the end of the lane. It worked most of the time, but he said I would be a lot quicker if I turned around on my stomach, faced the lane, and somersaulted through. But instead of facing the lane, I opted to sporadically crash into a buoyed lane marker, or hit my head on cement. I never moved my eyes from the ceiling.

One day after I attempted turn number twelve or twenty-five or forty-eight, I dragged myself out of the water into the arms of my towel and sat at the end of the lane. A couple of younger girls from the team walked around the pool over to me. They were small, with legs that seemed to eat the rest of their body and waists that would fit the cup of a hand. They sat down next to me. "What are those marks on your leg?" the smallest one asked.

She had blonde hair and long eyelashes and those purplish lips that skinny people have when they get cold and wet. Her lashes batted water as her thin fingers hovered over two large purple marks near the top of my thigh. They looked like rivers on a map. My body was growing and changing and stretching and my skin couldn't keep up.

"Nothing," I said.

I wrapped my legs up and walked straight from the pool to the locker room to my clothes without showering off. My swimsuit soaked through my

jeans and sweatshirt while I waited for my ride near the pop machines in the entryway.

I quit the team two days later and left behind the two tenths of a second. I never would've mastered the turn anyway.

4.

By the time I was seventeen, I hadn't been in a pool, or a lake, or a neighborhood sprinkler in years. Instead, my legs dove into seas of loose denim and my arms floundered underneath old basketball sweatshirts and men's sweaters from Goodwill. I didn't own a swimsuit.

My twelfth grade creative writing teacher made us write in journals every day. And every weekend he wrote back to each of us. One time he left a hand-drawn ink reproduction of Henri Matisse's *Icarus 1947* in my notebook. The original drawing is a black figure with a red dot on its chest, floating through a royal blue nighttime sky with gold stars. Some people think Matisse was inspired by resistance fighters in World War Two while living in occupied France.

Next to the black and white version in my journal my teacher wrote, "My granddaughter Emily and I were looking through my book *Dance Me to the End of Love*, words by Leonard Cohen, pictures by Henri Matisse. When we came

across this picture, she said ‘That looks like a girl, with a big heart, dancing in the lake!’ I explained the myth to her—about the father and his son who tries to fly but falls when he tries to touch the sun— and after I was finished she asked if she could still think it was a girl dancing in the water. I told her of course she could. I decided the girl dancing was you. Emily and I wanted you to have this.”

Every time I pick up a book of mythology and read the story of Icarus, it says he fell from the sky to a watery death. But maybe he dove. Or danced.

5.

Last summer I almost went skinny dipping in Lake Superior for the first time with a group of people I barely knew.

It was late and we were drunk. We thought it was a good idea and the sky was dark and we would only see the outline of our bodies “at most.” One of the boys knew how to build a makeshift sauna out of his tent, a heated stone, and lake water. We would get really warm before facing the cold shock of the lake in September. “Five!” was the cue to run with the heat, strip off our clothes and jump into the icy water like dogs.

We huddled together in a circle and waited for the large stone that was heating on fire. Once it was warm enough, the boy picked the stone up with fireproof gloves, placed it in our circle, and dumped lake water on it. Then

another boy quickly picked up the tent tarp and wrapped it around us. The air in the enclosure started to turn to steam and my throat closed up. I started to breathe in heavily and sweat, like a pillow was being held over my face. My clothes started to get heavy and itch and beg to be taken off. Soaked in steam and sweat, it was like we were already in the water.

I looked across the tent and soon the faces were just smoke or steam or fog. Right when my shirt started to dampen and drag with sweat, one of the boys started to count.

“One, two, three, four...”

On “Five!” the tarp came off, shirts and pants and underwear flew in every direction, while I stayed motionless, still dizzy from the heat. They took off running toward the water as I walked, crushing my feet into the sand. I stopped, unzipped my fly and touched my healed stretch marks as I pulled off each leg of my pants. The air bit my bare legs and I wondered how they looked in the moonlight. I knew the water would at least reach my waist and the others were already splashing, maybe dancing, in front of me. I couldn’t see their legs so I kept moving.

I left my shirt and underwear on as I eventually made my way into the lake. I’d take them off once the water hit my chest. It would still count because I’d have to walk back naked.

It was hard to make out faces in the night sky and black waves, but the fleshy bottom of a girl twice my size bobbed in the lake. It was pale and round like the moon. I touched the band of my underwear and tugged for a second, then brought my hands back above surface, empty. The reality of the water temperature soon hit, and treads became tiptoes closer to shore. After about five minutes, everyone splashed back to the warmth of cotton and denim. I was the last one. The weight of my shirt made it hard to swim. Their backs were turned as I walked out of the water and onto the shore.

I shivered in the late night air, wet, clothes clinging to me like two sides of a deflated balloon. I gathered the thin blanket next to my shoes and shielded myself from the September wind. I looked at the face of the moon, and tried to keep warm until morning.

1.

My newlywed aunt found me shivering behind a tree next to the river. I was too ashamed of my see-through dress to walk back past the guests. She tapped my shoulder and led me inside, behind a white shawl she bought especially to keep her shoulders covered in the buggy and cool river night. Once she closed the room to her door, she stripped off my clothes and toweled me off. Her wedding dress was still on and river water dripped off my ropey braids,

peppering the taffeta. She rummaged around in her drawers until she pulled out a faded red swimsuit she wore in college. Pushing my damp legs through the openings one by one she said, “I used to do this when you were a baby. Your legs were so chubby—you used to look like a little sumo wrestler waddling in the sand.”

“But I don’t want to swim,” I whispered, low.

She grabbed the extra fabric from the straps and safety-pinned the right shoulder, then the left.

“This is just in case you decide to go in again.”

THE ROPE IN

“We can remove the flimsy shadows from before our faces and braid them into ropes. We can fasten the ropes between us so that if one of us slips, as we climb, as we live, there are others in the line to stand firm, to bear her up, to be her witnesses and anchors.” –

Louise Erdrich, *The Blue Jay’s Dance*

I.

When I walk along Lake Superior’s shoreline, I stare at my feet. Even though this sand is clean, I can’t shake the feeling that I’ll step on a corpse washed up from sea—a breathless gull, a vacant shell, a half-eaten fish. Maybe I should know better.

They say “Lake Superior never gives up her dead.” Captured bodies tend to sink because the lake’s cold water slows the movement of bacteria. The bacteria in warmer waters create enough gas to make corpses float after a few days, but the dead rarely resurface here. Those who die are usually lost forever in the water. Even the smallest objects drop to Superior’s floor; a single drop of water stays in the lake’s basin for over 200 years.

I know these things, but still I stare at my feet. Like any other girl who grew up near Lake Superior, I know we build coffins in the water, not on the shore. Yet if I don’t keep my eyes peeled to the ground, the lake might offer me a

key—a fingernail, a coat of scales, a femur—some type of entry into life lost at sea. All it takes is something small to conjure up a memory. I'd rather let the memories sink.

II.

It's Christmas day and a year and two weeks have passed since I was pregnant. But I'm not thinking about that right now. Right now, I'm thinking about how this is the first time I've driven to Grand Marais alone.

Every year after opening presents, my parents, my sister, and I take the two hour drive from Escanaba to Grand Marais, Michigan, making it just in time for dinner at one of my grandparents' homes. But this year, I asked if I could take my own car; I don't want to stay until the twenty-eighth. And to my surprise, there are no gripes about gas mileage, safety, or tradition. To my surprise, they are okay with this.

After they packed up their car and our two black dogs and waved goodbye while pulling out of our circular drive-way, I waited, flipped through a few new books, curled a couple of strands of loose hair, and laced and re-laced my boots. After that they were far enough ahead of me to make a difference.

Now it's an hour into the drive. I've never taken this trip, on this day, alone before. Maybe it will always be this way—driving by myself in a car to

meet my family on Christmas day. I go to adjust the volume on my car stereo, but it isn't on; I've made it all the way to Manistique without a single CD or radio station playing.

I need to shift my focus quickly so I concentrate on the sounds the car is making against the pavement. Even though the air is cold, the roads are slush. My car drifts toward the shoulder and the tires hit a pool of melted snow. Water splashes on my windshield, on my sides, and I'm inside a wave. Inside, it's like a womb, closing out everything around me but the sound of water. I close my eyes for a second. There's only blue. The splashing stops and I am dry again. I open my eyes back up and start to seek out these pools, listen for splashing, and think about being inside of wave—not about driving alone, not about last December—and soon I'm standing in front of my grandmother's house, unpacking my bags, and my stomach is begging for Christmas dinner.

III.

The house is empty. It's Sunday and my mother's family went to mass, even though they just went yesterday. I decided to stay back. To my surprise, they are okay with this.

Christmas day was unremarkable. Less than twenty-four hours have passed since we opened the last present, and I can't remember what I got, what

anyone got, besides the coffee table book of Georgia O'Keeffe paintings I bought my grandmother. I wanted it for myself. I could write "Christmas 2010" on the jacket flap or next to the painting *Blue, Black, and Grey, 1960*—it looks just like water hitting snow.

I trace the hole on top of the post at the end of my mother's old bed. I would've been happy with a small piece of jewelry—something unique to distinguish this Christmas from the last—a piece of agate on a string, a cluster of seashells, a chain of origami cranes rounded off with a clasp. But I'm older, and the presents are for the children, and the gift cards and lotto tickets will blur in one long unremarkable line until I have a child of my own. But I want to remember this Christmas. I want to remember this moment because right now I'm okay. Not good, but right now I'm thinking about normal things like jewelry and Georgia O'Keefe and what to buy with my gift cards. I need to find something to hold, to trace back to this feeling.

My mother's family always takes a post-mass walk down the road parallel to the shoreline. If I'm going to claim something, this is the time to find it. Maybe a piece of forgotten jewelry is hiding somewhere in the house. I already wear my mother's agate bracelet and my aunt's double "7" gold graduation necklace. I like the way the old clasps snap around my wrist and my neck—something about the construction makes the pieces feel heavier on my skin.

When asked, I tell my friends that they're "vintage"; I never bother to find out the stories behind them.

I've cleaned out most of the good spots in my grandmother's house, rummaged around the dresser drawers in my mother's old bedroom inscribed with my father's name, hunted among the matted wigs and military hats and bridesmaid dresses in the hallway closet that creak open when children's feet pound too hard running up and down the wooden floors. I even combed through my grandfather's writing desk stored in the basement to see if there was maybe a pair of decorative cufflinks or a watch chain that could be fashioned into a necklace or bracelet or pair of earrings. Now, my mother's old dresser is bare except for a few jeans and gardening sweatshirts, the hallway closet left with only props for my younger cousins to play dress-up, and I can't wear the poems my grandfather's desk is holding. I'm not sure where to start.

I walk to the upstairs kitchen to curl a few loose strands of hair. I don't know why my family calls it a kitchen—it's just a small square room surrounded by a wall of cabinets, a large chest, and a makeshift vanity consisting of a mirror and table. Maybe at one time the room was meant to hold a stove or a sink or even serve as an extra storage spot for pots and pans, but all the cupboards hold now is kitschy décor, old comforters, and board games.

I catch the reflection of the cupboards as I lazily curl my long, dark hair in the mirror. They're worth a shot, even though I highly doubt there's anything in them worth unearthing. I release the last strand of hair from the iron and walk over to the cupboards. I open the drawer closest to the stairs and find empty votives, unused yarn, and marbles that my mother and siblings probably played with when they were younger. I shut it.

I open the next two drawers where an advent wreath and old postcards from relatives I never knew are buried. The only way I can distinguish who's who is through the shape of their cursive. After enough time, we simply become the artifacts we leave behind.

I move onto the upper cupboards. Metal owl lanterns stare at me with vacant eyes. I shift my eyes and stare back at a once lush cornucopia now barren except for crumbling green foam. I don't remember these cupboards looking so cold.

Inside the last door, to the left, a small box has surfaced to the front of the cupboard. It looks like Christmas, white with green and red insignia. I've never seen it before or maybe I just didn't notice it. Even though it's probably filled with Nativity-themed cards or fallen silk poinsettia petals, it's worth a closer look. Maybe I'll get an enameled holly pin or a pair of jingle bell earrings.

It says “Wickman’s Chocolate” in a retro type. A green silhouette of a young couple in a red horse drawn sleigh dances through the snow across the front. The top is still sturdy, tight to the box. I use both hands to take it off. Beneath the top, yellowed pieces of tissue paper peek out. What’s underneath is something dark and thick and long, like a large embalmed caterpillar. I almost stop. What if it’s alive?

I peel back the tissue and let out a quick gasp. A small note jumps out, as if it’s trying to escape the contents of the box. I try to find my breath again. The color of the hair is the same as my own. But the braid is longer, messier, like it was taken from a dying horse or a large, matted doll—something left to disappear into the cold, dry air of an attic or the damp floors of a basement. I flip my hair over my shoulder and take the end of one of my fresh curls. I let it spring back, willing it alive. I bend down and pick up the note. “*Mother 1932.*” My breath cuts short again as I look back down at the braid. I want to feel it, to see if it will move.

IV.

My grandmother takes frequent trips to Marquette to buy groceries or take in a musical act at the university and always makes a point to take my sister and me

out to dinner before she returns to Grand Marais. She says the memory of our company keeps her warm through the lonely drive back.

I never knew my grandmother lost a child until dinner at our favorite Mediterranean restaurant last early November. This particular trip must've been on a Tuesday because my sister was in class. I don't know what made her think of it. Maybe it was the flavors in the potato salad or the face of the waitress or the way I buttered my bread that day. Maybe beneath the smell of hummus and curry, she could sense a familiar loss inside of me, like those cats housed in cancer wards that always happen to sleep with a patient the night before they die. But somewhere between talking about my dog's chewing habits and her grocery list for the Co-Op, she told me about her miscarriage while I buttered my bread. And when I ran out of bread, I buttered the plate in front of me.

When she told me it was almost a year to the day that I found out I was pregnant, and I still felt strange around my Catholic grandmother. Maybe she'd scold me for having a child out of wedlock. Or worse, maybe she'd worry about me and ask me from time to time how I was feeling. I didn't want anyone to worry, so I never said anything. At that point, I hadn't said anything to anyone in my family and tried to concentrate on things like buttering my bread or stuffing my face with mashed potatoes at family functions in Grand Marais. If I buried my memory with enough food deep down in my stomach, maybe no one

would ever find it. Maybe if I occupied my mind with ways to keep them from finding out, I would be okay. Maybe if I didn't talk about it, it wouldn't exist. But here at the Mediterranean restaurant, my grandma was talking about it and it did exist and I wanted the waitress to bring more bread.

My grandmother's face glowed a slight pink as she looked down at her salad bowl. Although her bobbed hair was grey, she looked young in the restaurant's dim lighting, maybe forty-five, fifty. With her fork, she gently pushed a strawberry clockwise toward a piece of lettuce and touched it, then pushed it counterclockwise, touching the lettuce on the other side. The fork kept moving in circles as she told her story.

Shortly after they moved to Grand Marais, my grandmother said she could feel it, even though logic told her it was too soon to feel anything. It was a sharp cramp right around dinner—the family had chicken that night. They always bought one bird to feed the six of them: my mother, Barbara, the oldest, got the back, David and Katherine each got one leg, and Karen, the youngest, got a breast. My grandmother and her husband, Carl, shared the remaining breast and wings. She stared down at her green melamine plate so that she wouldn't have to watch how quickly her children raced toward their meal after grace. The tin cups tinged her children's milk and the four of them were too polite to

complain, too polite to ask for new dishes so that their milk would taste like milk, not metal.

"Mleka," her own mother used to say to her at dinner. *"Mleka* will make you strong." She took a sip from her own tin cup and prayed for strength, a slap from her Polish father, something to snap her out of it.

Karen stuck two undercooked carrots in her mouth in the place where her two front teeth should be and pretended to be a rabbit. The rest of the children started to giggle at a low simmer, but she didn't look up from her milk until the table boiled into raucous laughter. She said she normally would've scolded Karen for acting so silly at dinner, but this time she let her family laugh at the welcome distraction, her little rabbit.

My grandmother said she should've embraced the surprise, like when there were samples of Polish sausage on pretzels on the grocery store or when JoAnn Castle performed ragtime on the Lawrence Welk Show. They were almost the same age and she loved how alive Joanne looked, like each key was running a higher charge of electricity than the next. At the time, my grandmother wished she had more time to play the antique player piano that sat next to the bay window in the living room. *"It's how I cope with things, you know,"* she said.

She glanced down at the salmon colored waist of her polyester skirt, full, stretching, and tried to will a smile for the grayed table cloth.

She remembered Carl asking, “Do you want any more Virginia?”, probably talking about the carrots or the corn.

No, I’m fine, she lied.

She realized this was the first time in awhile that she failed to take a second helping and looked back at her *mleka*. She was only a few weeks. She was only a few weeks and there was time.

“You know I won’t be upset if you never have grandchildren, Erica. There is no expectation to have children or get married—I want you to know that.” She looked up from her salad. “You are enough.” She looked back down as her fork curled around the bowl once more. “I just want you to be happy.”

She breathed and I let her words sink. Then we discussed her grocery list for the Co-Op.

V.

“You can always tell there are people around because of the seagulls,” my dad says every time we pull up to the bird-covered harbor in Grand Marais in the summertime. “It doesn’t matter if there’s only one of you out there near the water—the seagulls will find you. They want to be fed. And it doesn’t matter if there’s just one of them—if you so much as give them a piece of bread, pretty soon there will be hundreds of them, up in your face, next to your hand, asking

for more where that came from. Don't give them anything to eat. Otherwise, they'll never leave you alone."

VI.

The walls in my parents' house are bare. There aren't any signs of ships in this new house and the paint is still builder's white. It's been fifteen years since we moved, and they still haven't unpacked the decorations that used to adorn our house on Fourteenth Avenue. They sit in boxes, buried in the attic, along with the Christmas ornaments we never hang anymore. No one bothers to make the climb upstairs to take them out. The last time I remember covered walls was the summer before I turned thirteen, the same summer my mother found out she was pregnant.

My mother prayed for another child. She prayed for it and it came and for a time, she could really feel it. It felt like a miracle, like her middle name, Mary.

At thirty-nine, my mother was past what some fertility specialists might say was her prime. But she said she didn't feel that way—her hair was still long, never dyed, and she walked twice a week around the halls of our small town's high school after dinner. My sister and I sat at lunch tables and colored and completed multiplication packets and sometimes joined her. We were a little

older and didn't hold her hands when we walked past the band room at the end of the darkest hallway, F section. During the laps she walked alone, she missed small hands grabbing around her knees and dragging weight behind her, the feeling of being completely needed. So she asked my father, Jon, if they should start trying for another child.

They didn't eat dinner together much any more—most of the time my father would thank her for the making the meatloaf or pepper steak and take his plate down to the lake-blue carpeted basement where he cheered on whatever Detroit sports team was in season. They decorated the room to look like a ship on water—a planked bar, brass seagulls flanking the walls, and nets and knotted ropes hanging from the ceiling. It reminded them of Grand Marais. Sometimes my sister and I would stand on couch cushions and pretend we were navigating Lake Superior. If my father's mind ever wandered during the game, we bet he felt like he was sailing.

She caught him on one of those rare evenings when they occupied the seats of their dining room table. My sister and I had finished our dinner quickly and ran to play in our rooms. When she asked him about trying again, he probably thought about eating, about leaving for the basement, but she said he missed the feeling of being completely needed, too. Even though my sister and I were still young and I played softball and chewed Big League gum, the thought

of a son always lingered in his mind. So he said yes, they should start trying, and it seemed as though they made a toast that night to the child they were going to meet.

She started to feel the baby when she and her mother were in London for a week in June. They had never traveled alone before and the foreign circumstance made them feel like they needed each other. During their last evening dining in a pub, they split a half chicken and mashed potatoes and leaned their heads together and spoke like she'd always wanted them to speak. She thought about telling her about trying but decided to wait. She didn't want to change the moment.

When they were given the check, she moved her hands around the back of her chair for her purse. It wasn't there—a local pickpocket had swiped it. The plane ticket and passport and her original birth certificate were gone—she should've panicked. There should have been an emptiness, an opening in her stomach. Instead she felt whole. It could've been the richness of the meal or complete shock that read as calm, but she maintains that she knew that they would get home just fine. My grandmother still marvels to this day at how strong my mother was in that moment.

Two weeks after they returned, she took a test so my father could be sure, but as the plane crossed over the ocean, over every body of water on their way back to Michigan, her body gave her all the confirmation she needed. As the plane touched down, she looked out the windows at the blues and greens surrounding her home and said her regular Hail Mary.

Maybe hanging the brass seagulls would remind her of that feeling or if her arm graced the net on the wall, something would resurface. Maybe one of those knotted ropes would pull her back in. I let the decorations sit.

VII.

I'm afraid to touch the braid, the same way I'm always scared to put that first foot into lake water in the summertime, like a fish is going to bite me, like snake-charmed arms of seaweed are going to rise up to pull me down if I'm not cautious enough. Hair can't bite or rise up like a snake, but something about the way the braid lays in the box suggests it has the power to be animate.

Hair is one of those things that I always put in an intermediary category, not particularly attached to the dead or the living. Since the follicles are already dead by the time they show up on our heads, hair always looks the same whether you're breathing or not. It's been a year since my parents' dog Sam died

but I still find pieces of his hair in my clothes and every time I do, I'm tricked into thinking he's still alive. Every time a piece of his hair surfaces, I start wishing he was here.

If I braided and cut my hair and stuffed it in a box, it would look the same. But this is my great-grandmother Elizabeth's braid because my grandmother Virginia was born in 1932. And this is all I really know about her—we have the same color hair and my grandmother was her last child and I feel no particular sense of loss when I think about her. We never met. But right now, I am scared to touch her hair because it's just like my own. This hair makes her real and if I touch her hair, there will be a link between us and an emptiness might surface—an emptiness I never counted on feeling.

I am tired of feeling empty. So I shut the box.

VIII.

My grandmother Virginia prays everywhere—little sticky-note blessings grace every surface in her house. *"Please Lord, let me make wise decisions to eat healthy,"* is on the front of the refrigerator; *"Lord, bless me with your warmth outside,"* looks down upon our hanging coats. Even when she's not home, she speaks to us and sends her blessings through the towel rack or the microwave door. When priests

were more available, my grandmother attended church down the hill from her house twice a day—she’s the most pious person I know.

During our dinner at the Mediterranean restaurant, she confessed that the first time she prayed in that way, in a way that might really hurt someone else, was when she was pregnant for the fifth time. She walked up and down the sand near their house. So many things would change and they couldn’t pay for another mouth at their table. They couldn’t afford cups that didn’t tinge the milk of the children she already had.

“I would never hope for the death of a child. I would never pray for something like that,” she said to me. “I think I just prayed that nothing in our lives would change.”

IX.

The first time I remember praying in that way, in a way that would really hurt someone else, was when my mother told me she was pregnant.

She decided to tell us in Grand Marais, where she and my father grew up and met. The place of their first date, Kahle Park, had eroded over the last ten years due to an insufficient break wall. My mother wanted to make a new memory with her family in the place that held so much of her heart, before the whole town washed away.

On the drive up the car ebbed against the pavement. This usually made her sleepy, but she stayed awake for the entire ride up. She looked out the window at the shoreline in Manistique and thought about names, about the way she would let her stomach rise above the water in the bay no matter what the temperature of the lake was when they arrived.

At my grandmother's house, right before the Fourth of July parade, my father and she led my sister and me in to the room with the piano and bay window. "We have something to tell you," they said, with smiles so wide and unfamiliar that I guessed what they were going to say. Before they could sit us down, I screamed, "You're pregnant."

I ran to the piano and hit a cluster of keys.

"You're pregnant." She tried to keep smiling even though I was pacing and screaming. I've never liked change—my bedroom had the same rust orange carpeting and eggshell walls from when I was an infant, even though she told me they could replace them. But a baby was different. I was twelve now. I should've been better; I should've acted older. I should've accepted the change.

I ran outside and did a lap around the house and stopped in front of the statue in my grandmother's garden. It was St. Francis of Assisi. I prayed.

"Please let me be dreaming. Please don't let this baby be real. Please let the baby die."

My mother stayed inside.

My father found me in the garden and brought me back in to apologize. My mother's eyes were red, but she was still smiling because when the baby came this would just be a funny memory. But when the baby came I would have to move in the basement guestroom with the sailboat wallpaper and lake blue carpeting. That room was so cold in the winter. Maybe they would forget to buy a spaceheater. Maybe they would forget about me.

"Will you kill it? Will you get rid of the baby?" I begged my mother, choking on my words. It was like I opened my mouth underwater.

And she said she'd think about it because she loved me and she wanted me to feel important and she wanted me to stop. So I stopped and we walked down to the parade together, while I silently prayed that the baby wouldn't come with every step down the hill toward the shoreline.

X.

My hands are slightly shaking from the contents of the box. I need something to fill this newfound emptiness quick, and like my grandmother, I turn to the piano next to the bay window. Sometimes she plays right before me and the heat of her fingers are still on the keys when I hit my first notes.

Outside, the lake isn't yet frozen over but the waves attack the snow where the sand used to be on the beach. The land in Grand Marais is completely

surrounded by water so that even at a mile back, one can still hear the sound of water crash. The sound usually lulls me to sleep, but today it feels like pounding, each crest hitting me in the chest.

I sit on the woven piano seat and leaf through the books standing on the ledge above the keys. The ivory keys of my grandmother's player piano are so thin and translucent they resemble finger nails. When I let my nails grow long enough to hit against the keys, it's like another person is touching their fingers to mine, like the painting of God and Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. I usually bite them off before I play.

My knees curl over the edge of the bench and the button on my jeans barely holds in my navel. The weight gain is the only physical remainder of my pregnancy. I wish that the rolls of my stomach could recede like sand, that this skin would stop resurfacing. I take a deep breath and suck in my stomach. I start to play.

Most of the songs I know by heart are fast-paced up-tempo humoresques or rondos, but today my hands are moving slower. Instead of clunking my way through DeBussy's *Clare de Lune* or Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*, I run scales up and down the keyboard. My fingers never consistently go in the right place—they always want to hold onto the previous key.

My nails are long for once. They click hard against the keys like the ticking of a clock. My fingers start to get it right, and the metrics of the dance sound more urgent, like those last few minutes on a kitchen timer, when a minute goes faster than a minute. The strings of the piano are gone and now there's only clicking. I press harder on the keys, but even the most thundering low notes of the bass clef or the shrillest high in the treble can't alter the sound. Someone or something is trying to speak to me.

I take my hands off the keys, slide the top of the piano case over the ivories, and stand up. My mother's graduation photo and a photo of my grandmother on her wedding day look down at me from the top of the piano. We all have blue eyes. Our hair color is the same.

The waves are still crashing outside. I wonder if there's anyone in the water.

XI.

The second time I ever really prayed that way, in a way that might really hurt someone else, was when I found out I was pregnant.

Each year, between early October and late December, the wind around Lake Superior becomes violent due to the low pressure from the cold arctic air north of the lakes coming into contact with warmer fronts pulled up from the

Gulf of Mexico. The wind's speed gets above eighty miles per hour and the waves can reach twenty feet. Both fact and fable sometimes refer to these gales as "November's Witch" because of the death and destruction they leave in their wake.

I found out in November. I had just moved back to the Upper Peninsula to go to school and teach in Marquette, and my long-term boyfriend had left me a few weeks before. Begging and fights went along with that part, but all those circumstances led up to one irrefutable fact when I paid the check-out girl at Walmart for three pregnancy tests: I was alone.

Maybe someday the fact I conceived and lost a child during November's Witch will make it easier. Maybe history will lump my story in with all the shipwreck tales, with the crew of the Edmund Fitzgerald, with every other body that sank in these waters.

I'm sure they were afraid, but they fought and prayed to stay above water. All I can remember from those first few days after finding out was how much I wanted everything to sink, how much I prayed for one of those tall waves crashing against the Lake Superior shoreline to take me, the baby — everything — and wash away any evidence.

Before my father laid the lake-blue carpeting in our old house, he painted my name in bold white letters on the cement basement floor. "This so everyone

who has this house after us will know that you were here," he told me. There's a picture of me, six-years old, proudly standing next to my name. I hope the new owners never changed anything.

XII.

The southern shore of Lake Superior between Grand Marais, Michigan, and Whitefish Point is known as the "Graveyard of the Great Lakes." A monument near the break wall in Grand Marais reads, *"The awesome beauty of Lake Superior has its dark side. The overwhelming force of its waves and its frigid waters can overpower even the strongest swimmer. Do not walk on the break wall when waves are high."*

One September, right before my eleventh birthday, three boys a little older than me fell into the lake. They were standing on the break wall on a particularly windy day—November's Witch came early that year. One of them, Trevor, was dating my cousin Sarah; the other two were his friends, Chad and Clayton. The autumn wind plucked them from the ledge of the pier one by one and they flailed, trying to stay afloat amidst the ten foot waves. A man walking his dog nearby noticed them and he jumped in, saving Clayton. I don't know if he had a lifejacket or if he just grabbed him by the arm, but they made it and had to watch the other two boys drown. I always wondered how the water decides who it

pulls in and who it allows to be pulled back out, like it has a choice, like it spits out the people who aren't ready to go.

The bodies of Trevor and Chad were never recovered, but the monument permanently displays bronzed replicas of their youthful faces. Every time I walk down to the break wall, I trace the two boy's faces and the words above "*May whoever be drawn to the break wall, when waves are high, heed the warning, so that no other lives are lost.*" Trevor looks nothing like how I remember him. I don't know about Chad, but Trevor's family still lives in town. Do his parents trace his face, too, or do they just avoid it altogether? What do you when there isn't a body to say goodbye to?

One time over Thanksgiving dinner, my parents told us about the time they almost drowned. They were out sailing with my dad's cousin Melanie in a tiny boat. They took out it on Sable Lake, near the dunes. The sand was so much bigger back then. Everything was going fine until they got out to the middle of the lake. The wind just stopped and the lake was too calm for them to move. All of a sudden a gust of wind came and tipped the boat right over into the water. No one wore life jackets back then. They stayed by the little boat for awhile, holding onto the edge and kicking the water to propel themselves forward. They weren't getting far.

My father decided to swim to shore to get help. He left my mother and Melanie holding onto the boat. Halfway to shore, he grew weaker and just let his body sink—that peace that comes over you when you know you’re going to drown. It’s just like they say—there was no panic, only the calm that comes with giving up. He lay on his back and let the water carry him. He didn’t know where he found the strength to start swimming again—he didn’t remember praying—but he made it to shore. It was some type of power he couldn’t explain.

By that time my mother and Melanie were already safe. Neither of them could swim—my mother still can’t. But they just kept treading until they made it to the other side of the lake. My mother had to watch my father trying to swim, trying to save her when she was already safe. All she could do was pray that he made it.

“Here’s a lesson—don’t ever leave the boat, whatever you do,” they said.
“Stay together—don’t ever leave the boat.”

. “I never knew that story,” my grandmother said. She walks to the dunes and back every day. If my mother never made it, would she avoid that walk? Or would she return every day like she does now, hoping, somehow, that my mother’s body would resurface? “Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked.

“I just didn’t want you to worry,” my mother said.

XIII.

There's a picture of my grandmother and great-grandmother on her First Communion. My grandmother is sitting on their front porch in the sun while her mother braids her hair around the crown of baby's breath atop her head. One day my grandmother caught me looking at the frame in the living room. "I always used to ask her to put a piece of hers in with mine," she said, bending down over me. "Her hair was so thick and dark and beautiful—just like yours." And she's right—if I squint I can't tell if the girl is me or my mother or my grandmother.

"She lost a child too, you know," she said. "It was after me. I think everyone was surprised that she was still able to conceive." She grabbed a corner of the frame and moved in a little closer. "I think it was a relief to her, but I can't be sure. You can never be sure with these things."

Together we set them frame back down.

XIV.

The day I miscarried, the loss was already present. Like one of those clichéd moments in war movies when a mother screams as a stranger in an official uniform knocks on her front door, it was just waiting for the cue to spring alive. Before it happened, I pictured a recaptured sense of breath. I thought my

life would stay the same and unlike most losses, I would feel at ease. Instead I felt empty.

“I was relieved,” my grandmother said. “I could keep teaching and we wouldn’t have to worry about money as much.” But something about the way she pushed her fork around her salad led me to believe she felt the same type of emptiness that I was feeling.

I don’t remember anyone telling me my mother miscarried. Instead, a pamphlet sat on our dining room table for weeks that fall, something like How to Cope with a Miscarriage. Every time I saw her, she had a faint smile, but quickly turned her head and looked through the mail or searched for her keys. I don’t remember holding her or asking her if she needed anything. Instead, I patted her shoulder once, maybe twice, and slept soundly in my bedroom with the rust orange carpet and the eggshell walls. This continued on until eventually everything faded into the life we had before that summer, only quieter. We moved into a larger house a few months later.

I always thought that I’d take comfort in an answered prayer, a sign that my words, my faith had power over what ever fate I faced. But when I got my own pamphlet, when my prayers were answered and there was nothing left to want—that was the worst part. Maybe it was for my grandmother, too. To feel that perhaps I had some role in all of this, that somewhere between faith and

fate, this could've been my fault—there was no comfort in that. To know that I had some part in the hurt my mother was feeling, however strong she tried to act, was the part I want to bury the most.

XV.

I used to pray every day. When I was eight, I turned my mother's college coffee table into an altar. She let me put the unity candle from her wedding on top of it as long as I didn't light it and surprised me with rosaries and saint cards that she got free from the Catholic school where she taught at.

“You are such a good girl,” she would say to me. “You have so much good in your heart.”

On Sundays, she would kneel next to me on my carpet and smooth her hand over the still visible ring from a glass of wine on the table and listen to me read prayers as she braided my hair for mass. Usually she had to do it fast in her classroom right before the bell rang for school, but on Sundays she took her time while I recited one children's prayer book and a full rosary by heart. She never pulled too tight and instead weaved each section in a meandering rhythm like girls playing double-dutch jump rope.

When I was nine, I was the May Girl—the girl who gives Mary flowers for May Crowning. It's a celebration in which a statue of Mary, the mother of Jesus,

is honored with a wreath of blossoms to indicate Mary's virtues, virtues to be imitated by the faithful. She was said to be the "perfect follower of Christ." Everyone in the Catholic parish brings flowers to the event and a procession of a couple of little girls carrying baskets of flowers and a little boy carrying a crown on a pillow and a slightly older girl walks through the crowd of people. Once they reach the statue, the older girl places the crown atop Mary's head, at which time the parish sings and celebrates Mary's designation as the Queen of Heaven. My mother told the parish it should be me.

I begged her not to. I didn't want to walk in front of all those people. I was clumsy and what if I dropped the crown or tripped and I just wanted to watch from the crowd. I wasn't pretty enough. I didn't love Mary enough.

But she persisted and on the day of the crowning she woke me up early to shower. I obeyed and sleepily plodded to the bathroom down the hall. When I got out she asked me to sit next to her at my altar. "Let's braid your hair now," she said. She roped in my damp, dark hair and pulled a little tighter than usual this time. I stayed quiet, eyelids bobbing up and down like a doll. "My mother did this for me when I was the May Girl. You are going to be so beautiful."

The air in our house was cold as I went to eat breakfast. I shivered in my wet braids on the barstool that sat on the edge of our kitchen counter. I started to kick my legs and made the stool twist and turn and motioned my hands in a

breaststroke, swimming through invisible water. The air rushed past my head and my hair was dry by the time I finished my oatmeal.

I went back to my room and my mother soon followed with a skirt and top set that she made me for the occasion. It was made from a fabric of blue carnations—Mary’s color. I put on the skirt, then lifted my hands over my head and let the blue fabric tumble down over me like water.

“Perfect,” she said. “Just let me latch the clasp in the back.” Her arms touched my neck, then moved to the two braids that were resting on each shoulder blade. There was a soft tug. Her hands started unweaving the perfect braids, turning them loose.

“What are you doing? Mom, no. I want my hair in braids. I look ugly!” I yelled.

“I thought your hair would look pretty all wavy,” she said. “It’ll be a change from the braids. The waves will look so nice with the crown of flowers.” She bit her lip.

“I’m not going. I’m ugly.”

“You have to go and we don’t have time to re-braid them. You look beautiful. Now hurry up and put on your shoes.”

I buckled my white patent shoes in the mirror. My hair cascaded over my red face and appeared to have a golden tint to its dark brown shade. *Please God, let me be pretty. Please God, don't let Mommy be wrong.*

XVI.

His name was David. I lost him too early for him to leave anything tangible like clothes or hair or bones behind. The only way he can resurface is through my skin, my nose, my teeth.

Some scientists say smell is the sense most inextricably linked to memory and it's true: every time I get a whiff of a Vanilla Wafer from a little kid's lunch, I am back in my Uncle Vernie's kitchen, watching golf, taking sips from his black coffee; the smell of an old book places me in my Grandpa Carl's armchair, listening to him read a Shakespearean sonnet, laughing at his fake accent; whenever I get a whiff of freshly picked carrots in the summer time, I am back in my parents' garden with my childhood friend Julie.

David is in the water, the smell of cool autumn days when Lake Superior is noisy and the air is so sharp you can bite it. I tried not to think of him when October hit, but the lake is everywhere. There's no way to avoid it.

XVII.

It's five o'clock now, and my mother's family will be home soon. I walk back upstairs, intending to find a piece of jewelry, but soon find myself back at the braid. I'm still afraid, but I peel back the yellowed tissue paper once more and pick up my great-grandmother's hair.

It's softer than I thought. It's matted, but healthy and thick and strong. How could she bear to cut it—did she do it before or after my grandmother was born?

I hold it in my hand, like a pet, running my hands up and down every groove, knocking loose two smaller sprigs of hair, rubber-banded. They must've been hiding in the braid. The sprigs are short and fine like a child's, but the color is still the same. They could be my grandmother's or mother's hair. They could be mine. Maybe they're the hair of someone I'll never meet.

I look back in the box to see if there's some indication of whose hair this is—if one of the pieces is mine, when did my mother put it there?

At the bottom of the box is a collection of saint cards, the same kind I used to pray to when I was little. I leaf through Saint Francis and Mary and some other saints I don't recognize. There's lace around one of them, so old it crumbles as I touch it. In the middle of the pack is the memorial prayer card from my great-grandmother's funeral. It's bent around the edges, maybe from the

hands of a nervous funeral-goer, someone not yet comfortable with death,
someone not yet at ease with their own guilt.

For the first time in a year, I start to really pray and the incantations sound
off in the rhythm of waves:

Lord I pray

for the soul of Great-Grandma Elizabeth

for the health of my family

for the safety of those in the water

for forgiveness

I put the hair back in the box and set it in the cupboard, letting it sink.

for the ability to change.

THE EXTRACTION OF GLASS

It is an anxious, sometimes a dangerous thing to be a doll. Dolls cannot choose; they can only be chosen; they cannot 'do'; they can only be done by.

— Rumer Godden *The Dolls' House*

I. Little Women

I had a choice. In the middle of my grandmother's glass doll case, among former queens of England dressed in ornate regalia, pigtailed Norman Rockwell girls silently giggling at dogs pulling down little boy's shorts, and impossibly dimpled babies with frozen laughter next to blocks that spelled "C-A-T", stood the Little Women.

"Which one are you going to pick?" my younger sister Laura asked, impatiently kicking her feet against the white carpet.

I peered into the case, as multicolored light from the stained glass windows Grandma salvaged from an abandoned church cast down upon my arms and part of my thigh. Amy and Jo were the only Little Women so far— Grandma was still waiting for the last two heroines, Beth and Meg, of Louisa May Alcott's famous novel to arrive. The manufacturers only released one doll each year. "When I die," she used to say, "you can have *all* the Little Women."

Amy wore a soft white dress, trimmed in ruffled white lace and blue satin ribbons, with three pink flowers resting on the gathered right hem, left hem, and the chest. A cameo necklace of the same blue ribbon wrapped around her neck, practically hidden behind the loose golden curls cascading past her shoulders. Atop the curls rested a crown of the same pink flowers on her dress, almost matching the color on her lips and cheeks.

Jo wore a dark red velvet dress trimmed in black, with sleeves that reached past her wrists and small beady buttons that went all the way up to her chin. She carried a tasseled black satchel in her left hand and a book in her right. Her long black hair was held back by a red velvet bonnet with a cluster of feathers attached. It was so large it almost covered her cold white face and pale lips.

“I want Jo.”

“Good. Amy’s the pretty one,” my sister said, flinging open the case and grabbing Amy from her stand.

By age ten, I had read the abridged version of the book three times. Amy was the flighty one, the artist, “always carrying herself like a young lady mindful of her manners.” Jo was the strong one, the writer, the real heroine, not afraid to speak her mind or cut off her hair or care for an ailing family member, even though she might get sick. And that was part of the reason why I chose her.

But what it really came down to was the eyes. I took Jo from her stand and rubbed my hands against the smooth velvet. "She had a decided mouth, a comical nose, and sharp, gray eyes, which appeared to see everything, and were by turns fierce, funny, or thoughtful," Alcott wrote in the book's first pages. And it was true. Even behind the shadow cast from the large bonnet, her eyes were dark, sharp, present. Even though they were glass, there was something behind them.

The glass of Amy's eyes was a light almost translucent blue. They looked just like mine. But I didn't want to be Amy. I wanted to be Jo March when I grew up. I wanted to see everything.

II. Three Photographs

First Photograph:

My Great-Grandpa Newburg is sitting on a pea-green chair in his living room, his left hand holding a short glass filled with dark brown liquid. Almost ninety, his head is bald, and his bones disappear beneath his loose shirt and slacks. Behind his wire-rimmed glasses, the color in his light eyes is almost gone. His wife died twenty years ago. All of his thirteen children, besides my grandmother, have moved away.

He passes away two years later. Every time my father sees me picking up the frame, he says, "This is exactly how I remember him."

Second Photograph:

Ruth, my grandmother, is against a blank background. No more than twenty, twenty-one, she smiles bright, head tilted to the side. It's before color film, but someone has carefully painted in her bow-shaped lips, pink cheeks, and ringlets of strawberry-blonde hair. Her light blue eyes look off to the side, hopeful.

At twenty-two, she marries a man she doesn't love and has a child. A year later she divorces this man and moves back home with her parents in Grand Marais, Michigan. She begins to drink with her father. A twenty-four, she meets a man who loves her and her child and she loves him back. Ruth and Frank have three more children together, born in a house next to her parents. She drinks in private until she is seventy-eight. At seventy-nine, she drinks too much and falls into a glass doll case on the third floor of her house, cutting her right eye.

Third Photograph:

Me at nine, against a blank, blue-grey background. My bangs are freshly cut and two smooth braids run down each side of my face, ends resting on my multicolored heart turtleneck. My light blue eyes are raised. I am trying to make

them appear larger, wider. I have rehearsed my eyes over and over in the mirror and in clean windows and I can feel them getting darker, stronger. I am going to see everything. I am going to be a writer. I have just written my first story. It was about a girl named Sarah who wins a horse competition even though her family is too poor to have a horse. She succeeds because of her hope and determination. My third grade teacher gave me an "A".

III. Signs I

When I was seven, maybe eight, raucous female laughter came up from my grandparents' basement. I leaned up against the swinging basement door with the blurry glass panel of pressed butterflies at the top. Pressing lightly against it, I slipped through and walked quietly down the stairs, undetected. I peered around the corner of the steps and saw my two aunts and my Grandma Ruth. Empty wine glasses and spilled popcorn sat next to them and Grandma's pants were undone with a wet spot near the zipper. Slapping the ground, they laughed hard— so hard and so long it was unclear how they found the time to breathe. I giggled, happy to see Grandma so happy. After a few minutes, my dad came down the stairs and grabbed my hand, leading me back up. "Stay upstairs," he said.

IV. Basement

The first time I ever tried alcohol was by accident. I was thirteen and had an inexplicable craving for mint ice cream. I remembered that my baby-sitter used to grab a green liquid from behind the bar in our basement and pour it over our vanilla ice cream when my sister and I wouldn't go to bed. "Don't tell your parents," she'd said. "This is our secret ice-cream."

I took a mug of crystallized vanilla ice cream downstairs and set it on top of the bar. Behind the bar I searched through dusty bottles of vermouth and brandy until I found a one with a green cast. Crème de menthe. Probably just some fancy green food coloring that would just change the color of my mouth. I poured a little bit of the green liquid over the top of the ice cream and took a bowlful to taste. It was exactly as I had remembered it—a fresh, minty sensation that warmed me up like Christmas. I gradually poured more and more of the liquid until soon a small pool of green sat on top of the ice cream. Spinning my spoon around the mug, I dissolved my ice cream into a minty green soup. I put the bottle back. Pretending I was my dad, I propped myself up on top of one of the bar stools and slugged down the liquid in one hand, while tracing my hand along the glass countertop. When I was finished, I leaned over the glass and stuck out my tongue. Sure enough, it was green. For the rest of the week, I kept

sneaking back downstairs with mugs full of ice cream until all of the Crème De Menthe was gone.

V. Signs II

“Don’t ask your grandmother about her cast. She’s embarrassed,” my father said to my sister and me in the car. I was about sixteen and we were on our way to Grand Marais for Christmas. My mother turned to my father, opened her mouth, then turned back to the book in her lap.

“What happened?” I asked.

“She slipped and fell on the porch when she was feeding squirrels,” he said.

“It was icy,” my mother said.

VI. Glass

I was lying on the carpet, head resting on something that was not a pillow. I rubbed the crust from my eyes, massaged my fingers around my sockets three times, and opened them. Red. *I fell asleep on my suitcase.*

I moved my head further back and pushed my hands against the red suitcase to prop me halfway up. *I am not at home.* I turned around and blinked again. A desk and chair. Two beds, one made, one unmade, with a nightstand

in between them and two wall-mounted lamps above. *I am in a hotel.* Pressing my hands on the suitcase, I scooted up, turned my legs over, and kneeled. I pressed down harder, planted my feet against the carpet, one heel on, one heel off, and tried to stand up. The suitcase gave and I fell back down, limp. Kicking off my other heel, I moved my hands from the suitcase, set them on the carpet, and tried again. My body moved into downward facing dog and I slowly straightened out my legs, bringing my hands to my blistered feet, then my ankles, my knees, and my thighs, and finally I stood. I rubbed the blood orange taffeta on the side of my right thigh and lifted it up. A deep black and blue circle covered about seven inches of my skin.

I must've fallen at the wedding. There was champagne. Lots of champagne and the cute waiter kept bringing it to the head table and every time he set a glass down, I picked it up. I had no choice. I was a single, twenty-six year-old, bridesmaid. They expected me to drink and dance and maybe even fall. But I had no idea how I got back to my room alive.

I limped across the hall to the bathroom and flipped on the light. Red rimmed the outer edges of my eyes and a thin layer of liquid cased the irises. I blinked once, maybe twice, and moved my glassy eyes to each corner of the mirror over and over, hoping that the motion would make them look more alive.

After a minute I stopped. It was no use. The harsh neon light went straight through the light, almost translucent blue.

VII. Broken Glass

My grandmother was lying facedown on the white carpet, as fresh drops of blood seeped into its fibers. Glass pierced her arms, her chest, and her right eye. Around her were the broken faces and scattered eyes of ten, maybe twelve of her dolls, most from the middle shelf of the case. The *Little Women* were mostly intact, except Jo's head was cracked in half; her porcelain face caved in, falling back into the shadow of her bonnet and mass of black hair.

Motionless, my grandmother softly moaned my grandfather's name. "Frank." She just wanted to look at the dolls. "Frank."

My grandfather was already on his way up the stairs. He kicked one of the dolls out of the way and slowly lifted my grandmother up from the back, cutting his fingers on the glass caught on her sweater. "I can't see," she moaned again and he turned her around. A sharp piece of glass was lodged in her right eye.

"You'll be okay. Hold on." He placed her arm around his shoulder and walked her down three flights of steps to the basement. Brushing more glass off with one hand, he grabbed a coat from the closet with the other hand and

wrapped it around her shoulders. He opened the garage door, set her in the front seat of their car, and drove an hour to the nearest hospital in Newberry where the doctors would attempt to save her right eye.

My father called me a day later. I was away at college at the time. "Your Grandma Ruth had an accident. She fell into the doll case and glass got in her eye. She's going to be okay, but the doctors don't know if they can save it yet."

"What happened?" I asked.

"She drank too much." He hung up.

Walking back to my bunkbed, I didn't see the crash of the doll case or glass in my grandmother's eye, but instead Jo March. My father hung up before I could ask if she was okay. I pulled her bonnet off and brushed the black hair away from her face. Her sharp gray eyes stared back at me. They could see everything.

How did this happen? Why?

But like God, dolls only answer in silence.

VIII. Dollhouse

The house is quiet. My grandfather's out of town and I drove up from grad school to stay with my Grandma Ruth overnight. She won't leave the

house anymore, not even for a day trip. My mother says it's anxiety, that she's scared she doesn't know how to interact with people anymore after her accident. My father says she's tired. My Aunt Katie thinks she heard my grandma murmur something about being afraid, that if she goes too far down the road she'll remember that everyone she used to know is gone.

She's lying on the couch with her eyes closed, sage blanket pulled up to her neck. White wisps of hair like tufts of dandelions frame the contours of her face and her bowed lips stay perfectly pursed. I slip off my shoes and walk up to the couch. Her breath wheezes in and out so lightly, I move in closer to hear it, to feel it against my cheek. "Who's there? Frank?" she asks.

"No, it's me, Erica."

"Where's Frank?" Her blue eyes flutter open for a minute and I look away.

"He's just gone for the day. It's okay. I'm here with you. Go back to sleep." I take her hand from underneath the blanket and squeeze it, bones gently rubbing together in that unmistakable grip of two piano players. She taught me how to play, but now she has terrible arthritis. "Don't crack your knuckles," she always used to say every time she saw me link my hands together, snapping them back. "You'll end up just like me."

I gently lift my hands from blanket and stand back up. Carrying my heavy bags, I climb the stairs to the third floor where the dolls are waiting.

IX. Contacts

My grandmother wore a hard gauze patch taped over her socket to keep her eye temporarily intact after the glass was removed. After three weeks of ocular rehabilitation, she was little ornery with a thick, hard contact in her right eye. It scratched and itched and made her eyes water uncontrollably.

That year for Easter dinner, my family and I went out to a local restaurant, the first family outing since my grandmother returned from her rehabilitation. She still left the house back then. We took a private room in the basement and my grandfather led her down the stairs by her arm.

As we sat down at the table, I had a hard time looking at her eye-to-eye, scared of what I might see, scared that there was nothing left. When she asked me how I was doing, I kept my head down and answered, "Good, Grandma. How are you?"

I briefly glanced at her eye. It was a brilliant blue, a color I only saw in comics or cartoon characters' eyes. The corners were red, like mine when the weather changed from winter to spring and summer to fall. The eye still looked separate from the rest of her face, like her eye was too big for the socket. It reminded me of when I was six and I tried stuffing a marble into the cavity where my Cabbage Patch Doll's eye was ripped out by my dog Sparkie. It could fall out at any minute. But it was there.

“Oh, I’m okay. Except my damn eye won’t stop watering,” she said, laughing lightly. She sipped her water as the rest of our family began to give their drink orders to the waiter.

As the young waiter came by to take my grandmother’s order he said, “Wow! You have the most beautiful eyes. They’re the bluest blue I’ve ever seen!”

“They’re contacts,” she replied.

X. Escape

4:15 a.m. Eighteen hours, two bottles of wine, and I was still trying to come up with the final line of the story for my summer writing group. It was fiction this time, about a girl who escapes her family of alcoholics and runs off to the desert to become a writer. The story would end with her sitting down to write. I took another sip of wine. “What do you want to write?” The flashing line on my laptop blinked along with the ticking of the kitchen clock. No answer. “What is the first line of your story?” The line kept blinking next to the period. “Tell me!” Blink. Blink. Blink. “Screw it.” I finished off my glass and shut my laptop. “You probably would’ve crawled back home.”

XI. Blue-Grey

The room is different. The carpet is a little duller and a pair of obtrusive green chairs were swapped out for a gentler, mauve-colored set. I set my bags down next to the bed and walk back over to the doll cases. Most of the dolls are still here, but my Aunt Andrea took the remaining *Little Women* soon after my grandmother's accident. I don't know what they did with Jo. Maybe they glued her face back together. Maybe my aunt bought another one off of Ebay.

The glass on the case was replaced and shines bright, free of fingerprints and dust. My grandpa must clean it from time to time. I can see myself inside the case, among the queens, the Norman Rockwell girls, the baby blocks, and impossibly dimpled children. They look the same, but my face is longer, my hair thinner, the blue in my eyes a little darker, sort of a blue-grey. My dad says the same thing happened to his eyes in his late twenties. I watch myself among the dolls and wait. I wait for the dolls to move, for the glass to shatter, for my feet to give out and my body to fall against the carpet. But nothing changes. Not unless I make it.

XII. Extraction

I set down two glasses of water and two plates on the kitchen table and we start to eat. My mother prepared my grandmother and me ham and mashed potatoes

and a couple of rolls that we just had to heat up. Our forks clank against the porcelain while I try to think of something to say. "Why can't you live with me?" my grandmother says.

"Well, I'd love to if I wasn't in school."

"It's like what Greta Garbo says in some movie. It's something like, 'Anna, come live with me, I have nice home, yes?'" she says in her best Garbo accent. Her eyes are bright. It's been ten years since the accident and her right eye has slowly healed, accepted by the skin around it. "Anna, come live with me, I have nice home, yes?"

I start to giggle.

"Anna come live with me, I have nice home, yes?" She starts to laugh, too.

"Anna, come live with me, I have nice home, yes?!"

We both slap the counter and laugh for a good minute. Once we catch our breath, our forks begin to clank again.

"Why don't we feed the birds tonight?" I ask.

"I don't want to fall down. It's icy out there."

"It's okay. I'll hold onto you." I let my eyes meet hers straight on. They're still a little red around the corners, but the blue looks pretty in the kitchen light.

"Okay, but be careful," she says.

We grab two rolls and shuffle arm-in-arm to the back door. I step out first, then wrap my hand back around her forearm and walk her onto the wooden porch. Keeping our arms linked, we edge out a few feet together.

“Okay, don’t toss them too far. Otherwise we won’t be able to see the birds from behind the glass,” she says.

She tears off a piece of her roll with her free hand and throws it toward the snow while I keep us standing upright. It lands on the porch.

“That’s okay. The birds will find it,” she says with a chuckle.

“I wish I didn’t have to leave tomorrow.” I tear a piece of my own roll with my free hand and toss it far into the snow while she helps me keep my balance.

“You’re much better than me,” she says, smiling. “Let me try again.”

And we continue to take turns throwing bread, keeping each other from falling, until all of it is gone.

BULLFROGS

The summer of 1990 sounds like croaking. My mother's second graders always had their amphibian unit right when we got back to school, and every year I helped her get ready. She scheduled it that way so we could catch frogs and toads outside our house; the thick August nights would ensure plenty of daddy-long-legs and spiders to feed them. We waited until dusk to walk empty fields, stalk the land around the lakeshore and gather the bugs in plastic cups from Pizza Hut, rubber-banding them in with paper towels. Once we collected enough, she drove us to school where the frogs and toads waited. As we flipped on the light, they commenced the motion they'd need to catch their moving meals, hopping across the dirt in the terrarium and thumping against the glass. On the ride over, I'd tip over the cup and feel the legs of the bugs dance across the paper cloth, wondering if they knew where they were going. When it was feeding time my mother took the cup of bugs from my hand while I turned my back. Sometimes I named the baby spiders on the car ride over, and even though they fed my pets I couldn't watch the death of something so small.

Once the supply of bugs ran low and the Upper Peninsula cold showed its breath on dark mornings, the unit was over. Without enough bugs to feed them,

the frogs and toads would turn on each other to stay alive and while some of the young boys thought the idea of watching a large frog eat a small toad was “cool,” my mother discouraged this type of violence in her classroom. “You don’t need to see death until you’re ready,” she’d say. In late September, we took the terrarium down from its place near her radiator, walked back out into one of those empty fields or marshlands near the lake, and let the toads and frogs go, one-by-one. I never asked if they would freeze, but my mother always reassured me that we turned them loose “just in time.”

One early August evening when I was eight, I was on my knees trying to coax a daddy long-leg into my Nickelodeon cup when my mother called to me from the front porch. The Ammels had the bullfrogs.

Every year at our community’s summer festival, Bayfest, the local Jaycees held a bullfrog race. Community members bet on the frogs in order to raise money for the Junior Chamber of Commerce. Usually the frogs were transported back down south to their proper environment by the same local man who picked them up, but this year he couldn’t make the trip. Instead, the folks in charge were going to kill them when the race was over.

My neighborhood friend, Paul, and his older brother Mark begged their parents to save them. There was marsh behind their house that led out to Lake Michigan and they thought it was warm and buggy enough so that the frogs

might have a chance. The Jaycees didn't see a problem with this, so when my mom and I approached the Ammel's backyard, there stood Paul holding onto a large green blob with both of his small hands.

"Do you want to kiss it?" he asked, shoving the slimy green flesh toward my nose. I ran behind my mother.

"It's okay, they won't bite. Here, get your own." Paul tossed his frog in the dirty white mopping bucket and bent down, wrapping his hands halfway around it. He struggled to lift it up.

"Paul, it's okay, Erica will just get it herself. Go on," my mother said. She stepped to the side.

I walked over and peered into the bucket. Five bulbous frogs bathed in the murky pool of water at the bottom, so tightly packed in, it was unclear which legs belonged to which frog. Every few seconds the one of them would drop its mouth and croak while the others continued to breathe heavily against each other.

I chose the smallest one. Slowly lowering both hands, I reached for its chest. It felt like raw chicken. Probably tasted like it, too. Bringing it up, I pressed my thumbs against its chest and felt its heart thud through the yellow-white skin. Moving it closer to my face, I watched the filmy skin move in and out in rhythm, black eyes staying stationary on mine. "You're lucky to be alive, little

guy.” At that moment, it moved its mouth downward and let out a long croak. I screamed and dropped it on its back. It turned over and slowly took off into the grass as Paul chased after it.

“Kids, I think its time to let them go,” Mr. Ammel’s baritone called across the yard. The shade of night was closing in on the marsh and he wanted to make sure that we placed the frogs in just the right spot; in order to stay alive they needed to stay wet and the water tended to get low in August. He picked up the bucket and headed toward the trail at the end of their yard, while Mark tromped behind him shoeless, ready to wade into the water. Mrs. Ammel soon followed, carrying two Mason jars with holes cut in the top, while my mother, Paul, and I walked behind her. “What are those for?” I asked Mrs. Ammel.

“There are usually fireflies back here. I thought we could catch one for you.”

The sky got dark as we followed Mr. Ammel’s flashlight through the weedy trail, crickets and toads calling from beyond the thicket. About halfway through, tiny lights started to flicker on and off in front of our faces. My fingers reached out for one of the lights, but it turned off before I could catch it. I grabbed air instead. A moment later my light flickered again, two feet away. “How do you catch them?” I asked my mother.

“I usually just let them land in my hand and the close it.”

I held out my right palm and waited. Soon a tiny light landed on the meaty area right before my thumb. My fingers shut. As the light beat through my skin, I moved my fist next to the jar and dropped the firefly in, capping it quickly.

“I can use this for a nightlight,” I excitedly told my mom.

“Mmmhmm,” she murmured.

Once we reached the edge of the marsh, Mr. Ammel and Mark rolled their pants up to their knees, while the rest of us swatted away the heavy cloud of mosquitoes. Mr. Ammel slipped off his shoes and socks and the two of them waded into the water with the bucket of bullfrogs. About three feet in, Mr. Ammel said, “This should be a good spot.” Mark took one of the frogs from the bucket and set it in his hand next to the shallow water. The frog stayed in his hand, skin on its chest moving back and forth in a fast beat that said, *I’m alive I’m alive I’m alive*.

“Don’t you wanna’ be free, buddy?” Mark asked the frog. *I’m alive I’m alive I’m alive*.

“Just toss him in, Mark,” Mr. Ammel said. Mark flicked the frog’s hind legs three times and finally dropped him into the water. Mr. Ammel handed off the flashlight to Mark as he gently tipped the bucket over and the remaining frogs plopped in.

“Do you think they’re going to make it?” I asked my mother.

“If they can find enough food, and the water stays high enough, they’ll be just fine.” The frogs heads were now above water and their small feet must’ve been treading beneath.

“Goodbye, big froggies,” I called out across the lake, then turned back to my firefly.

We returned to the backyard and Mr. Ammel and Mark started a fire in the pit. While my mother and Mrs. Ammel chatted, Paul asked if I wanted to swing from the large oak tree. Mr. Ammel had built a large platform about halfway up and attached a rope to one of the sturdy branches so that the kids could swing over the entire backyard.

“Go ahead. I’ll watch your firefly,” my mother said.

I climbed up the ladder and stood atop the platform. Paul handed off the rope from below and I grabbed on tight. Looking straight ahead, I jumped off of the platform and let the thick August air rush past me, gliding above the flickering light, the marsh, and my mother.

I didn’t know then that the light in my mason jar would stop flickering by the end of the next day, or that in the next three days the marsh would dry out because of record highs. Instead, for the rest of the night, Paul and I took turns

climbing up the ladder against the tree trunk, grabbing the rope, and jumping off into the dark, knowing that something near the water was still alive.

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