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# In Mirrors and Through Windows

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IN MIRRORS AND THROUGH WINDOWS

By

Laura Mead

THESIS

Submitted to  
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For the degree of

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## ABSTRACT

### IN MIRRORS AND THROUGH WINDOWS

By

Laura Mead

*In Mirrors and Through Windows* is a collection of four nonfiction essays and two poems that deal with experiences, memories and issues from the author's life and point of view. The author attempts to make sense of her memories, emotions and identity by reflecting upon life events, personal anxieties, insecurities, and other complicated issues that have risen not only from her own present and past, but those of family members. On her journey toward self-discovery, the author notes parallels and comparisons between her own experiences, relationships, and personal struggles, and those of her family members, namely her mother and grandmothers. The four essays in the collection follow a segmented/lyrical form which the author uses in order to mirror and convey the fragmented, complicated, and often chaotic feelings that arise from these subjects.

The pieces in this collection deal with themes of youth, loss of innocence, body-image, femininity, addiction, and family history. She often explores these issues through the process of reflection, the use of memories and the return to the past, as well as by contemplating the future.

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2012

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all my loved ones, my Grandma and Grandpa Mead, both of whom passed away recently, and had a tremendous effect on my life and my writing; my Grandma Minor, an incredible and inspiring woman, my mom and dad who have been so incredibly supportive and encouraging, and my sister Erica, who helped me navigate and survive graduate school. To all of them, I owe countless thanks.



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my abilities, and loved me unconditionally. You are the source of everything that is good in me.

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

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## INTRODUCTION

The process of writing this thesis has really been a process of self-examination and involved confronting of a lot of my fears—not only the fears I write about in my essays and poems, but also my fear of writing itself. For me, writing has always been an anxiety-filled endeavor, something I want to run from because it requires honesty. As I'm sure is the case for many writers, my writing compels me to confront very personal issues, to revisit my past, and to shed light in places I have preferred to leave in darkness. I must also contend with the voice of the inner critic, that nagging fear that what I'm writing is too self-indulgent, too confessional, too whiny or too mundane, not worthy of an audience. But with the support and guidance of other writers and readers, I have learned to ignore or at least quiet these persistent thoughts and just keep writing. Although it was sometimes a painful experience, writing these pieces resulted in emotional and personal growth and self-discovery.

The title of this collection, *In Mirrors and Through Windows*, refers to the reflective and exploratory nature of the pieces in the collection. Many of the pieces involve “looking in the mirror” – that self-reflection and study of the self in order to access emotions, to figure out why and how experiences and

memories shaped you, and to look upon yourself with relative objectivity. In the case of rearview mirrors, this reflective process also allows us to look back, to see what has already passed. In my writing, I constantly look back, remember and explore, not only my own past from my childhood, but also my family history.

While mirrors allow us to examine our present and past selves, windows let us see what is beyond ourselves, whether it be a window to the future or a window to the outside world, both of which I try to explore in my writing. I strive to connect my own personal experiences in a more universal way. In the essay "Body Parts," I strive to connect my own personal experiences with the body to women in general. In "Murmurings," I look outside myself to an event in nature and I try to examine the affects this event had on people the world over.

The pieces in this collection deal with themes such as memory, the passing of time, body image and family. I also explore the physical landscapes that influenced me and that serve as the backdrop for many of my significant personal experiences. Some of the issues I write about include my anxieties about getting older, my insecurities about my body, struggles I've had with addiction, as well as my search for parallels between my own experiences and those of the women in my family, namely my mother and my grandmothers.

The essay titled "Body Parts," is a segmented lyric essay that is divided into six parts, each part dedicated to a specific part of the body. The essay as a whole deals with subjects of body image and body issues, self-acceptance, femininity and addiction.

The body parts bring me to relate personal experiences I've had involving that body part, either figuratively or literally. In the beginning, I talk about the body as a whole, and I set the tone of the essay which is, for the most part, one of anxiety and dissatisfaction. I discuss how I have never been seriously physically injured and I worry that I am taking my body for granted, but I also worry that this means I have been too careful in my life, that I haven't taken enough risks, perhaps. I circle back to this in the end of the essay when I talk about this summer, in particular, and how I feel like I have started taking some steps toward changing that, by being adventurous, spending more time outside, and taking more risks. This also relates to a common theme in my thesis, that of youth and anxieties about getting older. I refer to my childhood at this point in the essay, and how I always played outside as a kid and how I felt less inhibited. Although, I'm not quite that I'm where I want to be at the end, I do express that I feel more connected to my younger self.

Other parts of the essay deal with body image and insecurities I have. In this, I introduce some paradoxical thinking. In one section I talk about how I've

been told I am attractive but how that is sometimes a tough pill to swallow, while in other sections, I describe incidents where I've felt insecure about my body, have compared myself to other females and felt I was lacking, and how my insecurities about my body have developed, in part, from my observations of my mother. By discussing my mother and the comparisons I've made between myself and other women, I hope to connect to women readers. I'm not just talking about myself, but trying to connect on a more universal level by centering on a shared experience—that of social pressures to be attractive and thin, anxieties about getting older, and the insecurities we feel about ourselves physically.

The essay, "The Song of Ruth" is about my paternal grandmother who passed away a little over a year ago, and the strong connection I realized I had with her, especially since her passing. That connection, I realized, was more than just in our blood and DNA, but also the anxieties we shared about the outside world and our way of coping through self-medication. For example, I discuss the social anxiety my grandmother and I share—how for many years of her life she was afraid to leave the house and how I struggle to be social as well. I also make subtle reference to her alcoholism, how she self-medicated in order to cope with her anxieties and other mental or emotional struggles, something, I too, can relate to. Although I discuss my own struggle with addiction more fully in

“Body Parts,” I hope that the connection I felt to my grandmother comes through in this essay. Exploring my memories of my grandmother, my perception of her versus the reality of her, was, again, a way of discovering things about myself, my beliefs about the world, and my thoughts on life, as well as where I came from and where I might be headed.

“The Song of Ruth” is probably my favorite piece, but it was also the most difficult to write because of the subject matter. I was afraid of writing on the topic of death—afraid I would fail miserably at it, that it would too self-indulgent, or else laughable, and I was worried about whether it was okay to write about death directly. I was also particularly anxious about writing about my grandmother’s death—afraid I would not be able to fully capture her spirit on the page, afraid I would not do her justice, and afraid I would tarnish her image in some way. However, as I wrote, I discovered that I was writing less about my grandmother’s actual death, but about my memories of her while she was alive and how our relationship has affected me. This piece was about memory, and the fragility of memory—how our memories and perceptions of people are fragile and breakable and—and about the desire to preserve and protect our memories.

Connected to my grandmother is the town of Grand Marais, a place that played a big part in my life and in my thesis. Grand Marais, the small town



where my grandparents met, my parents grew up, and where I spent much of my childhood, is an important part of “The Song of Ruth.” One of the ways I characterize my grandmother is by examining her family history in this town. I write about how, to me, my grandmother is Grand Marais. She and her family have lived there for decades and are part of the place. This town was also like a second home to me. Since I spent so much time there, it of course played a big role in my childhood and in my memories. Those memories are inextricably linked with my memories of my grandmother. In this essay, my memories of the physical landscape of Grand Marais and my memories of my grandmother bleed into one another.

The role physical landscapes play is again explored in my essay “One Week, Every Year,” a segmented lyric essay inspired by my annual trips to the U.P. State Fair in my hometown of Escanaba. The fair played a significant role in my childhood and the arrival of the fair in my hometown is one of the things that, I think, makes my hometown special. To me, the fair was like a microcosm of my hometown and the surrounding areas—a small sampling of the people and culture you would encounter if you were to live in the area for some time. The essay became a lyric essay because I felt I could only describe the experience of the fair through fragments and images. Attending the fair is a chaotic, frenetic experience and I wanted that to come across in my writing.

Writing about the fair allowed me to see it in a new light. I had attended it for so many years without really considering what it was all about. I found that, as an adult looking back on it, it was really a landmark in my youth. Again youth, loss of innocence, and aging, are themes I explored in this essay. I try to convey how my perceptions of the fair changed from youth to adulthood by beginning the essay as an adult looking down on the fair from the top of a Ferris wheel. I appreciate the fair and I appreciate my home, but later on in the essay I also describe how the fair lost some of its magic for me when I got older. In order to highlight this, I describe what it was like to experience the fair as a young child—how everything seemed bigger, more beautiful and more mysterious.

In this essay, I also wanted to capture the character of the people at the fair, such as the carneys—a subject I found particularly interesting and which I spend some time describing in my essay. Some of the character descriptions are not necessarily positive, however. For example, I refer to the teenage parents that I often saw attending the fair. Teenage parenting is not exclusive to the U.P., but it is a reality, especially in rural areas like the U.P. I wanted to paint a realistic picture of the fair, one that would make the reader feel like they were there and could imagine these very people, the sights, sounds and smells, and what it was like to experience the U.P. State Fair as a child.

The essay titled “Murmurings” was inspired by a YouTube video I watched of a murmuration, which is a flock of starlings that moves in sync, creating incredible shapes and patterns in flight. I found this video to be so incredible and moving in its study of such a miraculous natural phenomenon, that it really renewed my sense of awe and my appreciation of the natural world. It also was somewhat of a spiritual experience. The fact that these birds could create such intricate and beautiful patterns, seemed to me, an act of God and it renewed my faith in a way. It was a feeling I had never experienced before through that kind of medium.

This essay is probably the most experimental piece, or at least is the oddball of the thesis. In this essay, I tried expanding my horizons, taking on a style I hadn’t tried before. I did this by mixing journalistic elements with lyric essay-writing. I incorporated interesting bits of research I found on starlings and on the phenomenon, as well as excerpts from people’s posts about the video on a blog with my own lyric writing. By incorporating excerpts of these posts, I was attempting to gain a sense of how this one small event had affected people and connected people from different parts of the world.

This was also my “window” essay—a piece in which I was looking outside of myself, looking out through the window of my computer, examining the world of the Internet, which in turn brought me to another world—the one

where the murmuration was taking place. Viewing this new world, and examining how others connected to this experience, for me, brought up questions about how the Internet is changing social interaction and human connections. I don't exactly explore that issue in much depth, but it is something I would like to explore further in future writing.

The two poems I chose to include tie in with the collection through themes of family, memory and childhood. My first poem, titled "The Mariner," is about my paternal grandfather, who passed away this May, and who built boats for a hobby. In this poem, I hoped to pay homage to my grandfather by showing how he was always giving to others and how he expressed his love through building boats. It is also about my memories of my grandfather and my fascination with the sailboat he built in honor of my grandmother. In this poem, I describe the experience of seeing the boat in his workshop when I was young, and the idea that objects can be infused with a person's spirit.

This idea of objects containing human spirits is explored again in my second poem titled "Octavia." This poem was inspired by my maternal grandmother, and an object of importance to her and my family, the player piano, which she still owns today. Player pianos are somewhat unique and as a child I was fascinated by this instrument. My grandmother is an avid piano player and this piano and she are always linked in my memory. In this poem, I

link the death of my grandmother's husband to the player piano's demise, when the original ivory piano keys began chipping and the piano's automatic playing mechanism stopped working. Although this poem is inspired by my grandmother and includes many elements of her biography, it goes beyond her life. It's also an exploration of the stories, memories and spirits that objects can hold for us, how objects can contain the spirits of people who are gone, and how they can haunt us through these objects.

I explore many themes in this collection that are personal to me, but I have found that self-reflection is the mode through which I am best able to do this. I reflect upon my view and perception of myself—the metaphorical mirror—in order to convey certain issues such as body image and addiction. Writing also requires me to use my rearview mirror in order to reflect upon the past, to access my memories and my childhood experiences and to then reflect upon the changes that have occurred since then. I sometimes also reflect upon myself in order to gain a more objective viewpoint of how a particular experience affected me both at the time of the event, how it affects me now in the present, and how it might affect me in future—the metaphorical window. Sometimes the act of reflection is done in order to access emotions I experienced in the past or to try to get in touch with a past self so I can be as honest in my portrayal of the experience as possible. Observation is the other half of coin. Much of my writing

relies on my observations of the people around me, namely family members, their behaviors, anxieties and emotions and I try to find parallels between myself and them.

Mirrors and windows, reflections and observations, play very important roles in this collection. They are the modes and vehicles through which I access emotions and memories in order to convey the stories I am telling. While these modes will continue to be important in the writing I do in the future, the pieces in this collection represent only this stage in my life—the present. As I move on into the future, as I learn and grow, I hope to discover new and different modes of writing, to continue to develop and improve as a writer, and to continue to evolve as an individual.

## BODY PARTS

### I. The Body Whole

I have never broken a bone. I have never twisted an ankle or sprained a wrist. No part of my body has ever shattered like glass, been re-set or removed and then replaced by a foreign transplant—one that would haunt my body with phantom memories.

I tell myself I should be grateful. I think sometimes I should thank my body for maintaining its wholeness. I should massage the heels and balls of my feet, caress my forearms and kiss my knees. I should submerge my bones in a bath of milk and slather my skin with creams and oil. And I do, pamper myself, in a way, but it's not in gratitude, or in celebration or for enjoyment. The smoothing, the slathering, and the massaging is done to fix existing and prevent potential imperfections: scars, cellulite, stretch marks, pimples, crow's feet, split ends—everything you've ever seen listed on the cover of a women's magazine under the heading "How to Get Rid Of...For Good!"

Sometimes I reprimand myself for forgetting to take my vitamins, for not eating enough vegetables, for having the occasional cigarette, for eating junk food, for not stretching or doing cardio. I feel guilty that I do not revel in each flex of muscle—each tiny movement I have the good fortune to be able to make. I should celebrate each movement I make because, just yesterday, I could have tripped on my way down the stairs, landing on my face and knocking out my front teeth permanently, leaving me with a gruesome and faulty smile. I could have slipped down the sandy side of a cliff while hiking, tumbling down, my body knocking from one rock to the next like a pinball before finally landing in the lake below, then dying in a warm, red bath of my own blood. I could have broken my neck, become paralyzed, contracted a deadly virus, or been burnt to death in a fire.

Then there were the nights after the bars when I was too lazy to walk and too cheap to take a cab so I would drive myself home wet-brained, my head spinning with liquor and cloudy with cigarette smoke. I could have crashed into a telephone pole or a tree—my car folding like an accordion, becoming nothing more than tin foil under the force of the impact. I could have suffered



brain trauma, forgotten my own name, forgotten the faces of the people I love.

But, that's never happened (knock on wood). I am still whole.

So, I should be grateful, I tell myself.

But then other times I wonder if my wholeness is not so much a testament to the strength of my body, but a sign that I've just been too damn careful. It's hard to break a bone when you're sitting at a desk all day, or lying on the couch watching re-runs of *America's Next Top Model*, or reality TV shows that let me watch other, more interesting people, live their lives instead of living my own.

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Sometimes, I wish that I had been an ugly duckling. Like Sabrina Fairchild in *Sabrina*. She is an ugly duckling in love with a man who pays no attention to her. But then she goes to Paris to attend culinary school. In Paris, she learns how to dress, how to converse, how to please men, and returns home a beautiful and sophisticated swan of herself. I wish I'd had that. I wish I'd to build

up a lot of character and personality and strong intellect and talent because I couldn't get by on my looks. A modern-day Sabrina, I would one day shed my braces, get a haircut, and my long, thin and gawky frame would become enviable with the arrival of bigger Victoria Secret-sized breasts and a slight widening of the hip bones. I wish I'd had a transformation like that.

I don't think I ever really blossomed. I've always sort of looked the way I do. Proof of that is when I was in eighth grade, I was voted "Looks most the same since first grade" — a pretty awful award to come up with, if you ask me.

I wish I would have been an ugly duckling because it would have been the best of both worlds. I would have faced some adversity which would have toughened me up, made me resilient while also requiring me to use my personality to attract and interest people. Then later on, I'd become a swan and shock the world.

For most of my life I've been told I was pretty. I've been told by my parents, my grandparents, friends, boyfriends, boys who weren't my boyfriends, and even the occasional stranger. It's a cringe-inducing thing to think about, and even more so, to write about, and I can't help make a face while doing so. This reflex is

disgust with myself; it's rejection of the idea. Sometimes I wonder why I have that reaction, what instilled in me that immediate rejection of flattery. I want so much to be found attractive, but I cannot take compliments. The desire and fear of validation is a contradictory position that's uncomfortable to hold.

I sometimes believe I am pretty, for a few brief moments after someone has told me so, or in a brief glance in the mirror, when my head is turned just so, and my chin is tilted at a particular angle, my hair is arranged just so, when I've achieved a somewhat "come hither" squint, and I smile just slightly so that my teeth, which I hate no matter what anyone tells me differently, don't show. It takes a lot of adjustment, but I can, at times, recognize myself as pretty. But I wonder if I could ever recognize it if it had never been affirmed. Any physical beauty I possess exists only if someone else says it does.

I think if you're told you're pretty too often, you'll start believing it is the only quality you have that's of value. I'd much rather be told I have a magnetic personality, that I'm funny, and that I'm fun to be around because these are qualities that don't fade

with age. But these aren't things I hear often and I'm deathly afraid of being boring.

## **II. Stomach—what I've eaten that could one day kill me.**

I worry about the consequences of what I ingest. I probably worry more than most, and ironically, that worrying can cause stomach ulcers. Despite my hyper-anxiety about the damage I have done to my body, I continue to feed myself toxins and pollutants. Well, not just feed. These toxins don't enter my body merely through the mouth. They have also been smoked, snorted, and injected, as well as eaten. The 4,000-plus chemicals in the cigarettes I smoked regularly for six years, and then occasionally for the past two years, are nothing compared to the poisonous filth, germs, scum and grime I have breathed in and digested. I've put my lips around resin-coated pipes that have been in the mouths of complete strangers. I've snorted all kinds of chemical-laden powders—whatever kind of speed I could get my hands on—off dirty tables and smudged mirrors. In my nostrils I have lodged used and jagged drinking straws and soggy dollar bills exchanged by countless hands and groped by, no doubt, the occasional

unwashed, post-bathroom hand. Along with the drug, whatever other microscopic particles, dust and dead skin cells happened to have been scraped up into the tiny trail of powder also went up my nose.

I've also swallowed, dissolved and partially chewed probably hundreds of pain-killing, mood and energy-boosting pills—pills that would make a meal out of my liver and tear and claw at the stomach lining like the sharp fingernails of someone desperate to get out.

As a result of putting these things in my body, I have suffered headaches, nausea, chills, sweats, and aches, anxiety and apocalyptic come-downs.

But those were only temporary. And I wonder and worry about what will happen when I get older. Will I be punished for mistreating my body like I have? Will it come back to bite me in the ass?

I once heard a story—maybe it was an urban myth—about a beautiful and very vain woman who partied a lot in her youth and was a chronic cocaine user, and, later on, developed cancer of the sinuses. As a result, her nose collapsed and had to be removed and

she spent the rest of her life with a cavity in her face where her nose once was. She went from being beautiful and popular to not being able to stand to look at herself in the mirror.

I carry this story with me everywhere. But it hasn't stopped me from doing bad things to myself.

I know I'm taking my body for granted, and the guilt often keeps me from enjoying these sins which should, in being committed, bring pleasure to the sinner.

I wish I could speak of my drug use with nonchalance and a sense of humor like some writers do, but I guess I'm just too serious a person, too much of a worrier. I wish I could shrug it all off and tell my drug stories in a funny way that would make my audience laugh. It would be like I was someone who had lived life. I wish I could be the type of person who could admit to all the wretchedness, but could do so with a light heart—someone who doesn't punish herself but looks back on those times with a smirk and an eye roll, having since put her head on straight. But I hold onto this story like stored fat, like I do the story of the woman with the collapsed nose. It weighs me down. It stunts me. It traps me. And I am unable to move, to go forward.

### III. The womb

I've never given birth. Life has never grown inside my belly, so I can't fully understand the miraculous feats my body can achieve.

I'm not yet a mother, not yet a wife. I'm not a fiancée. Not even a girlfriend. Most of the girls in my graduating class are married or engaged. Some have children. A few are even divorced and on their second marriage. I feel so far from that.

I told myself I was too busy for a social life when I worked as a writer for the newspaper. Then I told myself I was too busy to date when I was in graduate school. I keep telling myself I'm too busy, I'm too busy, but the truth is, I'm not that busy.

Maybe I'm just not trying. I'm not a hunter. I'm not out on the town looking for a man. I'm not closed off, but I'm never approached. People keep telling me, "It will happen when you least expect it," which is frustrating. I'm never expecting it.

It's not like I have marriage on the agenda, but I do wish I had someone. I hate going home alone at night, but I want my bed to myself. I'd like to have a family and a home, but maybe I'm too

selfish and too private to share myself. Maybe my mother's generation was one of the last of its kind. My generation has more options. You can be a single woman who dates the rest of their life. You can adopt, or be inseminated with another man's sperm. No muss. No fuss. And you've still got your freedom. Maybe this is my route. But then again, I'm not a rule breaker. I follow the path that's before me—and that path is a pretty traditional one.

I am now older than my mother was when she had my older sister. The gap between my mother's life and my own feels like a dark canyon I could fall into.

#### **IV. Thighs**

I remember comparing thighs.

The first time was in gym class at the Catholic school I'd attended from kindergarten through eighth grade. The girls were on one side of the gym doing stretches. The boys were somewhere else. We girls were spread out, a cherubim tribe, in formation on the lacquered wood floor. I was sitting on my feet, my legs folded under at the knees. I stared into my lap, and under the swinging florescent lights, I saw how, in the squeeze of skin, my thighs had



widened considerably, each an expanse, like a pale country, only narrowing at the knee. I looked over at the tan and spindly limbs of the girl sitting next to me. Pamela's thighs were neat and brown, and long like stripes. Her thigh- skin didn't blob like mine. I looked back down at my own, massive white stubs, and for the first time, felt disappointed in my body. For the first time I had compared and found myself inferior. I was envious. Right then, I struck up a secret feud with this girl and would forever compare myself to her and forever try to beat her. With our bodies, we make enemies.

**V. Knees (and my mother)**

My mother's knees are swollen and bruised-looking, and each is split in half by a pearled and serrated scar that runs from the top of her knee cap to the top of her shin. The scars are from being sliced open in surgery. My mother has had both her knees replaced and now she gets an extra pat down from security at airports.

I want to talk about my mother's knees, but talking about her knees leads me to the subject of pain, and killing pain, and I

want to take this moment to sidetrack in the hopes of shedding more light on the bad things I've done to my body.

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After the first surgery, my mother was laid up on the couch for about a week. She was prescribed Vicodin, which she took only for the first four or five days because she said they made her constipated. She'd tough it out, she said. I guess I wasn't tough like her. I was happy to take the pills off her hands, stealing two at a time at first. I don't think my parents were even paying much attention to the meds. I wondered how they could be so naïve.

Even when my taking the pills became noticeable, no one approached me about it. My mother simply hid the bottle in an old purse in her bedroom closet. One day when both my parents were gone, I ransacked the house with a desperation that surprised and frightened me. I thought about places I might hide something I didn't want anyone to find. That was how I discovered the hiding spot, with the cunning and persistence of an addict. I guess, at that point, I had abandoned any pretense. I no longer cared much if they found out because I just kept taking.

Then one day I looked and the bottle wasn't there. Instead, I found a note from my mother. I can't remember what it said—it was a quote—something that was supposed to inspire me, or give me hope or something, something to make me stop and think, and then just stop. If only it were that easy.

I was surprised my mother hadn't confronted me directly. She couldn't have had any doubts about me taking the pills. At that point, it was obvious. The pill bottle was half empty. They would have known it was me because my sister had never done any kind of drugs. But I had. Was it that my mom didn't know what to do, or was it that she wanted to give me the opportunity to make the change on my own?

If it was the latter, I disappointed her. I didn't stop. This was followed by more bad things, more bodily damage until finally, one day, I got sick of it, went to counseling and began to recover.

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But back to my mother's knees. My mother's knees are swollen. They bear so much—the excess weight of my mother's body, the weight of an unfulfilling marriage, the weight of disappointment; they carry the years she spent on her feet

waitressing, and the years she spent and continues to spend on her feet teaching.

My mother once told me that when she married at 22, she weighed 118 pounds. That is exactly how much I weigh now at 27. I have yet to be married.

My mother once had pronounced cheekbones that I longed for but didn't inherit. I, instead, inherited my father's round and ever-child-like face.

My mother once had pronounced cheekbones. Now, she struggles to stand up, to climb, to bend. I watch her struggle and it makes my heart break for her even though she is smiling. She never seems to be burdened. Her face never shows it—the disappointment in herself, in what she's become, in what she doesn't have. But I know it must be there. She no longer gardens because of her knees. Instead, she retires, after a long day at school, to the couch, where she watches the series of television shows that she follows, alone, while my father secludes himself in the basement with a few beers. I worry about her. I worry about her health and I worry that she's unhappy. I worry that I will one day

become unbearable and my husband will hide from me like my father hides from my mother.

And I worry about my own knees. When I walk down stairs, I feel the ligaments move and contract like pulleys straining against my weight; they pull and pop and when I bend down all the way and then stand up again you can hear a faint crackling sound, almost like the sound of oil sizzling in a frying pan. I worry about the fate of my knees and I worry that I am headed down the same path my mother got stuck on, leading me toward nights spent on the couch, falling asleep and snoring before the show's end, completely alone except for the empty voices of the actors on TV.

## **VI. Feet**

My feet are one of the very few body parts of mine I like. My toes aren't too big and they're nicely shaped. They aren't oddly-shaped or ill-proportioned, too long or too fat, or crooked. I've never had a problem with foot fungus or athlete's foot or foot odor, or yellow nails, or bunions or warts.

And I was always proud of my arches. I have deep arches, which, as a child, I took as a sign that I was a born ballerina. I

dreamed of being a ballet dancer for most of my childhood. But ballet dancers are known for having foot troubles, bunions, blisters and disjointed toes. I wouldn't have minded sacrificing my feet, though. There was a part of me that wanted to bleed like ballerinas did, with their elegant, slim bodies and graceful fingers stretched out in the air.

My dreams of becoming a ballet dancer never panned out. I got bored with dance classes, and it turned out that I'm much too short to be a ballerina anyway. So my feet have retained their prettiness.

This summer, though, my feet are beat up like they used to get when I was a kid running around, playing in alleys and backyards, swimming and biking and jumping. This summer, I have scrapes and scratches and bruises and blisters. Not all are from playing; some are from walking too long in high heels in Chicago, but others from jumping from one rock to the next, and landing on tree roots while hiking.

In some small way I feel I've accomplished something during these recent weeks of summer. I've turned off the TV, peeled myself off the couch and gone out in the sun. I've subjected

myself to the wild and made use of my muscles—my calves have helped me push the pedals of my bicycle up these steep hills of Marquette. My biceps have helped me grip overhanging tree branches that keep me from slipping down the side of a mountain. I'm sweating and sunburned. I'm getting dirty and scraped up. These are scars I won't try to fix with the application of ointments. These are scars I'll keep.

I'm trying to use my body in the way it was meant to be used—to climb, to hike, to jump, to run. I'm trying to damage my body in a way that will satisfy me when I'm 80 years old, when I'm two inches shorter, when my skin is wrinkled from years under the sun, when my veins are numerous and my knees are even worse than my mother's. I'm trying every day to thank my body for its wholeness by tearing it apart. I'm trying every day—trying not to be so damn careful.

## THE SONG OF RUTH

*Grand Marais, my grandmother, and glass:*

Ruth Newberg was the twelfth child in a line of 13 Finn children, followed only by her baby brother Jack. Her parents, Helen and Axel, had immigrated to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, hoping to get work in the lumber and commercial fishing industries. Helen and Axel had traveled thousands of miles from the snow and ice of Finland to the similarly snowy, icy climes of the Upper Peninsula. They met, not between frosty breaths on a boat ride to America, but in the small town of Grand Marais, Michigan. It was there they would meet and later marry under the damp wood of a church roof, the frost melting from their lips in the heat of their holy kiss.

And it was in Grand Marais where their daughter Ruth, my grandmother, would meet and marry her husband, Frank, who had been born in England and had immigrated to Detroit with his family at the age of ten before moving north, to this place—this place of fish and trees and a lake that will either swallow you whole or spit you back out on the shore where you came from. Helen and Axel were swallowed. Frank and Ruth were swallowed.

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Somehow, my feverish, childish brain had concocted a romanticized Hollywood version of how my grandparents met. The version I had known for years was that they had met during the war. My grandmother was a World War II Navy nurse, and my grandfather, a Navy sailor, perhaps having been injured by the blast of a mortar shell, was sent to the hospital where she worked. There, my grandmother, a pretty girl with chestnut-colored curls, red lips and crisp uniform (I have seen her photograph), was assigned to look after him, and they fell in love as she nursed him back to health with morphine and kisses.

But this was not the way it happened.

My grandmother was, in fact, a member of the Waves, a U.S. Navy Women's Reserve stationed at the Great Lakes Naval Station near Chicago. My grandfather, however—and this I cannot understand, because he loved sailing and the sea—hadn't been in the Navy at all. He served in the Army. My father broke the news to me just a year ago when I asked him how long grandpa had been in the Navy. I protested his claim. What had formed in my mind, a memory I had not lived, had become so real, I thought, for a time, that he must be wrong. What had, in fact, happened, was that my grandparents had met and fallen in love not during the war, but just as my grandmother's parents had, and just as my own two parents would, in the small town with a French name that means,

the "Great Marsh." The Great Marsh which gave me a mother. For it was there where Ruth and Frank's son, Jon, would attend high school, and would meet and marry my mother, Barbara Minor, but not before a breakup that lasted four years, followed by what must have been a destined reunion. Grand Marais, a town of no more than 350 people, had fostered the three marriages leading up to my birth.

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*Grand Marais, my grandmother, and her garden:*

Grand Marais is my grandmother and her flower garden, which my grandpa always boasted was the best and most beautiful in the town. (It was true.) She tended her flowers like she did her children, hovering over them, inspecting them, keeping her eye on them at all hours. She had a talent for growing things that could not be rivaled or replicated.

Her garden was a sanctuary for me, with its pathways boxing in squares of dirt, one separating a tangle of rose bush, another, a patch of snapdragons, and in another corner, a spurt of lemon-yellow daffodils. There, even my Aunt Katie's reclusive gray cat was at ease, napping on top of the garden gate until I approached, my greedy hands reaching out to try to catch her, but failing.

In the back corner of the garden was a shed which had been built to resemble a chapel, with mock-stained-glass windows and a roof with a steeple. The glow of sunlight filtering through the patches of transparent green, blue and yellow plastic drew me in like Sleeping Beauty to the spindle.

Upon opening the door to the shed, I was enveloped in a wet warmth so thick I could trace my fingers through it like sand, leaving marks in the air—small ghosts of me—and I would name them after the dead women in my family. I would allow them to marry, to have children, to give me a mother.

Instead of pews and an altar, the chapel shed was furnished with garden tools tossed into buckets and a watering can and shovel trapped in cobwebs. Suffocating from the heat, I could stand there just long enough to say a prayer, and then exit with a sign of the cross. Going outside again was like happening upon Oz. I was greeted by a wall of lush colors which eventually took the shape of flowers.

My grandmother is a song in the shape of boat. My grandfather builds boats as a hobby, and when he and my grandmother had been married for 45 years, he built a sailboat for her, which he named, "The Song of Ruth." I remember the birth of this boat. I remember standing on my tiptoes to peek through the dusty window of my grandpa's workroom to see the ebony hull of

the boat propped up between two wooden stands. Although he'd never told us not to go in, and although I knew this place was sacred and private, I snuck in, opening the door as slowly and quietly as I could manage.

My fingers traveled along the smooth curve of the boat's sides, and I was in awe of how my grandfather made wood bend beneath his hands. I imagined he coaxed it, whispering to it, and the wood obeyed him as it would a beloved prophet.

I stood back from the boat. Beams of sunlight shot through the windows, illuminating the haze of quivering particles hanging in the air. I suddenly felt a sense of loss, as if I would never truly know the man who had built this steady black force in front of me, and that I would never be the type of woman who would compel a man to name a boat he'd built after me. I don't remember what my grandmother thought of the boat, whether she was flattered by its namesake, or found it romantic, but I imagined the two of them lying together in bed, and my grandmother whispering thank you in the dark.

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*Grand Marais, my grandmother, and glass:*

My grandparents had a room in their house they called the Rainbow Room. They called it that because at a certain time of day, the sun would shine through the facets of the three stained-glass windows, and then the floor, walls and ceiling would be dappled with hundreds of miniature rainbows made from the sea-green and mint-green swirls of the glass, thick violet orbs, and a flower with blue, pink and red petals blooming and sprouting from the center of each window. I imagined I could keep one of these rainbows. I tried to catch them, as if they were some living thing I could harvest or love. I tried to scoop them up, clawing desperately at the carpet, and when I couldn't, I tried to trap them and then stamp on them. They multiplied in the prisms of glass and yet I could not have a single one.

The Rainbow Room was also where my grandmother kept her collection of dolls. If you knew my grandmother, you knew of her dolls—hundreds encased in a set of tall, glass-fronted shelves that stood on either end of the room. Hours of my childhood were spent sitting on the edge of the bed, staring at the delicately ornamented dolls with their painted porcelain faces, their permanent smiles trapped behind glass. There were Gibson Girl dolls, a collection of Little Women dolls, Shirley Temple dolls, baby dolls, bride dolls, World War II nurse dolls. One doll, too heavily rouged, was dressed in an 1800s Parisian-style dress, glittery-black with netted tights, and even at that young age, I thought she must

be a prostitute. I wondered about the darkness of the streets she roamed and the darkness of the men she kept company with. Another doll, a boy, was posed in a tableau of fishing at a lake; he held up a fishing pole from which a glossy trout half his size was suspended. His expression was one of mischief, and his cheeks were so rosy and bloated I wanted to punch them to release them of breath.

In all the time I had known her, I can't ever recall my grandmother playing with her dolls; I had never seen her fondle the folds of a dress, or untangle a knot from one's hair, or straighten the palm-sized straw hat onto another's head. I began to imagine she did it in secret, that she could make the dolls come alive, that they would respond only to *her* presence because they understood her quiet ways and her fears of the outside world. I imagined her standing before them, orchestrating their movements. The boy would let his trout go and watch it swim away, and the lady of the night would happily count her earnings. This is what I imagined my grandmother was going to do on the night of the accident—she was going to be with her dolls.

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*Grand Marais, glass, and my grandmother's eye:*

I was not there when the accident happened, and I would not have understood it if I had been. I was only seven. My grandparents, aunts and uncles,

and my father were seated for dinner. Wine glasses were filled halfway with cheap Merlot, which my grandmother drank without shame—her blue eyes twinkling, watery, glazed. The lip of her glass marked with the pink smudge of her Avon-brand lipstick, her boisterous laugh which she had passed down to my aunt, and to my sister, and to me.

More wine. The sound of glasses and silverware tinkling.

It is then, I imagine, that my grandmother, warm with wine, escaping from the dinner table, made her way up the stairs to the Rainbow Room to orchestrate life into her dolls. I saw her stumbling toward them, tripping, maybe over a bulge of loose carpet, then falling, falling, falling into one of the doll cases, shattering the glass panes, a shard of glass slicing her left eye.

Did my family, still eating their dinner downstairs, hear her cry? Did they look at each other in one brief, isolated moment of terror, before climbing out of their chairs to rush to her? Perhaps they found her, crumpled on the floor, among the glass remnants, her hand covering one eye, while a trail of blood trickled down her cheek from underneath her wrinkled palm? I don't know how it really happened, but for seven years of my life, my grandmother had two beautiful, perfect blue eyes, and after that, her one good eye was paired with one

of a dim and cloudy blue. Her eyesight was never the same after that. She never saw flowers the same way, or her dolls, or any of us.

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My grandmother's bad eye follows me, in my thoughts and it appears in my dreams. Her eye, which once sliced, opened up truths about her, truths that I had never known before.

An old woman is likely to fall. It's what happens when people get old. They lose balance. They lose reflex. They fall. But her fall was strange, and I knew it even before I was told what had really happened. I didn't understand how my grandmother had tripped and fallen into the glass pane of the doll case. Why hadn't she been able to catch herself? How could she have fallen in a way that broke glass? I couldn't piece it together.

My memory is foggy, but I remember I was in the back seat of our Mazda, which was parked in the garage, but still running. My mother was in the driver's seat. My sister was in the passenger seat. I don't remember what we were talking about that led up to it. Possibly everything else surrounding the conversation had faded amid the aggressive banner of my mother's next statement.



“Your grandmother has a problem with alcohol,” she said. “She has for a long time. She can’t control herself when she’s drunk. She just doesn’t handle it well.”

I remember not believing her, not at first. My dad had never said anything about it. I believed this was something too big for him not to mention.

“Your dad doesn’t like to talk about it,” she added, anticipating my silent question.

I had known nothing of this. I had never noticed any signs of it. Then again, I was young. I didn’t know anything about struggles or alcoholism or addiction. Not then. And perhaps I’d been blinded by my view of my grandmother, my view of old people, of grandparents in general. They didn’t have addictions. They didn’t mess up.

I could never bring myself to ask my dad about it, even years later. Even though I wanted to. Even though I wanted to understand it. I wanted to understand *her*.

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*Grand Marais, my grandmother, and grass:*

Here, in Grand Marais, the Newbergs grow in the grass, and my rose-bud grandmother, especially, grows in the flowers that bank the roads and sprout up in neighboring gardens, surprising the residents with her unlikely perfume.

My grandmother and her band of siblings made the Newberg name famous simply by marrying and multiplying. If you were to visit Grand Marais today, you'd find a road called Newberg Road, and on it, you'd find the ramshackle house my grandmother grew up in, along with her twelve brothers and sisters. By sheer numbers, they were able to make their mark on the town. They had mated with the Bell family who owned the only gas station in town, and the Bruski's, who owned Welker's Restaurant, where everyone gathered for breakfast after Mass. The Newbergs even bought out whole neighborhoods. My grandparents' house was one of a holy trinity of houses— along with my grandmother's childhood home, now a summer home to my uncle who none of us thought deserved it, and another next door, where my grandmother's older sister Katherine, lived. Great Aunt Katherine is the only living Newberg left. She is over 90 years old now, and walks with a cane, which I like to think helps her bear the burden that belongs to the matriarch of a disappearing family.

To me, my grandmother *is* Grand Maris. Her breath is on the dunes, where my cousins and I would somersault into pits of sand and stand up dizzy

and with a headache that lasted through dinner. Her voice can be heard in the piano at the church hall, where I got drunk off wine for the first time at my cousin's wedding and made out with the Capagrossa boy, who told me about how his brother had drowned in the lake before the break wall was built. How he'd gone out swimming, drunk, and defenseless against the rip current, and was buried by the tide.

My grandmother *is* that tide, claiming lives, with an uneven temper. She is the lake, the eastern gateway, the pebbled shoreline; she is the harbor, cradling boats named after beloved women.

My grandmother is so much a part of this place, and this place is as much a part of me as the scars on my skin that have pearled in the sun. This one, on the side of my hand where our ornery dog Sam clamped down his jaws in protection of his food, this one on my shoulder where my friend Jenny dug a fingernail into me, which matches the one on her arm where I scratched her back, and these three on my forearm where, in anger, I took the blade of a Schick razor to my skin, deliberate, making each cut deeper than the next. This, I learned from my older sister. And perhaps she learned it from my aunt with the identical laugh, and perhaps, she learned it from my grandmother. And, for centuries back, women in our family were cutting themselves to temper fevers, to medicate, to

release breath from glass, and the trap of our silence. This is what we've been taught to do: To draw blood. To slice at ourselves.

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When my grandmother died, she became perfect for a moment. In my mind, she came forward as a summary, a representation of the things I loved in childhood, in Grand Marais, and in myself. She was her collection of dolls, her flower garden, the stained glass windows in the Rainbow Room, the games of Crazy Eights we used to play at her kitchen table, the blue jays and cardinals and robins she kept fed in the backyard. When she was younger, she was the Hollywood glamour of the 40s, with her peroxide blond hair, her small, red-mouthed smile. When she was older, she was shy and bookish, completing crossword puzzles, wearing her glasses with the one special lens for her one special eye. She was timid in strange company, but silly and playful with those she knew and loved. I could remember her that way if I wanted to.

When my sister and I drove home after my grandmother's funeral, she said to me, "You know, grandma had a lot of secrets. There's a lot about her we don't know."

It didn't matter. I loved her more now that I realized she was flawed and human and had lived. In those last few months, I realized just how much of my body she inhabited, how much alike we were.

Before she died, my sister and I got to spend hours by her side, helping my aunts care for her and clean her and give her medicine to keep her comfortable. Lying in the hospital bed that my aunts had stationed in the living room, she was surrounded by her dolls and books and flowers in her hometown – all the things she had loved in life and that I had loved about her. I finally told my grandmother everything I had ever wanted to say to her, but had been too shy to. I told her how much I loved her. I told her I understood why she would get so upset when my grandpa would leave to spend time with his friends some evenings, and I understood why she was afraid to go out in public, and afraid to be around strangers, and afraid to be alone. I told her I was so much like her, that I was shy like her, and sensitive like her, and I was often afraid like her.

She had been in and out of consciousness, whether she was sleeping or drifting away, we didn't know, but when I whispered these things to her, she opened her eyes and smiled at me and I wondered if she had seen herself in me all these years.

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Now, when I visit Grand Marais, my aunts and my sister and I do our best to keep my grandmother's immense garden in shape, but we are baffled at how she tended it on her own all those years, even into old age. And as we seed and water and pull weeds, we can feel, rising up from the earth, my grandmother and her sisters, and their mother, Helen, who traveled miles from Finland to take root in a Great Marsh, to give birth to my grandmother, to plant seeds and grow and to give me a mother.

## ONE WEEK, EVERY YEAR

At the highest point of the Ferris wheel, the sky is an ink spill. Below me, is a small piece of world, frantic and lit up as a pinball machine. Beyond the fairgrounds is the town, and beyond that, the expanse of Lake Michigan. Here it is, I think: my home. I want to capture it all in my palm. I want to feel it blossom. It belongs to me and I can never shake it off.

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It's August, and the state fair. It comes and sits heavy on the town, imprints itself on our lives. It beckons us with promises of the weird, the fantastic. We attend it like an annual Mass, returning each year and expecting nothing new. Through the fairground gates, enter people of all sizes and tax brackets: young men with babies strapped to their chests braid fingers with those of their tattooed teenage wives; families from the outskirts arrive looking stunned and sunken-eyed as if seeing daylight for the first time.

My early memories of the fair are Lo-fi photographic images—dreamy, blurry, brightly-colored and blackened at the edges as if viewed through a camera lens. I recall it all as a series of words affixed to senses: the sounds of buzzers and bells and screams and sirens; the familiar smells of spun sugar and

corn dog batter; the dizzying display of spinning, blinking lights; and the dry dirt and strands of hay that stuck to our feet as we stalked the fairgrounds.

As a child, giant mechanical rides loomed over me, threatening to pitch me out of the sky. Feeling so small, I reached for my father's hand and was grounded again. I remember the comfort of his hand, and the way that, when comforting, his eyes would turn up from the earth, as if searching for the constellation that abandoned us here.

He was younger then and I was innocent.

But a chain of summers is marked by the impossible glory of the Pirate Ship, a ride that swung pendulum-like, going higher and higher with every back and forth until nearly completing its revolution. The wall behind the ship was decorated with gaudy hand-painted images of busty red-haired mermaids and gruff, leering sea-men that epitomized a grandfatherly machismo. Dwarfed in the shadow of this façade, I felt terror, yet something always pulled me toward it.

In my twelfth summer, I submitted to it, handing my ticket to a pock-marked carney standing at the point of no return. Strapped into a hard seat in the belly of the ship, I accepted my fate with eyes tightly shut. Invisible gears put the giant ship into motion. The vessel began its gradual ascent, first climbing the



wall of night, then plunging backward, the balmy August air rushing toward me in a funnel. Higher and higher it climbed until it reached its peak and I was launched out of my seat and left to hang from the tip of the crescent moon.

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The fair keeps my teenage years in a distant glass case, displayed on tufts of cheap velvet like the prizes that made you play the games but could never be won.

As teens, my girlfriends and I would stumble along the Midway, arm-in-arm and reaching out in different directions like an octopus trying to tear itself apart. Ducking behind the booth of a snow cone vendor, we unveiled what was hidden in the linings of our purses. Pulling out cigarettes like magic wands, we would hold them between our teeth while a boy with steady hands gingerly set fire to them. These boys studied our mouths greedily, and under their gaze, we transformed from sucker-stained school girls to Ophelias staring out from under water.

In those years, I dreamed of leaving home to join the fair troupe as a performer, but instead of a traveling fair, it would be some kind of Barnum & Bailey/Ringling Brothers circus of the 1930s. I would be a trapeze artist or a tightrope walker with a tragic past, and after each performance I'd return to my

tent, wipe off my makeup, look into the mirror and ask myself, how much longer could I go on living this way. I think I wanted a life stained with misfortune because my own deeply normal life was so mundane. I prayed for an escape, but never found it.

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Operating the rides and manning the game booths were the carneys. These men—most carneys were men—were strange to me. They were different from our fathers, our male teachers, the local bankers and store managers in town. They were rough, weathered, and clothed in ripped and dirty denim, with the signs of the road on their hunched backs. Some were tight-lipped and efficient with black and narrowing stares that belied some sort of wickedness. Others were clowns, who laughed from their bellies and punctuated their words with a raise of the eyebrows, their nicotine teeth, crooked and broken as piano keys.

They were gypsies, I imagined, rootless vagabonds who carried on them the smells of unfamiliar places. Places where the fair was not a dream, but became real. A carnival, sprung up from the earth, bearing dancers on springs and ringmasters with waxy mustaches and suits of glitter.

I imagined a year in their lives playing out on a movie screen, a montage in black and white, of places and people moving at warped speed. Men in top hats, marching mechanically to the static sound of a gramophone. Our main street, empty of cars, and striped with a trolley down the middle. Then, women in drop-waist dresses and cloche hats tipping back flasks. Then laundromats and Chevrolets and suicidal housewives. Then it grows cold.

Years pass. They age. And some return next summer. I was not one of them.

Then one year I did return, no longer a child, no longer able to fantasize an escape. The dreams I once had of swinging from a trapeze and running away with the carnival were too distant. I was too tired, too used up from having artificial dreams—not dreams conjured from magic but from some drug that eats and releases all the pleasure you have left in one go.

I looked for the pirate ship. I hoped to feel again that awe I had for something simple. But the ship that had once seemed so glorious, so intimidating, so fierce, was now a toy I could crush in my fist. I couldn't resist a look behind the painted wooden walls and platforms to find the nails and bolts that held it all together. Men and machines is all that it had been.

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In a week the fair will disappear, leaving behind a cloud of dust and dirt that will settle on the land, becoming part of it. It will have come and gone, a reminder that another year in our lives has passed. Summer will fade into our memories and another winter will invade. Businesses will go bust on Ludington Street. More fast food chains will mark their territory, and people will stay less and less. This little piece of world keeps changing. It grows quieter and the colors fade to greys.

But once, when walking through the House of Mirrors, I believed that if I took a wrong turn, I could be trapped, for eternity, in a maze of my own small reflection.

## MURMURINGS

It was called a miracle, a phenomenon, a mystery. A murmuration. It was mid-October. Two female canoeists making their way across an Irish river were startled by a dark cloud, an expanse of black wings across a portion of the sky. This shadow shifted its shape, from a funnel to a sphere, to an undulating wave.

The world responded. Blogs were buzzing. People began to sing songs to each other.

The birds, wrote one woman, were responding to some magnetic fields. Her hypothesis was based on the fact that the flight patterns were similar to the aurora. She said flocks of pigeons fly like that too.

Pigeons, she wrote, were pedestrian birds. She had once seen pigeons playing in an air current overhead, which she watched from the small dusty parking lot in her childhood neighborhood.

"I used to love to watch them soar," she had written. She had wanted to be a gull and soar like them but when she got older, she realized if she were a gull she would no longer be able to appreciate the beauty of her own flight. Would she rather be a soaring gull or a human watching gulls soar, she asked herself?

She made the choice with regret for a lost fantasy.

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Scientists and mathematicians are at a loss. A mathematical analysis shows that each starling's movement is influenced by every other starling around them. They are all connected to each other in a network. Starling flock patterns are best equated to the literature of "criticality," of crystal formation and avalanches — "systems poised on the brink, capable of near-instantaneous transformation."

Last year, one man had seen a display like the murmaration put on by a school of silver fish in the Virgin Islands. The man wrote that he and his friends had gone out to scuba dive and dropped their anchor in Vessup Bay, at the East end of the island, within sight of St. John. His 42-foot catamaran cast a shadow in the water, and at mid-day, schools of tiny silver fish had gathered there. Like the starlings, they made shapes with their movements—a water ballet of swirls and loops and whirlwinds. When the man dipped his hand in the water, the fish responded with their choreography. He returned to that spot every day that week. "We never tired of playing with them," he wrote.

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It has been reported that the 200 million starlings now living in North America are descendants of the 100 starlings released in Central Park in New York City in 1890

by a pharmacist named Eugene Schieffelin. It was this man's dream to introduce every bird species to North America that had ever been mentioned in the work of William Shakespeare.

Shakespeare was drawn to the bird because of its ability to mock, to mimic. Ornithologists say starlings can embed surrounding sounds into their own vocalizations – like car alarms, or crying babies, *our* murmurings.

Some complain that the starling is a nuisance. Starlings get stuck in airplane propellers, terrorize crops, roost in the roofs and corners of city buildings, and devastating structures.

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A flock of starlings is called a murmuration. A flock of nightingales is called a watch. A collection of pigeons is called a kit. It is a pandemonium of parrots and a charm of goldfinches; an exultation of larks and tidings of magpies; a murder of crows and a deceit of lapwings.

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This murmuration. These birds of metallic sheen. These dark and glossy origami figures in animation. Iridescent-winged sky dancers. This was charm, pandemonium, exultation, tidings, murder and deceit. And all the world bathed in it.



## THE MARINER

I always find the sea in my grandfather's eyes and salt in his sweater.  
My grandfather has been building boats in his workshop  
Since before I memorized his face,  
before I recognized him as my father's father,  
before I understood him as someone for whom my love was permanent.

He built boats for those he loved—  
vessels he conjured from shapeless matter.  
his kind and capable hands blessing each curve and corner,  
Christening each one like a child.

In a younger year, he breathed life into  
"The Song of Ruth."  
He honored his wife, her beauty mirrored  
and cast forever in the shape of a sailboat.

I imagine my grandmother, standing  
in the pale winter kitchen.  
She thumbs through the mail,  
her eyes searching; her veins like rivers.

I imagine the two of them lying in bed,  
Their fingers entwined like rope,  
When my grandmother turns to whisper,  
To thank him, in the dark.

It was the “Song of Ruth” that first  
Captured my attention  
And when everyone was away,  
I went to take a closer look.

Standing on my tiptoes, I peeked through  
the dusty window.  
Private and sacred—the workroom.  
I revered this place like a chapel.

When I entered, beams of sunlight shot  
through the windows, making visible  
the haze of quivering particles  
hanging in the air.

From beneath its cloth cover, I spotted  
the ebony hull of the boat propped up  
between two wooden stands.

The fresh-smelling paint  
black and shiny as oil.

When I stood within inches of it,  
I could almost hear it breathe.  
My gaze followed the curve of its sides  
and I marveled  
at how my grandfather could sand each piece of wood  
to an undeniable smoothness.

I marveled at how a material,  
so stiff and unforgiving  
could be made pliable beneath his touch.

Suddenly, this man's life opened up before me  
The trials, the accomplishments, the continued kindnesses  
Branded and embodied  
In this steady black force in front of me.

His was an unparalleled voyage.

## OCTAVIA

The loss of the ivories angered us all,  
though they were chipped and brittle as smokers' nails.

The tuners had taken them, we were told,  
When we asked what had become of them.

The player piano was nearly sold,  
but bought back, when her daughter begged.

She spoke of it with eyes squeezed shut,  
belying her intentions.

She caressed its keys after he left,  
scaled the octaves in the dark,  
and when the silence wouldn't bend,  
she shaped it with a song.

By threes, she made the keys depress,  
under her plump and pillowed fingers.  
Her shallow voice stretched to meet high notes,  
she plays her own accompaniment.

Once, a pneumatic mechanism  
With hammers pounding strings by heart  
And paper sheets with bullet holes  
Fell silently on the floor.

But, the player piano no longer plays alone,  
It sounds only with widowed touch  
Such a constant sight it is--  
Her figure at the bench.