We would like to thank . . .

Diane Seuss, our faculty advisor, for her constant support and encouragement throughout this process. Her passion for creating and sustaining a vibrant writing community on campus has inspired us to strive for excellence.

Lisa Darling, Sara Whalen and Kelly Hurd for the countless hours they spent getting The Cauldron ready for publication. Without them, publishing a magazine of professional quality would not be possible.

The English Department for their dedication to training talented writers and for allowing us to advertise and sell The Cauldron at department events.

The Art Department for their dedication to training talented artists.

Amy Rodgers for her willingness to read all of the pieces and select the Divine Crow Award Winners.

Natalia Holtzman and Diane Seuss for copy editing the magazine. Their attention to detail and commitment to excellence has added immensely to the professionalism of the magazine.

The artists and writers who submitted to The Cauldron. Thank you for sharing your work with us and allowing us to create a beautiful magazine.

Student Commission for funding the magazine. The Cauldron would not exist without their financial support.

Dianne and Robert Vibbert for their spiritual and financial support of the magazine. The Cauldron continues to honor the memory of their daughter, Stephanie Vibbert, who embodied the vital relationship between creative writing and political and social justice.

The reader for valuing the creative work of K’s artists and writers. Enjoy!
Welcome to the 2009-2010 edition of The Cauldron! This year’s edition features Michelle Lamont’s painting, “Collecting,” on the cover. As a collage painting, it forces us to constantly shift our attention within the complex web of images. Portraits appear sideways, upside down, and right side up. We are not given the names of the people in the painting. All that we know is that we are invited to look at them, both as individuals and as part of a larger whole.

In order to appreciate the painting, we must attentively spend time with it. When looking at the 5’ by 4’ canvas, we must mentally reconfigure the portraits in the painting. However, when viewed as the cover of the magazine, the painting can be physically reoriented. We can turn the magazine upside down and sideways to look at each figure, interacting with the individual portraits. Ultimately, Michelle’s painting demands that we actively engage with it. The painting does not allow us to passively consume the images that it presents. Instead, it challenges us to confront the silent stares of portraits of people who we do not even know.

To me, Michelle’s painting represents the goal of any good art and literary magazine. We hope that the pieces in this year’s edition encourage your interpretative interaction. The magazine offers powerful writing that will grab you. Natalia Holtzman’s visceral poem, “Bang Bang,” confronts us head-on with its physical intensity. The speaker of the poem states, “Sometimes I feel the rocking back and forth of these old walls against/ themselves and I feel the house swell hard inside itself and I/ believe we’ve gone to sea, that rasp of salt, that shotgun-height—”. The poem pulsates on the page.

The magazine also features pieces that demand us to reconstruct stories. Anna Coopperrider’s piece, “Patricia McCoskey,” offers various perspectives on the same woman, forcing us to constantly reorient ourselves in our attempt to uncover the identity of its title character. The narrator tells us, “whoever she was, she was beautiful once, posed in a white gown with Uncle John on her lap, as though straight from the cover of a parenting magazine.” Although we never know who Patricia McCoskey really is, we are invited to consider the various perspectives on her.

These pieces, along with the rest of the magazine, will present poignant and refreshing ways of viewing familiar aspects of life. When deciding how to organize the magazine, the pieces resisted any impulse on our part to place them into neat categories. We did not try to impose thematic sections on the magazine because we felt it would confine the voices and images presented in the magazine. Instead, we grappled with the pieces, ultimately finding an order that would keep you, the reader and viewer, on your toes. We hope that you are up for the challenging of engaging with The Cauldron. We have enjoyed the process of creating a complex web of stories and images. The Cauldron now awaits your full, interpretative attention.

- Rachel Jeffery, co-editor
### Writing

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The Divine Crow Awards are given annually to three outstanding pieces in The Cauldron, regardless of genre, and are judged blind. This year’s Divine Crow judge was Amy Rodgers from the Kalamazoo College English Department.

* Denotes Divine Crow Award Winner

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The month unspooled behind me, I felt it spin off like a top:
maybe I stayed out too long but something about the sun

in my skin and the heat and the salt and the sweat makes my heart go wild,
I even get rhapsodic for a storm, the way the wind starts getting sexy

with the windowpanes, and the blinds contract, they are ecstatic, and every door
in the house is going bang bang, beating itself to death against its frame.

Sometimes I feel the rocking back and forth of these old walls against
themselves and I feel the house swell hard inside itself and I

believe we’ve gone to sea, that rasp of salt, that shotgun-height—
I woke up late last night with a fever from the sun,

all wet-skinned and glowing red, the pulse of the storm in my heart
and my blood, and the ocean dilating in my bed.
smoking opium in the boulder supper club
Jacqueline E Clark

The moonfaced girl on the balcony
serenades the Boulder Club audience.
I have a table to the side and to the left,
jazzed up in my navy blues,
while the rest are dressed for dinner.
Even the chandelier is mesmerized
by the hibiscuses
I exhale as I smoke,
easing powder from a red
and gold box on the balcony.
The stars above the skyline
spell out our names and the slow
glide and quickstep—
a dance parade
watching the rosebuds
vanish in the tea-lit glow,
scattering their steps as they pass,
watching their reflections
in champagne glasses—I want
this waltz with her, gold heels
catching for a moment
in the lace of her hem, you’d think
it deliberate how she
arches her knee
to retrieve it,
the glittering shoes cast
stars on the paneled floor,
back-stepped and twirling
high kicks as the moonfaced girl
on the balcony
serenades us all,
her rouge lips smack
of dark blood.
at party, explaining books i will never write

It’s a rumination on young love, you know? But, you don’t really figure that out until about the start of the third act because everything that leads up to it is just following this old man around, and he doesn’t seem that romantically involved. In fact, it kinda reads like an examination of our twilight years. Like he’s going to be dying soon and the first two acts are all, “Life is miserable and somehow death will be too.” It’s subtler than that, I’d like to think, but whatever. The point is that he’s living day by day, and is at odds with the fact he’s never really justified his existence. He’s this failed cellist and he’s always wanted to play in front of a crowd of thousands. You know, Carnegie Hall sort of dreams. Only he’s never come close. His fingers are arthritic, he can’t sight-read half so well as he used to, and he’s starting to lose his mental faculties, so he forgets how certain songs go.

And this is all the first few chapters, right? There’s some other stuff about him conquering his fear of water and taking a ferry across Lake Michigan, and it’s an allegory for—you need another drink? No, it’s not a problem, I can just…all right, if you insist.

But yeah, it’s secretly about first love. That kind of intense first love you only know when you’re no longer a kid but not exactly an adult, and you think you know everything that your heart needs when really you don’t have a single clue.

Do you want to dance at all?

in a bed that is not my own, explaining books i will never write

I’m absolutely fascinated with the creative process, almost as much as the actual product. I love movies about struggling filmmakers, books about failing authors, concertos where the composer repeats the same few measures over and over again, tweaking a semitone here or there. It’s less refined, but it’s so…so raw, right? If the finished story is an author’s translation of his Muse, then the creative process is the direct conversation.
Something is always lost in that translation, even if it’s prettier to behold. So this is a story about a man who comes into literal contact with his Muse. I only have a vague outline at the moment, but I think he’s a struggling poet who used to write more freely when he was younger, and he thinks he’s losing his style, his voice. Then maybe he, I dunno, invokes the Muse or some sheer happenstance of cosmic alignments manifests her, or something. It might be a magical-realist conceit, but I think it’ll work if it’s played straight. And it’s this guy and his Muse, engaging in real life. And maybe he falls in love with her, or maybe she just opens him up to his voice, or maybe she becomes less an idealistic construct and more a feeling human and leaves the writer behind, and he just fades into obscurity. It’s a downer ending, yeah, but it’s just kinda...real, you know? But that’s stuff to consider at the end, and I’ll likely get rid of it altogether. What’s important is how the writer writes. How he used to come into these beautiful passages, and how he reads his old stories and can hardly believe that they’re his words. And how he’s struggling because he has no one to write for anymore. He has no one to translate his Muse to. Which is what it all really is. It...I...

…I used to write for you. Never to you, I wasn’t strong enough for that. I never thought I deserved to have you read what I had to say. But I would write for you and because of you. You were my Muse once, and I read those stories and I can hardly believe that they are my words. I knew that I was sad then, but I didn’t remember this much sorrow. I wanted you to read it all, but I never gave you so much as a poem. And now here I am, and there’s something like a song in my chest but I don’t know how to write lyrics. Not really, no.

Dawn’s coming soon.
Please let me stay.

on end of dock trailing toes in water, explaining books i will never write

I told her it was supposed to be this reflection on our small, personal
tragedies. The things we’ve buried so far in our past and that seem innocent enough, but the guilt and shame that they draw up are so intense that they become more for us than the moments they actually were. Like, as an example, there’s a story about this little boy whose teacher tells the class to bring their favorite toys in for show and tell, so he brings in this doll. Everyone sniggers and laughs at him, until he explains it’s not *his* favorite toy to play with, but rather his little sister’s. She couldn’t be separated from the thing, but had passed away from leukemia the year before. And the other boys in the class, because they feel bad for feeling ashamed, wait until after school to ambush the boy on this bridge over a river. They dangle him over the side and threaten to drop him if he doesn’t throw the doll into the water, which he does. The story ends thirty years later with the boy, now a man, waking up in this cold sweat because he’d been dreaming about that day and the doll. He regrets ever having dropped it, and starts weeping. His wife hears him and pretends to be sleeping, and much later she too regrets having never turned over and asking him what was wrong. And that’s just one example, of course. The whole book is about the mistakes that are under the surface.
But I lied.
It’s about her.
Oh, what do you know? You’re just some fucking fish.

_hanging from railing of world’s tallest tower, explaining books i will never write_

I think you’d like it, really. It’s an attempt to synthesize survivor’s guilt into the written word. Not merely to describe it but to bleed from it, to make the barb the reader’s own. It’s a story that will—please, I told you, not one step closer. Just back away.
Just back away.
It’s a story that will really make you turn inward and ask, *Why me?* Or, more appropriately, *Why not me?* It invokes all the powers that might be while
never actually engaging them in dialogue, as they cannot exist. Our lives are nothing more than a series of coincidences stacked upward into towers. There is no greater significance… I said back off. I see you in the corner of my eye.

There is no greater significance, obviously. But we will always question when these misfortunes happen to others. To loved ones and not ourselves. This is a story that will fracture your heart with all that wondering and answerless Why?, but it puts those pieces back together again in a whole new order. It’s a story that hurts you and then gives you the courage to just…

…let…

…go.

on phone with emergency services, explaining books i will never write

Hello, 911? Yes, there’s been an accident. Well, not an accident necessarily, but I think you get the idea. Attempted suicide. Yes, only moments ago. Lot of blood. Ton more if you guys aren’t quick.
The name’s not important, ma’am.
Yes, I know the person very well.
Please, stay on the line. The ambulance won’t be here for a few minutes.
Talk me through this. No, let me talk you through this.
I was writing tonight. In this journal a girl gave me once for Christmas. This was years ago. It was a nice enough journal, but I never knew what to write in it. The pages are kinda creamy, not exactly white. The whole thing is bound in cloth and has a fleur-de-lis watermark on the inside cover. It’s really nice, and I always felt bad that I never…
Ma’am, I’m sorry, but there’s no crime in this town. I really doubt I’m tying up the line.
So I always felt bad that I never wrote in the thing. Until tonight. I found it in the middle of all the old photos and letters and dried flowers and lengths of lace and the half-finished blanket and bags of tea and an
ugly sweater I only wore once that she saw and every day for a week after I knew I’d never see her again. Found it and a pen and I wanted to write this story that told as truthfully as possible all the pains of the heart. I wanted to document every last one. Write it like a medical text, played straight. Love sickness as an actual disease. A bevy of diseases. Like it’s an entire branch of medicine. I’m so very warm right now. I wanted to illustrate it too, Grey’s Anatomy style. Case studies would be these quiet, personal tales of loss.

Tales of loss…

I hear them outside, the sirens. I’ve locked all the doors. I’m so very warm. This water so very, very red.

Of course it was me, ma’am. Of course it was me.

in line at coffeehouse, explaining books i will never write

I dunno, have you ever read One Hundred Years of Solitude? Gabriel Garcia Marquez? No? It’s a modern classic…but whatever, okay. One way to read it is as a century-long history of this fictional town, Macondo, told mostly through the eyes of a single family. What I’m writing is something similar: a collection of short stories that explores the history of this European church through all sorts of viewpoints and narratives. Most of them are antiquated, stretching back to the Middle Ages. Although, there’s this section that’s written like it’s out of a modern travel guide, and another one that owes to this magical-realist, maybe fantastical mood. Like, there’s this fallen angel living in a belfry and only this little girl can talk to it. But the stories are all about this church, right? And it’s…I dunno, I just think it’s going to be interesting.

No, no greater point to it, really.

Just something I wanted to write.

hooked up to hospital machines, explaining books i will never write

I have all these photos. I’ve saved them over the years. I think they’re beautiful. A black and white of a girl in a windowsill, a solitary bike on a country road, a snowy train stop in the city. Dozens of them. Hundreds. I don’t know who any of the people
in them are. But I think I love them. Or the idea of them in these photos.
So I wanted to write a story that linked them altogether, somehow. It
would have been my magnum opus.
I only wish I could have finished it in time.

\textit{lying in snow-bank with eyes turned to heaven, waiting for the blizzard,}
\textit{and explaining books I will never write}

This. It’s about this, right here. Right now. It’s about you. It’s about me.
It’s about this moment and how it will never last, and how I wouldn’t
want it to. Because then I wouldn’t have something good to remember
when I needed a hand in the dark.
Water took over. It used to be contained by all the skin and muscles and bones but it forged through the cell dams. Lakes, ponds, rivers, all sized by our stature. We fold through cracks and have to recollect ourselves when we fall through openings on porches, splinters floating in a puddle. We wait for a drop of eye or one of the left arm. It is hard to remain complete. We must hide from the sun so none of us are sucked away, processed, and misplaced. The Sun is god, telling us where to form ourselves and deciding when to take it all away. We have sex in buckets where we are blended and find ourselves rolling away with someone else’s foot. It is hard to distinguish one from another, but we take different forms and shapes – some subtle and hiding under weeping willows while others roar obnoxiously into shores. Our eyes are always open—translucent blue under the light of moons and stars—while wind skims over our surfaces drifting us to sleep.
All pine with a red cherry finish, white crepe beaded spread, tailored pillow, the sick caress of luxury in death. It was always the small things getting clawed at, the uneven collar, the liver-spotted lawn, the trail of the dog’s nose against the glass, this casket. It’s dark and the crepe no longer blots my skin, the cherry is rotten and brown. This death is dark and quiet and endless, complete, the everything we thought we wanted. This is what we wanted? Racing you to the end of the drive, sliding along the garbage, cartoon Band-Aids, cartoon macaroni, cartoon anything, static in the dark. I miss the cough of smoke, the transvestite in the park, the morning service I hated so much. The knots of a tree, its veins in the ground, the leaves that fall and melt back into themselves. Is it the sky peeking through, the sun cutting the shadow that is missed? Drown in the dark, the light, we swam in the cold, the salt, the sweat.
Purse
Joanne Heppert
I don’t remember how it came up in conversation. My knowledge of the family secrets, the ghosts, came not at opportune times or in premeditated discussions, but in fleeting moments during car rides or on walks home from school. My mother is a storyteller, and as a child I would fall asleep curled up next to her, listening to the tale of Axel Morgan, the psychic in her parents’ northern Michigan town who once saved my grandfather a beating by locating a missing forty dollars and who had been called upon by the FBI to help in the search for the Lindbergh baby, though with no success. She told me of our ancestor in Sweden who had been given the surname “Fagerman”—meaning “beautiful man”—for great deeds in battle. It wasn’t until later that I understood why this surname brought a snicker among my peers, why my mother had shed it so quickly upon marriage. My mother told of growing up with four siblings, bicycle crashes, dogs that followed barefoot children through backyards, and the time the band KISS came to her high school and landed in a helicopter on the football field. As a child, I asked for these stories over and over; I knew every word. Yet the stories that were difficult to tell came only once, came when not expected, triggered by something in the conversation or a story on NPR. Suddenly my mother’s voice would change and I knew to listen. In these moments I learned of the alcoholism that had rocked my mother’s childhood and caused her father’s death when she was twelve, of the abuse my grandmother had suffered at the hands of a stepmother. Then the moment would be over. I had to collect these stories together and try to understand.

I don’t remember how it came up in conversation. But I remember the heavy August day, driving in the car to buy school supplies, when I first heard the story of my great-grandmother’s death. “It was a suicide,” my mother said. She glanced at my younger sister, who was blissfully singing along with the radio in the backseat, and lowered her voice. “Your grandmother was five and she found her mother. She had hung herself.”
Willis had courted my great-grandmother slowly. Perhaps it had begun with a nudge from her mother, anxious that this awkward and plain daughter not reach age twenty-five without a husband. Or perhaps he had seen her, at church or at Lindstrom’s Store, and had seen something in this quiet young woman, with her wispy, dark hair and the body that was full in all the wrong places. He himself was quiet, spoke only when words needed to be said and smiled only when something seemed particularly worth smiling about. His cheekbones rose sharply from his cheeks and his features were dark, his eyes like coal. During the war he had been assigned a tour in Italy, but a knee injury left him sweeping the halls of army barracks in Georgia and hearing about the war from radio broadcasts. When he returned his mother had died and the farm was his; he came into town only for Sunday services and sacks of grai, and my great-grandmother barely recognized him the first time she walked into the house to find him sitting at the dinner table.

She wasn’t like Birget, the younger sister who teased young men with batting eyes and who had been caught kissing Karl Standlund in the choir loft, sending their father into an outrage. My great-grandmother didn’t know what to say to men. Often her parents would leave her and Willis alone in the drawing room, Birget’s silvery laugh ringing up the stairwell as their mother shooed her away. They would sit by the fire, neither of them able to find words to fill in the silence.

Yet when he asked her to marry him, she said yes. She stood solemnly through the ceremony and smiled as cake was cut, as aunts expressed hopes of happiness and prosperity. As he drove them home that evening, he held the horses’ reins in one hand and wrapped the other arm around her to cut the chill in the air. He brought her upstairs and she let down her hair in the lamplight. As she turned off the light, he leaned over to her and found her lips, her thighs, her breasts. And it was gentle and quiet.

*
During all four of her pregnancies, she heard voices. She heard low moans, chants, whispers. She knew that they were Indian voices. They called - not in Swedish, or English, and often not even in words at all - for the tiny beings who were nestled inside her, who carried the watered-down Indian blood that had come down Willis’s line. Sometimes, as she tossed in bed, she would feel the spirits brush over her.

And, at the times that these voices spoke the loudest, the darkness would settle around her, fringing the edge of her vision and threatening to block her sight completely. Mornings would come and she would barely be able to detect the light streaming through the window. To pull herself out of bed, to respond to a child’s crying in the next room, to make her way through still winter mornings to feed the hogs—these seemed like impossible tasks. She vomited throughout the day; her skin felt stretched and taut. Bread would burn in the stove; she would forget to check the baby’s diaper and remember hours later, only to find its bottom red and raw. And sometimes she wouldn’t get out of bed at all. Willis once threw a frying pan on the kitchen floor, once demanded that she be a good mother. But usually Willis was silent. He would tend the animals and dress the girls for bed; he would pray to know what to do.

And all the time the voices, following her through her pregnancy. Even at times when the darkness seemed to lift, she would hear their murmurs. It made her feel holy, almost, to be carrying something in her womb that concerned the spirits. Yet she also felt as if she angered them, this Swedish woman who had somehow ended up carrying their seed, and she knew it was their doing when the kettle fell and crushed her foot. Each time she gave birth, however, the voices would cease—she suspected that they had gone with the children. Perhaps they had been with Bernadine when she had wandered away near the river and been found several frantic hours later, calmly plucking flower petals. But during my great-grandmother’s fourth pregnancy, the baby came early. It came before the doctor was there; it came with a blue face and a cord around its neck. His neck. They buried the baby in the Lutheran
cemetery next to Willis’s parents. And the voices didn’t go away.

* 

When I think of her, I picture a woman in dark clothes, a woman worn-down and lonely and sad. This harsh word—suicide—taints any image I can conjure of her. Yet we can’t know darkness without knowing light. As a child she played by the river with her sister and on Santa Lucia day wore a wreath of red candles in her hair, feeling like an angel. A few days after Bernadine was born, my great-grandmother bathed her first child and marveled at the curled toes, kissed the round belly. Her daughters knew she was strong, and not just because she lifted bales of hay and stood behind the plough just like their father did. They knew she was strong because she had not grimaced as she set the dog’s broken leg, because she had not settled for the too-low price the butcher had offered for their hogs, because she would come to them when they whimpered in the night and when she held them to her breast the bad dreams went away. She laughed too—the time Willa had come downstairs wearing her father’s underwear, the day Willis had gone to town not realizing there was a smudge of jam on his nose. She held Bernadine on a crisp November day when the snow first fell and showed her how to catch snowflakes on her tongue. Sitting at the kitchen table in their early days of marriage, my great-grandmother had laughed at Willis’s telling of an escaped rooster in the army barracks; the candlelight caused her pink cheeks to shine and he thought she was beautiful.

* 

It was Willa who found her. Willa who walked into the barn looking for the gray kitty and saw her mother’s shoes at eye level, still swaying slightly. She stood, unable to move her feet or avert her eyes, and she screamed, screamed a shrill and wordless cry that rolled out from within her and punctured the winter morning air, shattered the frozen dew that covered the yard. She screamed until Willis came running from the house, until Willis saw and stopped. In Swedish he said over and over the name of the Lord. He grabbed his child; he slammed the barn door shut. For years, Willa would see the shoes in her dreams.
I do not know her name. I know her husband Willis and her daughters Hilma, Willa and Bernadine. I know that they were Holmbergs, but with so many daughters that name has been lost. The names of her descendants fill the stories of my childhood - Michael, Marsha, Sherri. But her name is absent; her name is silent.

In my family, we tell stories. I’ve heard hunting stories and childhood stories and stories from working in hospitals. But some things we don’t talk about, because giving them voice makes them real. We pretend my uncles don’t drink too much; we pretend my aunt’s marriage is okay. If we silence these ghosts long enough, they’ll go away.

Yet my great-grandmother came back to me. A few words in my mom’s minivan were enough for her to wedge her way in, to begin prying opening the door that had been shut on her. It’s not okay to forget, it’s not okay to pretend that the worst things didn’t happen at all. She did suffer, she did kill herself. She left her children and they had hard lives. But she must have left them strength, because my grandmother sent five kids to college amidst poverty and alcoholism; she is stubborn and smart and sees no reason to retire at age 77. Raised by such a woman, my mother can’t help but pass some of that strength along to me. These things are passed down along maternal lines.

I can’t take away my great-grandmother’s death. But I can allow her some moments of peace.

She would wake up early, before the girls and even before Willis. She would step slowly down the wooden stairs, knowing that even one loud creak could be enough to awaken a sleeping child and cancel any chance of morning solitude. The gray cat would hop onto the table and she would stroke him lazily as she sipped coffee, as she gazed out onto the hay fields where sunlight was just beginning to catch frost-tipped stalks.

For a moment, the list of things to do would dissolve in
the early sunlight. The hog with a leg infection, the children to be fed,
the account at Lindstrom’s Store that could never quite be balanced, the
migraine, the backache—gone. Even the darkness, constantly lining her
vision, would be absent at moments like these.

Sometimes a child would stumble down the stairs, rubbing sleepy
eyes, and see their mother sitting at the table in her long white nightgown.
She would look at them and smile, and her face would be different, smoother.
This would be one of the images of her that they would carry with them.
He thought of her as a cat. Elegant, aloof, and perpetually beautiful. Her olive-green eyes fixated on objects with threatening intensity, yet she could never maintain eye contact for more than a few moments. Her gaze was reserved for observation, not communication. She studied butterflies in the park, her focus never wavering in tracking their flittering movements. She was social, but never outgoing. Always the focal point, but never attention-seeking, rarely saying a word.

People flocked to her. What he saw in her was the same thing others saw too. An enigmatic beauty, not self-centered, but rather centered in herself, a quiet, calm, self-assuredness in the way she walked, in the way she gestured gently with her hands to convey emotion. Her hands flicked wildly when she was agitated, but floated serenely, as if caught in a soft cross-breeze, when she was at peace.

At night she curled up next to him in bed, her spine curving inward, legs folded against her belly, chin tucked into the ivory of her neck, her long black hair cascading across her face, and down her smooth back, tickling his chest as he wrapped himself around her small body. He stroked her cheek, then combed his fingers through her hair. A cat would be purring, he thought. She was silent.
I am pretending to fall. I’m spinning in circles and I am tumbling through a haze of clouds and rain. I’m looking for my house and the 7-11 on the corner where teenagers go to smoke pot and deal crack and pretend that they are important. I see my backyard, scraggly and overgrown, like my older brother. If he is overgrown then I am undergrown: too small, too weak, too quiet, a shoot that refuses to bloom. But while I am pretending to fall, a controlled and thrilling kind of falling, I am alive and no one can see me.

I hear the sound of the front door opening and I want to keep falling. I want to keep going past Bowen Street to the ground, to the dirt, to the rocks, past the bodies of the people we thought we loved so we gave them boxes to stay safe in. I want to go to the center of the earth. I don’t believe that it is full of lava and hot like they told me in science class. There is something secret and pure down there but I can never fall far enough to get there. But the front door inevitably opens and I hear my name. Marigold.

I open my eyes. My Auntie Dee is staring down at me. Her eyes are blue, the kind of blue that makes the sky jealous because it is so blue. I wish I could jump into a lake of that kind of blue.

“Why are you lying on the floor?” she says. Her eyes don’t move from me.

“I’m falling,” I say.

“You’re not falling,” she says, “you’re just lying there.” She sets down the bags of groceries she’s been holding and says, “You need to get back into bed. Can you stand up?”

“I’m just falling. I don’t see what the big deal is.”

“I’m going to get Lyle. Stay there, baby.”

Lyle is the man who lives next door. He is a self-proclaimed artist but fixes cars on the side. Cash only, under the table. He has big arms and I think Auntie Dee wants him to ask her out on a date. She bakes him lemon bars and chocolate chip cookies. She puts on my mother’s Chanel perfume and her black high heels and takes the treats over to him. I close my eyes but now I can only feel the floor below me.

“What are you doing on the floor, little girl?” Lyle says as he

(continued)
walks in the front door. Lyle has been calling me little girl since we moved to Bowen Street eleven years ago. He has on a man tank top and it’s smudged with dirt and paint. I hate man tank tops, they are freaky and unnatural.

“I don’t really know, Lyle. I was falling,” I say, looking up.

“Well, your Auntie says you gotta go back to bed. Do you want to lie here all afternoon?”

“No. I think I’m over it now,” I say and Lyle scoops me up in those big arms.

“I don’t know what she was doing down here. She knows she can’t make it all the way up and down the stairs anymore,” Auntie Dee says, following us up the staircase. Lyle smiles at me and rolls his eyes playfully. Auntie Dee is just talking for the sake of making noise at this point. This is the fourth time this month he has come over to carry me back upstairs.

My room is light green and has white trim. My bed is big and comfortable but I always sleep on the right side, pressed against the wall. Lyle lays me down in the middle. Auntie Dee follows us into the room.

“Oh Lyle, I don’t know what I would do without you around. You’re an honest to God lifesaver,” she gushes.

“It’s no big thing, Dee.”

Lyle winks and starts to shut the door, “I’ll see you around, little girl.”

“I just don’t know what to do anymore. June refuses to put her up in the hospital and Jesus knows we can’t afford to send her to that Woodland Estate up there in New York. Lyle, I keep telling her Marigold can’t live like this.” Auntie Dee forgets that her whispering voice is actually a regular talking voice. She also thinks that I am both sick and deaf. I picture her hanging her head dramatically, hoping that Lyle will put one of his arms around her and hold her in a hug and whisper, “It’s okay, Dee. You just need to be strong right now. For everyone.” Then there would be some eye gazing and a passionate kiss. Auntie Dee has always
been a fan of the romance novels they sell at gas stations and I think she’s secretly disappointed she doesn’t have an open-shirt man clinging to her.

I imagine the millions of cells inside my body, mutating. Mutation. That’s how it was described to me and it all started from a tiny little spot on the skin but underneath things were growing and morphing and reproducing all in the wrong way. I am yelling at deaf pieces of human anatomy. This is all coming and going too fast, why so fast? I tell them to stop, to just take a break or something. I need a break.

It could be blamed on everything and nothing at the same time. Auntie Dee said it was too many days outside in the sun. My mother said we would just have to pray a little harder each night. Lyle said it was a goddamn shame. And my brother Reed was away in the city and no one had the heart to tell him right away.

Sometimes when I close my eyes I go back in time when I didn’t need to be carried upstairs.

When I was in junior high my science fair project got smashed on the bus ride home from school. I had gotten second place and wanted to show my mother because she was missing Reed. He was in the military and stationed in some country we had never heard of before. I threw the project in the trash can by the gas station and I walked the four blocks from the bus stop to my house, defeated.

“Little girl, why are you crying?” Lyle said from his garage as I passed his house.

“I don’t want to talk to you right now, Lyle.” I sniffed.

“You don’t have to talk to me. Why don’t you just sit and calm yourself down here in this lawn chair,” he said pointing to a red and brown chair positioned over the crack where the garage and driveway meet. “Ain’t no point in you walking around this neighborhood looking like a blubbering fool.” He then pretended to be more concentrated on the car he was fixing but a smile was creeping onto his face.

“I’m—I’m not blubbering,” I said defiantly or as defiantly as a twelve year old girl can be in the midst of crying. I sat down in the chair.

(continued)
“I’m sorry for teasing,” Lyle said after a couple minutes. “You’re right. All tears are legitimate. I have never heard of a person crying without a good reason. Do you know what legitimate means, little girl?”

“It means it is okay. But there are lots of people who cry for stupid reasons, like kids at the grocery store that don’t get the candy they want.” I had stopped crying and looked for something to wipe my nose with. The words of Auntie Dee rang through my head: if there is anything a lady does not do in public it is fart, burp, or wipe her nose on her shirtsleeve.

“Those brats aren’t crying for a good reason. If you’re crying, truly crying over something that is important to you, then you have nothing to be ashamed about,” Lyle said, handing me a white handkerchief.

“Lyle,” I said, peering into the garage. “What’s that?” he said, looking up from the engine. “Will you show me some of your artwork? You say you’re an artist.”

“Not today. I’m sorry. But soon I will.”

For the next eight years I would ask him to show me his art. At first I asked him every day and then it spread out to weekly, monthly, and eventually to whenever I remembered or saw him outside. Even as I grew breasts and started going out on dates with boys that were only secretly hoping for me to climb in the backseat with them at the end of the night and learned to drive a car for myself and started thinking about going to college, he always said the same thing, “Soon, little girl, soon.”

I am staring at the crack in my ceiling. It reminds me of the crack in the ceiling of Reed’s apartment. Reed and I used to dance in the rain with our mom and listen to her sing Janis Joplin songs. Then he kept getting bigger and bigger and I couldn’t keep up. He left in a whirl of green khaki and my mother’s tears. The green khaki has never come back to our house on Bowen Street but the tears have stayed.
I hear the front door open again. It is my mother. I can tell by the squeaky sound of her shoes on the floor. She comes into my room and lies down on the bed with me. I am pressed against the wall, as usual, hoping that it will collapse under my weight and hurl me into a new world.

“Marigold,” she whispered, “you sleeping?”

“No. I’m just trying to escape through the wall.”

“Come here,” she says, pulling me close to her and running her fingers through my hair like she used to do when I was little and had a bad dream. “I have something sad to tell you.”

“Will it make me cry?”

“Maybe, it’s about Reed,” she says, looking up instead of at me.

“I don’t know if I want to know,” I say. Reed hasn’t called in two weeks; whatever she is hiding behind her perpetually watering eyes is the reason why.

“I think you should know. It’s important that we try to stick together through this,” she says. She says that almost every day to Auntie Dee. She tries to keep us stuck to her but sometimes we can’t and my mother is left all alone, wondering what happened to us all, where we went.

“Just tell me if he’s going to be okay,” I say.

She turns to look at me. She is holding my hand between hers.

“No, Marigold. No.” She says this quietly.

We stay still for a long time. I want the bed to float up and carry us away, like a magic carpet. I want to fly away from lying in bed all day and loud Aunts and sad stories. I want to fly to the ending I want written instead of the one that is already halfway done.

“Are you okay, Mom?” I say.

“I will be. We all will be, with time. We’ll just do our best.”

I wonder if she is sad that her children have almost completely slipped away from her grasp or if she is sad because she forgot to keep holding on to them.
Two years ago I went to visit Reed in the city shortly after he came home from that desert and before I got like this. There were hundreds of cameras in his apartment. They were stacked on tables, hanging from the ceiling, stowed under the bed, and there was even an old disposable circa 1983 in the freezer. There weren’t any photographs though, just the cameras. Although the clutter of the cameras seemed to be infringing upon whomever was standing in the middle of the four hundred square foot studio apartment, there was a sense of desperate neatness to the few pieces of furniture that were not cameras. The quilt was pulled tightly against the mattress, the five plates stacked neatly on a shelf, and two pairs of loafers sat perfectly perpendicular to the door.

“Christ Almighty, Reed. What the hell is all this?” Auntie Dee had said. “June! Do you know what this is all about?”

My mother just kept looking around the room, over and over again. Reed stood next to the doorway where we were standing, watching us. He was so big when he was in the military. I couldn’t even wrap my hands around his neck but standing amongst all those cameras he seemed smaller than usual in baggy khaki pants and a wrinkled button down shirt.

“Reed, what are these cameras for?” my mother asked.

“Mom, don’t worry about it,” he said, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

“Reed, are you okay? Why are you keeping these old pieces of junk?” my mother said.

“I’m creating a masterpiece.”

My mother’s eyes got wet. She knew that the war had done more than break his leg. Reed saw this and quickly said, “I think I’m going to fix them and make some money. You know, sort of an investment.”

Auntie Dee let out a sigh. “Well, why didn’t you say that to begin with? You nearly scared your mom into next century.”
Reed smiled at her and my mother. “Sorry,” he mumbled. My mother stopped crying but I don’t think she believed him.

Later, Auntie Dee and my mom went shopping for new purses and I stayed with Reed in the apartment. We ate sweet and sour chicken right from the carry out box and listened to Bo Didley songs.

“Reed, why do you really have all these cameras? You’re not actually going to sell them, are you?” I asked.

“Well, nobody wanted them but more than anything I needed them,” he said quietly.

“Why?”

“Because I can pretend that these are the cameras I would use to take pictures of the people I love. And the people I love would take pictures of me.”

“You don’t love anyone?” I said, putting down my chopsticks.

“No, I don’t think I believe in love. People do too many shitty things to one another. It’s too hard for me to figure out,” he said, putting more food into his mouth and then chewing slowly.

“Maybe we’re not supposed to figure love out. Maybe we’re just supposed to let it happen,” I offered.

“I don’t know. The whole concept of love just seems so ridiculous. All I know is I have these cameras.”

I felt like crying. “So what do you feel about me? I’m your sister.”

“I think of you as that,” he said, pointing across the room. I followed his finger and my eyes settled on an old camera, the kind you see in movies where the photographer has to put his head under a black cloth and hold a clicker out to the side. It was big and made of wood. It wasn’t exactly beautiful. It had scratches and the lens was cracked, but it was hanging solidly on the wall amongst much smaller and newer cameras. I haven’t seen him since then, only letters and phone calls.

It’s nighttime and I can feel the moon watching me. She keeps me company when I can’t sleep. She is big and soft and keeps me hidden in the crook of her arm where no one can find me.
I feel myself falling apart. I feel weight shift to places it has never been and then eventually go away altogether. I watch the purple rings under my eyes darken. I always wanted an Amethyst ring. I think God just got it mixed up.

I am pretending that I don’t hear my Auntie Dee crying in the room next to me because she is too proud to cry where someone can see her. I am pretending that my mother isn’t in the kitchen with a cocktail in her right hand and her head resting on the table. I am picturing her when she was a little girl and her hair was blonde and long. She and Auntie Dee are smiling and holding hands because that’s what sisters are supposed to do, even when they think they hate each other.

I am pretending that Reed is still in his apartment with all of his cameras. They are looking at him and he is happy because it seems like love. Like love seems better than no love at all.

I climb out of bed and go over to my window. I can see over the fence between our house and Lyle’s. I see Lyle in his backyard persuading metal rods to take the shape he wants them to. The metal is all wrapped together and intertwined. It is the most beautiful thing in the whole world and the only thing holding it together is a little fire and my imagination.
Duck Love in Public Places
Jeanette Lee

Even ducks bathe after sex.
Feathers swishing splashing water
Giving each other space after
Holding her under water and riding the waves of
Infinite but short-lived pleasure.
Just a quickie for the man—he takes her by surprise
Kicking her with his flippy feet until he rides her
Like a pool inflatable.
Mating rituals be damned—ducks do it in the water or land
No shame—in front of everyone
Only ducks get away with PDA.
She is cigarettes and coffee
sitting on the front porch
and that’s enough.

Her smoky gray eyes
look over the neighborhood,
squinting for her friends coming to visit.

When they walk up the sidewalk,
she calls to them
in a smooth voice that doesn’t match her teeth.

She is stale cake
left out on the Formica table
still okay to pick at.

Her novel lying face down on the table top,
its spine broken on the page she left off on,
while she washes dishes with her glasses still on top of her head.

My mother is untouchable,
but her touch is so perfect
I keep my hair long in hopes she’ll play with it.
The little one cowers behind a desolate taxi,
his eyes full and shut tight against the burst
of magnesium, sulfure, and barium slicing the sky
like a bullet in the name of justice.
The air is thick with smoke, the smell
of acrid incineration sticks to the tongue
and the shadows of the apartment launch-pads,
the sky ablaze with gun powder and flash paper,
a green parachute rocket gliding above the skyline,
the red flares signaling a battle won, lost
to lore of a goddess lurking in the alleys of Kalighat.
The tall one lights a rocket with a cigarette,
his eyes reflecting the sparks waltzing across the street,
the pirouetting whistler shrieking its agony
as the smog-muted echoes of explosion and flame
crackly and sparkle over a thousand tiny faces
gazing up from trash heaps and ashy curbs,
from flaps of black plastic tens and
the space between the wheels of an abandoned car.
As the golden flames rain down,
bouncing off foliage and dead cable,
the little one laughs, finally understanding
how beautiful destruction can be.
Books say it is only
the dolphins that do it,
but knee deep in the ocean
I can see the anemones wiggling,
making love in their shallow pools.
Their one thousand soft applesauce
arms cringe at our touch, are gentle
with each other. I imagine the sting
rays are down there too, throwing
themselves against each other like
hands clapping, their tails intertwined.
Even the sand contradicts as it lays nude
in the bed at my feet.
I liked to nap in the window seat when it rained.

I would fall asleep and dream that the room filled with water. The water turned into a river that flowed out of my house and into the street, through my town, across state lines, all around the world. I would float down the river, traveling far, never leaving my window seat.

One year it rained so much, nothing was ever dry.

My brothers and I would pretend we were swimming to school; a school of fish splashing down the sidewalk. When we got to class we were happy and soaked. Our coats and clothes were finally dry just before it was time to go home.

Over time, a film developed on my skin from the continuous moisture. When I got home from school, my mother would strip me bare and wrap me in a beach towel. I would sit in the window seat in my towel, waiting for my clothes to get out of the dryer.

The rain dripping down the window reminded me of fish swimming. I would trace one rain drop with my finger and pretend it was racing the others. It would go slow at first, and then gain speed, sliding down the pane and rushing out of sight. I thought about all of the rain drops and all of the fish swimming, somewhere. I dreamed of water everywhere.

I napped in the window seat when it rained.

And I was always dry.
I was nine when I discovered pawn shops. My dad was taking my brother and me to watch the Eagles play the 49ers, and on the way, he stopped at a small brown building with bars on the windows. He locked the doors of our pea-green Volare and told us he’d be right back. Harry looked at the hand-painted sign in the front window: PAWN.

“What do you think pawn is?” he asked me after about four minutes. I had my face pointed down at the program my dad gave me from the Eagles-Saints game he’d gone to three weeks before.

“What?” I asked, annoyed at the distraction.

“That sign. It says ‘pawn’. What do you think that means?” I looked up and saw what he was talking about. The word was just as unfamiliar to me as it was to him, but I was three years older and couldn’t make it seem like I didn’t know.

“It’s a word combo,” I told him, “of ‘paw’ and ‘lawn’. I read about it in the paper. It’s a type of grass that you put in your dog’s cage and it’s supposed to make him live forever.” I didn’t look at him, but I could feel his eyes widen behind me.

“You think Dad’s getting it for Jaws?” he asked, speaking of the lab we’d found on the side of the road six months earlier.

“Probably,” I said, sticking my head back in the program. Our dad came back five minutes later. I happened to look up just as he walked out of the building. He stuck something green and square in his pocket—cash.

“Harry, do you remember dad putting some money in his pocket when we left the house?” I asked my brother.

“No, just his cigarettes and some matches.”

Our dad re-entered the car, and we were on our way again.

“What kind of a place was that?” I asked just as the stadium came into plain view.

“A pawn shop,” he told me without looking over or seeming to care.

“What does that mean?”

“You take your old shit there, and they give you money for it.”

“I thought you said that he was getting—” my brother began from the back seat.

“Shut up, Harry,” I retorted, silencing him halfway. “So you sell them your old stuff?” I asked, directing my attention back to my dad.

“Pretty much.”
We got to the stadium five minutes later. One of my dad’s friends knew someone that worked for the Eagles and had gotten us seats in the eighth row just left of the fifty-yard line. He’d told me about it on Monday, and for the whole week, I hadn’t done anything but study the program. I figured that if I got to meet a player, I’d be able to rattle off all his stats from the previous year and he’d ask me to be his friend or come live with him or something. But when the game started, I didn’t care how many touchdowns Randall Cunningham threw or how many times Reggie White put Joe Montana on his back. All I thought of was the kind of money I could make from the useless stuff in my closet and drawers.

We got back home four hours later. I went to my room and locked the door without a word to anyone. Harry tried to get in a few times, but I threatened him with the fire-breathing tyrannosaurus that lived in my closet and only came around when I didn’t have time for a little brother. The first thing I did was to line up my army soldiers and decide which of them I felt any kind of connection to. Only a few made the cut, and the rest went into a little cardboard box that had been under my bed since we’d moved in four years earlier.

The next day, I fit the box into the bottom of my school bag and put my folders and books on top so my mom wouldn’t notice when she packed my lunch. Before leaving my room, I grabbed the twenty dollar bill that my grandma gave me for my birthday from the bottom of my underwear drawer. After lunch was packed, my mom began to organize my bag. I snapped at her that I was nine and should be trusted to organize my own bag. She desisted. The bus came ten minutes later. I ran out of the house when I saw it, slamming the door in Harry’s face. He cried, and I could hear our mother scold me with watered-down cursing. I half-expected her to come and drag me away by the neck, but she was too corpulent and lazy at that point in her life.

At school, kids got off the bus and formed a line to go in the building. The youngest teachers were always forced to stand outside and try to keep it single-file. They were rarely successful. I followed the line inside and sat on a small bench near the door. When the teachers ushered the stragglers inside and walked past me, I got up and went out the door again. There was an enormous mailbox just outside that was screwed onto one of the poles which held up the building’s front canopy.
I went to it and opened the rusted door. The flag was down. I took the box of soldiers from my backpack and placed it inside. Then I went to class.

I held out for lessons in subtraction, cursive, and earth science until the first recess when I could implement my grand plan. A group of boys and I would play football near the chain link-fenced edge of the undersized playground. I had the strongest arm, so they always picked me to be all-time quarterback. For this reason, the first stage of my plan—the ball ending up on the other side of the fence—presented no difficulty. I played with them for a few minutes before slightly overthrowing Derrick Collins as he ran a screen.

“I’ll get it,” I said amidst a swarm of groans and questions about my ability. After ensuring that none of the supervising teachers were watching, I hopped the fence, threw the ball back over, and with a salute to those I left behind, ran for the mailbox. I flung it open and found my soldiers just as I’d left them. A few blocks down, there was a street corner that I knew to be pretty good for hailing cabs. I ran to it with the kind of purpose that only an elementary school student fearful of being late for class can possess. Three minutes later, a driver whose ID card read “Alfredo” answered my waving arm.

“Where to, kid?” he asked with the voice of someone who did his fair share to keep Philip Morris in business.

“The pawn shop,” I blurted out, “and hurry.” I expected him to begin driving to the place my dad had gone to the day before, but we remained next to the curb.

“Which one?” he asked as he turned his neck and revealed a scar on the right side of his face that left his eye partially closed. On any other day, it might have scared me, but I was too fixated on the cash that I supposed myself to be on the verge of.

“The brown one with bars on the windows,” I replied, trying to convey the situation’s urgency.

He snapped in laughter and slapped the passenger headrest.

“You’s gonna have to be a lot more specific than that,” he said between snorts.

“How many of them are there?” I asked, getting fed up. He started laughing even harder.

I started to think the whole thing might not be worth it. My hand was on the chipped chrome door handle, ready to pull it, when he said, “How’s about I just take you to the closest one.” His laughter hadn’t dissipated at all. I pulled my hand away and nodded at him. He shifted out
of park and drove.

The nearest pawn shop ended up being almost halfway between the school and my house. I was pleased with the efficiency this fact presented for my future transactions. Alfredo said he’d wait while I went in.

Inside, an old man with a thin chest skin that comprised the unbuttoned section of his red Hawaiian shirt looked up from a gun magazine when he heard the door open. He looked at me for a moment as though he expected an adult to follow. When it became clear that none was coming, he asked curtly, “What do you want, kid?” I held up my box as though we were about to embark on the most important event of either of our lives.

“I want some money for this box of soldiers,” I told him as I approached the counter and placed the box on it. He looked at it and even placed his hand in for a second before looking back at me.

“Not interested.”
“Why not?” I asked in disbelief.
“Ain’t got no use for them. They’re just a bunch of toys.”

“These aren’t just toys,” I protested. “You can do all kinds of stuff with them—you can make up a war, you can knock them over like dominoes, and sometimes it’s fun just to give them all names.” I felt as though I hadn’t sold him yet, so I grabbed one of the soldiers from the top and placed it upright on the floor. “And look, you can smash them, and they don’t even break,” I said, bringing my foot down upon it with all the strength I could find. I picked it up and showed it to him. The rifle was a little bent, but the unit remained intact.

“Sorry, kid, I just got no use for them. So if you got no more business, I’d like you to leave.” I grabbed the box slowly, reeling in disbelief. Before reaching the door, I turned around and looked at him. He’d resumed reading about guns.

“What kinds of things would you have a use for?” I asked. He peered at me over the top of the magazine.

“I don’t know, grown-up things,” he said. I nodded and went out the door. Alfredo was still waiting. He got me back to school just as the recess-ending bell rang. I paid him ten-sixty and brought the box to my narrow orange locker. When the other boys asked what happened, I
told them I didn’t feel like talking about it.

For the rest of the week, I pondered what I could bring to the pawn man that he might like. I went through all the stuff in my room and realized it was all kid’s crap. By Friday, it came to me that I would have to expand beyond my stuff and sneak through my parents’ stuff. I woke up before everyone else on Saturday and went around the house looking for items that wouldn’t be missed.

The first idea was my mom’s sewing kit, but she used it too much. I then thought of the tool kit my grandpa had given my dad for Christmas a few years before in an attempt to make his only son-in-law more manly. But I figured that it might be too heavy to carry all the way to the pawn shop and that the man wouldn’t be interested in individual tools. After twenty minutes, hope began to fatally dwindle when I looked at the brand new VCR on top of our twenty-inch, knobbed TV. A stack of five videocassettes sat next to it. I pulled them down carefully and spread them out on the floor. These, I thought, are what the pawn man will want.

I was suddenly reminded of a promise my dad had made Harry and me a few weeks before of buying a movie that we could watch. A new plan entered my mind in which I would take the movie which looked the scariest to the pawn man and use the money to buy a movie for Harry and me. The collection, as it sat, consisted of Rocky II & III, Terminator, Deliverance, and Amadeus. I still can’t figure out why my dad had that last one, but that’s beside the point.

Terminator was the one that I decided had the scariest cover, so I put it on top when I replaced the stack. A half hour later, everyone else woke up, and my mom made breakfast. I conversed with everyone at the table, but finished quickly and asked my mom if I could go to Ricky’s house. Ricky had been my best friend since I was three. His was the only house my parents trusted me to go to alone. She told me to wash off my plate and put it in the sink first. I obeyed, went to change my clothes and brush my teeth, and went to the videos without being noticed. It was just as I’d left it. I grabbed the movie with the scary cover and went through the outside door that was next to the TV in the living room. Nobody ever used that door, so I expected someone to shout at me asking why I was. If they did, I didn’t hear it.

I reached the pawn shop after a forty-five minute trek in which I constantly looked behind me to see if Harry had followed. He tended to
do that. When I walked in, I found the same man in the same position reading the same magazine. He put it down and once again just looked at me. I expected some kind of cruel remark, but what I got was a grin.

“You got something good for me?” he asked. I walked toward him just as I had with the box of soldiers, only with slightly more reluctance. The tape had been under my shirt the entire way over, and as I pulled it out and placed it on the counter, I could feel that some of my sweat had dampened the case. He looked at it as I placed it on the counter and grinned once more.

“I think I got a place for this,” he said. He took it from me and bent over to retrieve a small cash box from under the counter. From it, he took a five-dollar bill and handed it to me. “How’ll that do?” he asked.

I looked at it for a minute. This was the first time in my life I’d ever been offered money for doing practically nothing. He began to pull it away after a moment as if he expected me not to take it, but I reached my arm out as quickly as I could, grabbed it, and stuck it in my pocket. I turned around and headed for the door thinking that he might change his mind.

“Come again,” he said as I walked out. To reduce the size of my lie, I went to Ricky’s house to see if I could stay for a few hours. His parents never minded unexpected guests. When I returned home at twilight, I could hear my dad ranting about something from another room. As I entered the dining room, I saw the remainder of his video collection sprawled out on the table. I suddenly got an idea of the cause of his anger and realized that they were all in the living room.

I tried to get to the stairway and up to my room without being seen, but it connected to the living room, so there wasn’t much of a chance. Harry saw me immediately and screamed to my parents as though he’d been the subject of a brutal interrogation.

“Did you do something with my Terminator?” my dad asked with a steamed face. At first I didn’t say anything, hoping he might forget all about it if I stalled long enough. But his deathly gaze stayed on me. I began to sob and fell to my knees, expecting sympathy from my mother. She got up and walked away, exuding a sort of angry relief that made it seem like the ordeal had sucked all of her energy. My dad told Harry to leave. All potential allegiances were gone.

“I took it to the pawn shop,” I said between difficult breaths.

(continued)
His mouth fell open, and his eyes widened. “I’m sorry. I just thought you could use the money to buy a movie for me and Harry and that you wouldn’t want that scary movie anymore.” He tried to say something, but wasn’t able. Finally, he just looked at me and pointed toward the stairs. As I reached the steps, I felt a tap on my right shoulder. I turned around to see him behind me with his hand outstretched. From my pocket, I grabbed the bill and gave it to him.

The next morning, I woke up with a letter addressed to me placed on my nightstand. It read:

Tyson Wilkes,

I was very unhappy to hear that you broke the first rule of pawning and took your dad’s movie to the pawn shop. As punishment, you may not enter another pawn shop until you are twenty years old. If you do, you will be forced to give up your most favorite toy, whatever it is at the time.

- Bertrand Omaha,
President of Pawni

I found this letter again a few weeks ago after my wife got on me to sort through my boxes of old stuff in our basement. Without even thinking, I recognized the writing to be that of my dad’s brother, Samson, who lived only a couple doors down from us. I smiled and remembered the churning stomachache I got when I first read it and how it was all washed away when I discovered stamp collecting six weeks later.

I put the letter in my pocket and drove to the pawn shop down the street that I’d seen a million times but never really noticed before. Inside sat a woman who I guessed to be in her early twenties with braces and a pair of ugly red glasses.

“Hello,” she said with feigned interest. I reciprocated the fake pleasantries and began to look around. There was a mixture of things from different points of the past twenty-five years including an archaic VCR, a faded Rubik’s Cube, and Eagles paraphernalia with the soaring wings logo. I didn’t plan on buying anything until I saw a stack of posters in the corner.
I sorted through them and found, among other things, Duran Duran, Ghostbusters, and Mark Knopfler with his red Stratocaster. Nothing seemed worth a second look until, near the bottom, I found Arnold Schwarzenegger with sunglasses and an enormous gun surrounded by excited Japanese lettering. Feeling as ecstatic as I’d been when the old pawn man accepted the VHS, I paid the three dollars for the poster and drove to my parents’ house.
welcome to the South
Hutch Pimentel  DIVINE CROW WINNER

where sweet tea is sweeter and chicken is fried deeper where you don’t hear nothing but lynyrd skynyrd on the jukebox in the waffle house while tammy or crystal or trisha gets your hash browns and vanilla coke and you hear that old man from the other booth spew his tobacco juice into the already gathering pool at the bottom of his water bottle where the summer air is almost water where the greeter at kmart got as many teeth as the baby gnawing on that shopping cart handle where you know why it’s called bluegrass why it ain’t really bourbon if it ain’t from kentucky why our horses run faster where you see car after car that ain’t never gonna run again parked in lawns as you go for a dip on the back roads between the farms where it’s pronounced ver-sails not ver-si where the last big thing to happen to this town was when a twister blew through and impaled the cows with all the pencils from the school ’cross the road where it don’t snow on Christmas and instead of turkey you’re having honey baked ham with a coca-cola glaze and a pineapple slice on top where you ain’t gotta feel bad for having the stars and bars flying from your wraparound porch or painted on your ford pickup or inked into your bicep because THE SOUTH WILL RISE AGAIN where monument avenue is lined with men who tried to save us all in the war of northern aggression and coloreds still live on the other side of the street where the only wetback ain’t the one trimmin’ yo hedges cuz you know full well yo’ shirt gonna stick to yo’ back from april to october where you gotta take three showers a day if you wanna look decent for supper at the country club where the only person darker than you takes your order where you know why the jewish guy behind you can’t get a table where all the chinks look the same where you know why the queers shouldn’t kiss in fronta you cuz they can do what they do in private but you ain’t gotta put up with it or else they’ll get what they got comin’ where you know why the grass underneath the sycamore is stained red where you know what strange fruit our trees bear, but you sure as hell ain’t gonna talk about it.
I found the photograph two years ago, in a box in my parents’ attic. It was taken on my third birthday; my mother was too sick to leave the hospital, so we celebrated in her room. After I was born, the doctors warned her not to have another child; the strain on her body was too much. But my mother is a damn stubborn lady, and she wanted one more child. In the end, it worked out; my little sister lived: a bookish, blond, female reflection of myself. However, at the time of the pregnancy, the survival and health of her and my mother was not nearly so certain.

I am not sure how many of my memories of the birthday are genuine and how many are put together from stories and snapshots. Regardless of their accuracy, the memories I do have are wonderful. The nurses bought me a chocolate cake with a racecar on it, and everyone in my mother’s wing of the hospital sang Happy Birthday. In the photograph, I am sitting on her bed, smiling while I play with a set of toy cars from her gynecologist. Behind me, my mother is propped up in bed, smiling. She is pale, paler than I’ve ever seen her. She looks happy, but also tired, thin, most certainly very ill. Her face looks in danger of breaking apart; it, and the body attached to it, look far too frail to support her smile. She is barely five years older than I am now, a frightened twenty-something doing her best to make everything normal for her young son.

It is shocking to me now that those details never made their way into my memory of the time. I knew my mother was sick, but never understood the seriousness of the situation. After all, how many children in white, suburban America can really understand mortality? For me, the hospital was a happy place. The nurses were nice to me, and sometimes I got to eat the leftover Jell-O from Momma’s lunch tray. To this day, I still think of hospitals as a good place. Their smell—that mix of cleaners and decay, so hated by what seems like everyone but me—still gives me goose bumps and happy chills up and down my spine. The full reality of my mother’s struggles became apparent only gradually, as awareness of the world grows slowly with time.

My mother has been plagued by a number of illnesses and disorders, from migraines to lupus, throughout my entire life. It’s something I’m used to, and also something I don’t like talking about much; I have always had the feeling others won’t understand just how debilitating something as intangible as pain can be.
With the exception of the pregnancy, none of these problems have been life threatening. Life challenging seems like a more appropriate word.

I knew the meanings of these illnesses; I could recite their symptoms and I understood, rationally and knowledgeably, their impact on my mother’s life. But I never really connected the dots emotionally; I never felt their effects viscerally, in my gut, until years after my hospital birthday. It was the spring of my freshman year of college, and I was eating in the cafeteria, idly wondering how my mother was recovering from surgery to replace her kneecap. I wasn’t terribly worried; health problems were an old standard for us by now. My phone rang. It was my mother, calling from the hospital. I answered. She sounded different. Something was off, perhaps the painkillers or just fatigue. I know she was on a lot of morphine at the time. Regardless of the exact reasons, something in my mother’s voice scared me. She sounded tired, confused and maybe just a little bit frightened. Worst of all, she sounded like she didn’t know what she was saying, like she had no control over herself. There were no filters. The conversation probably only lasted five minutes before my mother started drifting off and my father took the phone from her, but it left a terrible impression.

Until that point, my mother was nothing but a tough little lady who didn’t take shit from anyone. Sometimes I hated her for it—like when she grounded me for two weeks for drinking beer in the eleventh grade—but it was a facet of her personality that I had come to take for granted. Parents were tough, and were born (or maybe just put together with bits of metal tubing and armor) without the vulnerabilities that plagued me.

I had never really come to this realization before; the notion was new, and it terrified me. My mother seemed more real than ever; she could hurt and she could die. So can anyone. I don’t live surrounded by robots; those around me hurt and die and feel sad, just like me. People are fragile, and they can break. I hated this thought when it first entered my consciousness, and I still do.

Recently, I called my mother. I don’t talk to her much, and usually only when she calls me first, so she was a little surprised. She seemed happy
to hear from me, even if I did catch her when she was busy with errands. I like to think that she smiled at least a couple of times during the brief chat about school and gas bills and my sister’s high school marching band. I figure that’s the best I can do for my mother, or anyone, in the face of sickness and fear and death. We talk, and we smile, and we go on with our lives as best we can.
My mother met Stephen King
on the blue wire benches outside of Treat Street.
He ate Moosetracks
and she ate a sundae.
She asked him if eat
is the right verb for ice cream.
He told her that eat
is the right verb for a lot of things.
I read the news today, composed in prose across her face: a bit of rear, a bitter tear, a glass frame, an unsaid name, a list of things to drop like rain or a bomb, because she just bought a gun after work and she’s only twenty-one but the tee shirt says ‘Vietnam Survivor.’ Yeah, she’s a survivor, not a victim of rape, but a living shock-wave with a stolen switchblade and all her pain is just what she wants you to feel under the foot of a war on wheels, and her mug-shot caption reads hell on heels.

She didn’t want to be buried; one more forgotten soul of So Cal, one more true crime whore shaped shell, instead she dropped his ass down a well, drifted in and out of desert dreams, washed her face clean ‘til there were no more echoed screams from that Hell’s Angels S.O.B.—then she took his bike.

Dusted, Stoned, on the road, half dead eyes sunk in globes like a zombie; the jacket says Abercrombie but the underwear says ‘Motorhead Forever.’ Yeah, she’ll live forever in the minds of those she left behind, whose loved ones she ran down with her ride, and while some ran away, some volunteered to slide their skulls under the wheels, and her mug-shot caption reads hell on heels.
Patricia McCoskey was a housewife. Her husband’s salary from Ford Motor Company allowed for a beautiful lilac-colored house on a quiet suburban street, surrounded by flowers that Patricia tended in the summer while their young son, John, played in the grass nearby. Wind chimes hung from the roof of the porch, above the swing where Patricia and her husband spent evenings, holding hands, sipping Patricia’s homemade iced tea and talking about how wonderful John was, the new things he’d learned to do that day. The day her husband ran his car into a tree on his way home from work changed Patricia’s life. After his death, Patricia and John moved in with her parents, where she quietly fell apart, eventually leaving her son in the care of her mother while she boarded a train to Boston. There, she began her life again, marrying a new man and living in a new house and raising new children. Patricia’s brother Jim took pity on the poor boy that she left behind, and brought him into his own home.

* * *

Patricia McCoskey was a prostitute. She lived her life for no one, least of all herself, subsisting on whatever she could beg for, tolerating the nights spent in bars and the arms of various men by clinging to the few dollars she earned. When she gave birth to her son, John, nothing much changed, except that now she had to put herself through her parents’ pleading and crying whenever she dumped John at their house before going to work for the night. One night she dropped him off as usual, and never returned for him. Several years later, the police in Phoenix found a young woman dead in an apartment, two bullets in her chest. She had no ID, and Jane Doe was cremated. John eventually passed into the care of his uncle Jim, who adopted him as his own son.

* * *

Patricia McCoskey was a cheerleader. Captain of the squad, with a dazzling smile and excellent grades, she made her parents and teachers proud. One night after a game, where she’d cheered her heart out with her girls for their boys on the field, she was walking to her car when three dark figures approached. The young men grabbed her and forced her into
their own car, drove her to an alley she didn’t recognize, and took turns raping her with the radio blaring, muffling her cries. Then they dumped her back in the high school parking lot, leaving her with the threat of death if she ever told anyone the events of that night. When she saw them in Geometry on Monday, she turned away, letting her hair fall across her face to block them from sight.

Patricia’s son was born nine months later, and she named him John. She stayed home when her friends went to college, and worked to help her parents pay for the costs of letting her and her son live in their house. When John was three, Patricia finally told her mother what had happened, and her parents immediately called the police. A few nights later, Patricia disappeared after her shift at the local drive-in. The police were called again, but nothing was ever found. In the mean time, Patricia’s older brother, Jim, looked after John, and when after a year nothing had been heard about the boy’s mother, Jim adopted his nephew.

Patricia McCoskey was a drug addict. When her son John was born in 1974, she made various attempts to clean up her life. She extricated herself several times from her abusive relationship with John’s father. She sought help at rehab clinics. She applied for jobs, one of which she managed to hold down for six months or so before a relapse forced her back into therapy. Finally, when John was three years old, Patricia came to her parents, desperate for help raising her son, but her elderly parents could not have helped much, even if they hadn’t already emotionally abandoned their failure of a daughter years ago. So Patricia turned to her brother Jim, asking him to care for her son while she checked into a long-term rehab program with the goal of shaking her habit permanently. Jim agreed to watch over his nephew, and several days later, John came to live with his uncle, aunt, and thirteen-year-old cousin. Patricia skipped out of rehab two months into the program and was never heard from again. Jim and his wife eventually adopted their nephew.
* * *

My mother was thirteen when my grandparents adopted her cousin John, and her memories of her Aunt Pat are sketchy at best. Aunt Pat is a complete enigma, staring out from old photographs with her brown bloodhound eyes, huge pools framed by slightly drooping eyebrows, just like my grandfather’s, just like my mother’s. Whoever she was, she was beautiful once, posed in a white gown with Uncle John on her lap, as though straight from the cover of a parenting magazine. My great-grandmother never talks about her missing daughter. Her dementia is catching up with her, and when I last saw her, the best she could do when shown a picture of her child was say, “That’s my daughter, Patricia.”
I Had Another Lucid Dream But Sadly, I Woke Up Before I Died
Anonymous

I. Beginning

I’m looking at myself in the mirror for the umpteenth time today, admiring my translucent skin and the tiny bones underneath it. My stomach is flat, my cheekbones are defined.

The threadlike veins are visible in my wrists, thin as my arms. My ribs are defined. My hips are defined. My collarbone and kneecaps and foot bones are defined.

I carefully apply rings of eyeliner, blush on my sallow cheekbones, glops of concealer under my eyes.

In the car after school that day, my mom tells me I’m as scrawny as a crack-whore.

That night, I had another lucid dream, but this time, I actually died.

II. How it Came to Pass.

I run my fingers through spun yellow silk, a waterfall of straight blonde perfection cascading down her back. A living, breathing Herbal Essences ad for wash-n-go.

She says my hair feels like a wig.

She doesn’t pay attention in Geometry and gets an A+, giggling in the corner about circumspecting circles, doodling coffee cups and cupcakes.
I don’t pay attention in Geometry and get a D+.

She doesn’t work out but she is strong and willowy, running laps around me in PE, washboard abs and tiny waist.

I only buy a Diet Coke for lunch that day.

III.

Twigs don’t crack beneath her feet and she leaves no footprints in the snow.

Throw her in a pool and she might not even drown. Turn her sideways and maybe she’ll disappear.

Thin like the rusty brick etchings on her ribs. Dull Swiss army knife. Pins and needles. She thinks no one knows.

Personal graffiti to remind her exactly what she’s worth.

She has mastered this. A geometric proof she can actually solve.

Her willpower has conquered it. An exercise in willpower, that’s really all this is.

Sometimes she can even focus her will enough to have a lucid dream.
I Had Another Ludid Dream But Sadly, I Woke Up Before I Died
(continued)

IV.

Bitter winds sweep her across the cement among the dead leaves and debris, a rag doll missing its stuffing.

Tossed about at the whimsy of nature, no sense of where she’s going, or where she’s supposed to be, or even where home is.
Donholm
Sadie Sheldon
Molds and Mosses

Jenneva Scholz
Happy Mother’s Day & Drones
Christina Smith
Extraction
Ian Harbage
Portrait
Joanne Heppert
Self Portrait
Kelsey Gordon
Figure Study
Dana Schmitt
Food Chain
Kelsey Smith
Blowing Fortune
Jamie Schaub
Nest
Jessamyn Davis
Magicicada cassini
Sarah Michayluk
Falling
Kelsey Gordon
What did I dream last night?
I dreamed I was the ruins of a long abandoned barn.
It went like this: my ruddy paint peeling,
taken by the same winds that rattled my rafters.
I was slowly caving, slowly dying, slowly reclaiming myself.

I may have been forgotten, but I had not forgotten.
I could feel the memory of wild children, wild cats, and wild horses
stamping and snorting their frost-colored breath into my air;
I remembered how it felt to be born one nail at a time.

It was like this: I had many windows to look out of
and a clear view of the land—the green fields
matched the mossy decay of my interior, the grass
spread inside my walls. I had a door
for a mouth, but not much came out anymore;
once upright and enticing, now paralyzed in a grotesque, sideways grin.

I felt the reverence of having once been a temple,
haunted by the prayers to rain and corn gods,
pleas from those who created an altar on my brow.
I could hear their whispered pleas in my corners and eves.
I was a church, a wailing wall, a tomb.

I was surrounded by death (my parts remembered their own former
deaths),
falling timbers in a forest, iron ore separated unceremoniously from its
mother earth,
and the deaths of countless animals, both significant and small.
It went like this: I knew that there was peace in caving slowly, dying slowly;
in slowly reclaiming myself.
Amelia Earhart’s Body Found in Wyoming
Rebecca Staudenmaier

Detoured in a barn, perhaps she fancied
the overwhelming yellow of flaxseed
dried on the floorboards. Strange
how old she smelled out of range.
Splayed not curled on a rafter beam,
lazy summer bones stretched upstream.
Only islands know how many wails
it takes to launch half as many females
into spy plane shadows. Cautious
moths lick dust, offering solace
in crawlsaces where brain spice
and dried gut surpassed advice.
Gap tooth skull sends out orders still:
tell the birds to give up sky for hill.
That first morning I sat down with Ila Ridenour, she was 83 and looking like the typical old lady: short gray curls, giant granny glasses, one of those pastel sweatshirts with a seasonal picture appliqué on the front of it. We shared the same birthday, though mine came 73 years later. The other thing we shared was a love of games.

“You ever play Kings on the Corner?” she said.

I hadn’t.

“Well, let’s fix that. Let me teach you.”

Fifteen minutes earlier, the school bus had dropped my entire fifth grade class off at Chelsea Retirement Community to have our first monthly meeting with our “adopted grandparents.” I was excited; everyone likes a field trip, and Mrs. Brown, my teacher, had told me that Ila was one of her favorites. Some other kids, though, were not so excited. Some of the “grandparents” were sitting in wheelchairs with tubes coming out of their noses. Some of them were so old they didn’t exactly look like people. I felt lucky to get one of the “walking ones.” After a brief meeting in the lobby, all of us students went with our respective grandparents to their apartments. I walked with Ila to her second-floor room and almost immediately we sat down to play some cards.

Kings on the Corner isn’t a complicated game—it’s kind of like group solitaire. But it was the first game I ever played where you had to say “pass” at the end of your turn, and that seemed somehow grown up, even if the game itself didn’t.

It was over that first game that I learned Ila was a talker. Luckily, she was the good kind: one who was just as interested in hearing your stories, too. She told me about her husband, who had passed away five years before: “Ike and Ila. They always said we were meant to be married because of our names.” She taught me how to properly say her last name, “I always used to tell those kids next door, You pay a nickel, get on the bus and ride an hour. Of course, they just started calling me Mrs. Ride The Bus.” She laughed and added, “You can just call me
Grandma Ila, though.”

Each month when the school bus dropped me off, Grandma Ila and I would play games. Sometimes it would just be us dealing out Kings on the Corner; sometimes we’d play as a group with some of her other friends at the home. We’d sit around a table in their ice cream parlor (a dime for a cone, quarter for a sundae) and play simple card games. It must have looked goofy, my bright red hair in contrast with the grays, whites, and blues of theirs.

Grandma Ila was like a grown-up kid, which was perfect for me because I was always being told I was a 30-year-old in a kid’s body. Despite the 73-year age difference, we were equals. After fifth grade was over, I made the decision to keep visiting Grandma Ila; after all, CRC was only a 25-minute walk from my house. These visits on my own were nicer; we had more than the 40 minutes allotted between reading and social studies, letting us have whole afternoons of activities. A system was developed: I’d call her apartment from home to find out if she was free (she always was), then I’d walk on over. We’d go down to the ice cream parlor, eat chocolate sundaes, and scope out the game-playing options. The bridge ladies were too stuffy, plus neither of us knew how to play. Sometimes there’d be a couple of old men playing chess, but that wasn’t really a game we could jump in on. The best was when there’d be a cluster playing Kings on the Corner, or Uno. These old folks had made up some new rules for Uno to make it a little more challenging and I loved them: “We don’t want to be playing just some kid’s game.” Grandma Ila and I would sit and play with her friends for awhile, and then walk the halls of CRC: “I may be 84, but I’ve got to keep up my exercise.”

Mostly I didn’t think about how old Grandma Ila was, but during one of these walks I realized she had passed that stage of being a “normal adult.” We were down on the fourth floor when she had to go to the bathroom “right now.”

“I know the couple who lives here. They keep their door unlocked and won’t mind if I go in. Come on.”

She opened the door and we walked right in. The people weren’t
there, but Ila made a beeline for the bathroom, leaving me standing in some strangers’ living room. I felt weird and thought that this certainly wasn’t something a normal person would do, particularly when the couple walked in.

I can only imagine what it must’ve been like for them. You walk into your living room, maybe after a service in the chapel, or a bus ride into town, and find a strange girl standing there. She looks at you with her eyes getting extra wide and stammers something like, “Umm, ummm, Grandma Ila’s in your bathroom,” causing you to be a little more confused than your age usually has you.

Then there’s a toilet flush and out walks your pal Ila. “Oh, hi, June, hi, Paul. Just had to use your bathroom. Be seeing you around.” The two intruders walk out the door.

I started to get more fed up with the way these old people played cards as time went on. We’d be sitting around the ice cream parlor playing Kings on the Corners and someone would say “pass” when there was still a possible move that could be made. Another player would catch it and say, “There’s a play on the board,” and internally I would get so mad. If they don’t see it, it’s their loss. You aren’t really playing the game if someone’s telling you that you can move. Turns would go so slowly, and there’s only so much you can stand to hear about other people’s grandchildren.

The time between trips to CRC grew longer and longer as I made my way through middle school. The walk seemed particularly long, and there was another old woman across the street who was much easier to visit. Mrs. Keezer wasn’t as fun as Ila. She didn’t play games, and was the bad kind of talker with no listening. But she was right across the street.

I was in eighth grade when I played my last game of Kings on the Corners with Grandma Ila. About a month after that visit, I came home from school to a cup of hot cocoa from my mom. That wasn’t unusual, but then she sat down with me and told me that Grandma Ila
had died the night before. It was my first real loss, and I sobbed. I couldn’t understand it. Sure, she was 86, but she exercised, she seemed healthy, how could she die? Years later, I found out that she suffered from depression. That she ODed on her medicine. Even with hindsight, I still can’t see that side of her. She was always cheery, game-loving Ila when I was with her.

I can’t help but think of that last game of Kings on the Corners. When we’d finished, and I got up to walk home, Grandma Ila said, like she always did, “I love you, Emily.” And I just said goodbye, without telling her I loved her. For the life of me, I can’t figure out why I left when there was still a play on the board.
Untitled (Reaching and Singing)
Nathan Gilmour
Three Attempts at Detachment

Elyse Durham

1. Don’t look at his arms, now, don’t see for the first time the colorless mole on his left, don’t notice that his arms are twice the size they were when you last saw them, in the summer. Don’t notice they look like a man’s. Especially don’t notice the hollow formed by the curve between his shoulder and his collarbone. Don’t imagine that this is just where your head would fit.

  Don’t notice that when he laughs or is being impish, his eyes crinkle like his father’s. Don’t be pleased by the newly acquired downy stubble on his chin. Don’t deliberate if his nose is shaped like yours, linking the two of you together like newlyweds in the newspaper, who often have identical noses. Don’t suppose his cheekbone would fit in the palm of your hand. Don’t pick out the tree you’d recline beneath if given the chance, don’t ponder the poems you’d read, don’t deliberate between Donne and Dickinson and Whitman. Don’t write about it.

2. Look at his arms—they’re pale and thin and inexperienced. And they don’t belong to you. Remember the times he’s neglected you; remember the three months when he neither wrote nor called, without explanation, without apology. Pay attention when he tells you he’s planning on living in China, after he goes to Belgium. Notice his wandering eyes. Realize that everyone’s eyes crinkle when they laugh. Think his voice sounds small and trapped inside his nose, which doesn’t look like yours at all. Forget that you forgot all this when he put his hand on your shoulder to get your attention. Don’t write about it.

3. His arms? They were wiry, but you were inside them for a moment, even if yours had to reach for them first. Watch him clear mountains of snow off your car and windshield without being asked. Hear him offer to come rescue you if the roads get bad while you’re driving home. Wish for a conveniently located patch of black ice so you can take him up on the offer. Watch him grow up.

  Remember the time you slept next to each other—in separate
Three Attempts at Detachment
(continued)

sleeping bags, a row of chairs between you—in a church sanctuary in a
dying borough of Chicago. Preserve the poem you wrote him in Latin for
his birthday, the postcard he sent you from Paris for yours. Remember.

Write about it and put it away, watch him move away to
Belgium and China and Paris. When he comes back in ten years from the
United Nations and saving the world, put this in his hand and wait.
I. Fresh perm and red lipstick in wheelchair

The floors of the hallways are rubber
and so are the shoes—or else they’re slippers,
ever know the ground. Instead, rubber-coated wheels.
I’m thinking about the shape of contact, the different
ways we touch the earth. Remember heels,
one point taking all the weight? Once,
the aisle at the opera—plush red like a throat’s
lining and canted down to the dark swallow
of the pit—and I’m walking
the way my mother taught me: heel first,
then toe, each step a little rocking-horse. You’d better believe I kept my head up
the whole time, sure of my physics. Now they roll me
naked into the shower. Water sings on the metal.

II. Sleeveless sundress with blue daisies

The lioness stalks: shoulder bones see-saw, tent
the empty skin. She is skinny and mean
with thinking about her cubs. Some camera
captured this dance. She doesn’t ask, Mind
if I cut in, just slices hard with a slant run through
the gap between the herd and this dusty grandma.
Gets those clumsy hooves to shuffle. I look away
from the television, down at my crossed arms:
scant meat, loose on the bone, webbed
in blue veins. And yet—my mind
is sharp as ever. I see the grass shudder.
III. Dementia and lavender felt handbag

Raspberry stains on my fingers, seeds in my teeth. Already the taste is like the shadow of a door closing. Behind my eyes, the current runs too fast to cup the water in a palm, to drink; the rush crowds my ears and snatches leaves and twigs and cries of living things. Worried by the rapids’ molars, my granddaughter’s name becomes a bloated slur before it breaches the mouth. There: stuffing from the tear in the taxi seat’s leather, triptych hung over the altar, three umbilical cords. This is where everything comes to wait. Soon I will leave my bathrobe on the bank and when the current delivers me I will find again that night and the way the streetlights spooled off in threads, seen bliss-blurred from the hill where I stood in someone’s arms. I will hold the clear water of this view: the dip and swell of a city’s contours piped in light.
snow melted mascara
becomes like paint--
each lash--
a very fine
brush

tapping morse
code messages
--of dots
and dashes--
above each eye.

who could ever
decode
such a song?
to translate flurries--
of blinks -- and yawns.
What nuns hide under their habits
Kate Lutes

Yo-yos, which zip down quietly
    and ripple their robes during mass.
Foreign language dictionaries, heavily earmarked
    with phrases of good will glowing in highlighter orange.
Jumping rope, coiled around their hands like rosary beads
    in preparation for the Sunday Double Dutch tournament.
Photographs from long ago, printed in sepia tones
    which are creased through the middle and cut their families in half.
Pocket watches, for when God knows that time is precious
    but the priest throws it away like cellophane wrap.
Crisp tickets to a baseball game at the stadium downtown
    where grown men will shout a little less in their presence.
Birthday cards from their nephews one town over
    on which birthday is spelled with an ‘f’ and the inside says “We
miss you.”