cauldron

The Cauldron staff would like to thank Dufresne College for its support, as well as the Advisory Board of Directors, whose untiring efforts and advice are greatly appreciated by the entire editorial board. And finally, we would like to thank our many contributors. We are also grateful to the following people: Brian Amedee, History and Society, Mike Chappell, John Cunningham, Mike Feuss, Jeff Floyd, Walter Hooper, Mike Johnson, Mike Lang, Michael Luebke, Bill Nader, Roy Nutter, Dan Nutter, Kelly Parrish, the Society of Authors, Alhambra, and the Society of Authors, Alhambra. We hope we have been able to give you the best possible representation of our magazine, and we are grateful for the feedback you have given us.

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Literary and Arts Magazine 2000-2001 issue

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The Cauldron staff would like to thank the English Department of Kalamazoo College for its support, especially our faculty advisor, Diane Seuss, whose committed work and advice are largely responsible for this magazine's manifestation. Andy Mozina and Kathy Crown also generously gave their time in judging our literary contest. We would also like to thank Nicole Speigl and Tricia Hennessy of the Western Michigan Design Center for their ingenuity and perseverance in creating a professional representation of our writers' work. We are also indebted to the following performers: Sam Arnold, Liza Bielby, Frank Church, John Cunningham, Matt Guay, Jason Hendrix, Felicity Hesed, Adam Karel, Rob Kent, Jordan Klepper, Jeff Lung, Simone Lutz, Bill Malatinsky, Dan McCauley, Sarah Ovink, Bobby Pennington, Mark Piebenga, Ryan Rivera, and Eric Sindelar, whose hilarious antics earned us enough money to pay off the loan shark we were into for the printing costs. Equal thanks go to Larissa Brezden, Elizabeth Davis-Mintun, Kerry Doherty, Emily Gear, Caitlin Gilmet, Laura Mannion, Jessica Kamm, and Michelle Wallon, as well as the aforementioned Jason, Rob, and Ryan for conceiving and organizing the same events, as well as coordinating everything imaginable for the production of this magazine. There is also the matter of a certain already-twice-thanked Rob Kent, who spent a great deal of his own time diagnosing and eliminating the multitude of computer plagues sent by the heavens to punish us in these last weeks. Finally, and most importantly, we would like to thank all the writers who trusted us with their submissions. We regret that the spatial constraints would not permit us to accept more of the volumes of great writing we received.
I knew it was going to be pure hell. I could hear them massing in the distance. I reckoned it was that Birnam Wood headed on over to Dunsinane for another evisceration. My wife had some kind of zit. What should I do? My legions had mutinied. Curse! Arrr! I summoned to my aid a pack of starving trolls. They showed me their catacombs, their collections of bones. I bought them beer illegally. In time, they lost their accents. I lost my teeth. You could say it was some odd sort of mixture of the best and worst of times. By and by we grew hungry for gummy worms. Oh, mischief thou art quick to creep into the thoughts of desperate men. Oh, but the trolls convinced a virgin to ally our plight. At our bidding she bade the throngs submit. They did. That's when it got serious! For these were no ordinary marching trees like the ones that slew canonical Macbeth. Narr. These banshees had cleaved themselves clean through, thin as anorexic grass, and garmented themselves with all manner of dark images. What characters! They surrounded us the way any group of writings will surround a fictional Scottish King and his troll friends. Arr. Nay: Esss. It was quite an incident. Ay, and what could we do? There was a drunken sailor on one side, and a sad piece of cheese sitting alone on the other. So we read, as trolls and Scots read when there is a lot of it to be done. And as we were finishing, our eyes were bloodshot, our minds distraught. I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness that day. Were it not for kind Liz Taylor, I'd have gone to live with the kangaroos. She gave me eyedrops, fed the trolls a prime panda bear spleen. She said, "You didn't buy the magazine for the god damned preface anyway."

Note to the text: This reference should not be read as a slur against "the speaker's" clan. In Scotland, the same "stigma" is not associated with the troll population, due to extensive efforts of the TEC (Troll Equality Coalition) in the years 1968-1975. See Answer Me These Questions FOUR! and Whose Bridge Is This Anyway? both from Non-Humans-Are-Humans-Too Press.

Scottish Trolls are still forbidden from the consumption of alcohol. See Court Records for AAARG the Terrible Vs the livestock of Stonehaven.

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Brooke Cucinella
Heather Booth
Charles Johnson
Larissa Brezden
Stephanie Miller
Mara Cramer
What to Expect

You will wake up one day and realize that you are out of the working world of the busy city. You will begin to take breaks in the bathrooms or the kitchen to eat. You will only work part-time. You will drop out of school.

Your morning will begin by eating an egg or two and some bacon. You will then head off to the bathroom to wash your face and hair. When your son is born, your business will not be there forever. He said he wouldn't get off work. He will be in your nest with your other children.
What to Expect

You will be born early on a Wednesday in Almyra, North Carolina. You will be the fourth of your mother’s seven children. Your daddy won’t stick around. You will grow up in a cinderblock house painted dark green. The roof will be corrugated tin and the windows will rattle in their frames when trucks roll by. Not that trucks will drive down the dirt road in front of your house very often. When they do, the ragged pines in the front yard will wear a coat of red dust. You will play soldiers underneath those pines with your younger brother until your mother calls you in to wash the dishes. When you whine, “Why don’t we have a dishwasher?” she will say, “I don’t need one. What do you think I had you children for?” You will sulk and splash dishwater on the floor, accidentally-on-purpose. Your mother will slap you.

When you are nine, your momma will leave you kids with her new boyfriend while she gets groceries. He will call you into their bedroom and try to touch you beneath your skirt. When you scream for your older brothers, he yanks your hair, hard, and says you better not tell anyone. You won’t tell anyone, ever. Instead, you will go to the bathroom and wash and wash, trying to clean his greasy hands away. You will sit in one of the rusted out cars in the backyard and pretend to drive down that dirt road and out of town.

When you hit fourteen you will get a job at Wal-Mart pushing shopping carts around the parking lot. You will have bad hair and wear too much mascara. You will ride in the back of pickup trucks. You will smoke cigarettes that you buy out of the vending machine at the bowling alley while no one’s looking. You will reapply hairspray in the bathroom of the Kentucky Fried Chicken. You will skip school. You will drop out of school.

Your boyfriend will propose to you while eating pulled-pork sandwiches topped with coleslaw at Willy’s Hometown BBQ. You will accept, because you have missed your last two periods. When your son is born, your boyfriend will not be there because he said he couldn’t get off work. He will be in your bed with your cousin Rhetta.
He won't bother to wash the sheets. When he starts to get so drunk that he passes out while beating you, you will take your son and his pickup truck and drive like you always wanted to, down the dirt road and out of town. You will drive to Raleigh, where the factory jobs are. You will take a job in an adhesives plant and you will try to raise your son so he won't grow up to be like his daddy, or your daddy.

And late one night, when work is over and your son is finally in bed, you will sit down with a pad of paper and you will write. Find a good pen. Shut the windows so you can't hear the cars rattling by. Listen to the voices you've been hearing for years. You will take that blank piece of paper, and honey-girl, write it all down.
The Reds Are Running

I have salmon blood
dried beneath my fingernails.
Sleek silver Copper River Reds;
their sequin scales
are stuck to my forearms,
orange eggs
clinging to my palm.
The carcasses are swimming
in bloody black garbage bags,
heads whole,
guts and eggs
dangling loose,
skin trailing,
backbone intact.
Waves break against the rock
Blue shards and gray beads
charged by wind—
On the swallowed beach
a shell, the treasure
stripped
spars and timbers—and the
broken lobster trap
Evensong

We face each other in a twilight field.
All around are bright little flashes,
mini paparazzi.
A firefly orgy.
Millions of them sparkle,
fluorescent green glitter.
They make me dizzy,
discombobulated.
The world spins but is still.
I face you,
searching for my light.
A scene from a movie I saw when I was young rises from the depths of my memory. A young Chinese girl is in a small white tiled bathroom. She is naked and faces a mirror framed with silver hung over a white porcelain sink. The lighting is natural, yet dim, and sheds a silver wash over her blank face that stares into the mirror. From behind, her hands rest at her sides. In one hand she holds a knife that curves into a sharp shiny hook at the tip. She turns on the hot water with her other hand and plugs the drain to fill the clear white basin. The corners of the mirror start to steam up. Her expression still blank, she lifts her wrist into the air and with a quick flick of the knife, she slashes through her flesh. Then she slashes her other wrist. She does not flinch as she plunges both hands into the hot water. The water turns bright red as she slowly slips to the floor. I picture myself as that girl sometimes. There are times when I do not want to be the person I am, the one with the hearing loss. I feel ashamed and alone. Her blank expression is mine underneath the smiling one everyone sees. Behind the blankness I am clawing away at the walls built up around me.
The nerve fibers inside my ear rope themselves into a sheath around the twenty-two silver electrodes implanted in my cochlea the same way calcium carbonate layers itself tightly around grains of sand deep inside a shell to form lustrous and silky smooth pearls. There is nothing that compares to the beauty of finally being able to clearly hear birds, whispers, my dog’s claws tapping against the wood floors, cicadas, trickles of water through pipes in a house, crickets, someone else’s quiet breathing, or the rustle of the leaves in a faint breeze. Twenty-two pearls now radiate a glow through the branches of the pink veins into my world. They will grow more beautiful and shiny as they absorb more and more layers of sound. Clear voices and sounds tell me I am whole, beautiful, strong. They tell me I am safe. I can hear my own voice responding. Slowly and distinctly they lull me to find my way through the pink branches and outside again.
My attention zoomed in on the giant weight in my throat. Breathing was tough. I thought something was going to shoot out of my Adam's apple. I thought of my fifth grade band, how we sat in a semi-circle conforming around the refrigerators and ovens in the cafeteria of Bingham Farms Elementary School. I was seated on the right side with my father's worn but beautiful saxophone hanging by my right hip. Over my left shoulder, standing, were the trumpet players who struggled through every line of music, the spit building up inside the curved brass tubes, more spit, tightening, pressing. When we had a break I saw them open the A-valve and blow everything out.
Boy

I used to talk to you,
when our mother's stomach
was full with you,
and round.
A distended rosy peony with its small
knot in the center
like an eye.
I imagined that we shared secrets
through that bubble of taut flesh,
you tumbling around inside the
warm quiet, the cord settling
around your neck like a scarf.

Our parents let me look at the
picture
of you. Your face is yellowed,
like an old man's,
and the tiny hands with slack
fingers and no nails
are blue at the tips.
Your lids are slightly open
and I think that I can see your eyes,
pigeon-colored,
like mom's.
They posed you
on a flannel blanket
covered with a swarm of blue teddy
bears, like flies,
just like all the other baby boys
that had not been born dead.

This picture tells the story
of your birth.
Of our mother
screaming,
and screaming
enough for the both of you.
You were silent and yellow
as an egg yolk when
they laid you down
on her chest.

She called you Michael.
I have never seen, from the mountains in Montana to the Nile River to the peak of the Eiffel Tower to the meadows of the Irish countryside, a sky so ornate, dripping with stars, planets generating the rhythm, as I saw the summer of 1993 in Wisconsin, our voices raised, hands clapping; we whirled around the fire, Father churning the accordion, Brother pounding the guitar, we howling with laughter and song: a-fumm a-fumm a la trombon, a-zing a-zing u viulín, pa-pa pa-pa a la trumbett, a-pling a-pling u mandulin, marching, playing our sticks and arms and bottles; the fire clawing, lengthening, towards its sister fire; we almost jangled the stars that night, a magnetic force drawing us together, while miles away in Missouri your song stopped, breath cut short, your blazing spirit collided with the constellations we exulted. Oh God of brilliance, oh savage God.
We came home from camping that year and found half of our cherry tree shorn off at the shoulder by lightning, with a long pale stretch of flesh exposed against the slick bark. Its juice would have left dark stains on our palms if we could have climbed it, but it held its branches so high and gathered close together, round and full like the limbs of well-fed children. If the trunk had been hollow, my mother and father could have fit inside of it together, if they held each other very tightly. My father called some friends to help him cut up our tree and carry it away. It was more than the Christmas tree on the curb, less than a coffin being lowered.
I lie in bed, a scared rabbit
hoping not to alert the wolf to my presence.
I lie there alone so they do not hear me and realize
that I am listening to them. The tears well up inside.
I am afraid for them and myself.
I wish for silence, I wish that I were in the forest
away from the sounds, the yelling, the tears.
My forest is my den, I am the trees and the stars.
I stay there until the howling no longer echoes.
I stay there until the morning comes and the wolves are asleep.
So he told his mother that he wanted to do it.
He wanted to cross the dark and snowing sky to get the sled from the neighbors.
She dressed him and let him, Just before bedtime.
He wanted to cross the dark and snowing sky to get the sled from the neighbors,
But he didn't know he would fall in love.
Just before bedtime, she saw him Take his time, watching him from the yellow, lamplit window.
He didn't know he would fall in love
But he did. And as he stood between the snowflakes watching the tiny twinkling lights,
She let him.
He told her that he wanted to do it.
I remember the smell of the gym, musty with age, and how scary it was with black iron gates covering all the windows and lights. I remember seeing my little sister standing on one of the folding chairs. She was oh so cute in her pigtails. I remember how high up she looked, and how much fun she appeared to be having. I remember getting mad at my mother for not scolding her the way she had me, saying folding chairs were not a thing that you play on. I remember how cold the metal of the chair felt against my hand as I pushed. I remember the clatter of the chair and the commotion that followed. I remember the puddle of blood growing larger beneath her head. It was so bright against the white tile floor. I remember hoping I didn't kill her and "Mom was right," I thought, "folding chairs are really dangerous." I remember calmly walking away from the cluster of people attending to her and finding a forgotten basketball in the corner. I had never been a very good shot, but who knows, maybe today I could make one. I remember dribble, dribble, swoosh.
Kara had a Boston accent. She came from Dorchester; she had bags under her eyes sometimes. She was crude. We played floor hockey after school. The after-school person had frizzy hair and made us draw from the "Consequence Box" when we were bad. Our favorite game was Hangman. On the way to school I passed the same homeless man every day.

At Montessori we would take walks on those strings where everyone has a partner and holds a loop. This way we couldn't wander off. We would walk to the playground. When the sun came out while we were there, we ran around joyfully yelling "Hooray for the sun!" I would trade my lunch dessert for a sandwich made with forbidden white bread, processed cheese, and bologna. To me it was heaven. I would pretend I had seen the TV shows that everybody talked about.

We went to the planetarium before I knew how to read. I thought it was a lie you could read without moving your lips. I saw a penis when the little Indian boy shifted in his shorts the wrong way when he was sitting a couple steps above me. So that's what they look like.

Our teachers were Sri Lankan.

Lauren, Laura and I were best friends: Letitia, Lauren and Laura. We taught each other gymnastics moves on the fourth floor and swung standing up on the swing together. Lauren told me about having sex in the woods. We were in fifth grade. She would lower her voice confidentially, whispering to me details about strange things that I could not even imagine. Laura told me about a room full of dildos that she had seen. She said that they came in lots of sizes for different sized women. She used words like "hole" and "dick." She had short brown hair except for one long piece on the side that she kept braided. She wore miniskirts and had a father in Vermont. The boys called me Encyclopedia Head because I was always reading.

Ethan and Eben were parent-friends. We used to play cars at Ethan's house. When Ethan turned eight, I was the only girl at his birthday party. A boy I didn't know kept following me around calling me beautiful and I tried to hide from him, ashamed that I had made him think that. He said I should take ballet lessons. I told him I took
karate and I would use it on him if he didn't shut up. When he told my babysitter how much he liked her daughter, I didn't correct him. I just ran out the door.

Ethan's parents fought and yelled. It was there that I first heard the word "asshole." I listened to it literally and laughed myself silly, making for the first time a mental image of an ass hole. His little sister breast fed until she was four. His mom used to shoot spurts of milk into Ethan's mouth. You want some too? he offered. I was curious but I turned away. Ethan's mom told me the trick of walking fast: Long, quick strides. Ethan asked me if I liked vodka and showed me the bottle on the top shelf. We ate macaroons and hid from his grandfather.

Pat played ice hockey; he was one of the sixth grade boys. He would catch up with me during our weekly walk through the Bottom Commons to the YMCA and confess to me. I would listen, unsure what exactly he was talking about. I offered the only advice that came to me. Don't sell drugs, Pat, drugs are bad. When I left Boston he wrote me a letter thanking me for saving him from Evil. It is a letter written in pencil, folded around a hockey metal. It sits guarded by a dusty stuffed donkey on the top shelf of my room at home now. I only read it once before I committed it there, another Thing To Be Thought About Later. I never responded to it.

Jestina's parents were Jehovah's Witnesses, so she couldn't come to my birthday party. Our car is a Mercury Topaz, she told me. She lived at 27 Green St. An easy address to remember. I took an acting class with two brothers, Jason and Joshua. We learned how to mime and to say "NO!" in a thousand different ways.
My father never speaks
of the time he spent in Vietnam
...but may 1
not tell about.

Chris Wrobel

In the middle of the war. A six-week vacation.
My mother says perhaps the rest of our photos
are at my Grandfather's. "Remember that hot
ship? Big box of film?" Everybody says, he says.

Then those were photos of the car he bought
in California after the war which he drove
back to Norman, his hometown,
on the Michigan-Ohio border. "They just drop
you where it's a settlement and say it's up to you to get going."
I was three
when Dad put
the first addition
on the house.
I bounced in my
Johnny Jump Up
in front of the
window glass,
quite happy,
and watching.
He pounded
and snow fell.

It is a memory
he repeats often,
gesturing with
one large hand,
in imitation
of my early motion.
My father never speaks
of the time he spent in Vietnam.
To look at him you'd never guess
he'd been on search and destroy missions
in the jungle. Short salt and pepper
hair parted on the side, khaki pants,
button down cotton shirt. A business man.
We assume he saw things so terrible you'd call
them atrocities, and they're better off forgotten.

My father probably wishes he hadn't left
college that semester. However, it saved me
a trip to the hospital when I needed my stitches out.
A few quick snips, a gentle tug, and out they went.
Best doctor I ever had. Didn't feel a thing. My brothers
and I occasionally speculate as to some of the shit
he must have seen. I heard he once stitched
a guy from chest to crotch. He was split right open.

For the first time I can remember, my father pulled
out his old war album and showed us his photos. Thirty
five years and he can still remember all the names,
where they went to high school. He remembers
having more, a giant stack. There's plenty of Bangkok,
the floating markets of Shanghai where, "they
come up and you buy stuff right off the boat."
The army gave him a week of leave
in the middle of the war. A mini-vacation.
My mother says perhaps the rest of the photos
are at my Grandfather's. "Remember Dad had
that big box of pictures?" Probably not, he says.

Then there were photos of the car he bought
in California after the war which he drove
back to Morenci, his hometown
on the Michigan-Ohio border. "They just drop
you where it's convenient and leave
it up to you to get home."
My dog looks at my father
and Dad's eyes go soft.
The dog can rub up right next to him,
wind himself into an s-curve,
and my father will put down his cigarette,
bend over
and kiss the soft patch of fur between his ears.
He rubs the dog's belly, and laughs, shaking his head,
marveling aloud about the wonders
of having such a good dog.
My dog can look at my father
and make him a kind man.
I stared up at the cool basement ceiling and rotting walls. 
A mattress spring dug deep in the small of my back. 
I lay still, 
afraid to move. 
We were three peas in a pod that summer, 
the girl, her 24 year old boyfriend, and I. 
Now again I was in the middle, 
my cotton underwear draped silently 
across the empty six pack. 
Dust hung in the air, 
cigarette ashes discarded in the corner like rat droppings. 
My blood-painted lips smiled at the absent morality of the situation. 
You can’t have sex with something that won’t move, I thought. 
Their hands caressed my cold breasts, 
fingers tangled in my long dyed hair, 
I whimpered, 
 took a long dark blink, 
eyes sore from the constant thrusting world.
Then it seemed there were only two of us; the air around was deadened straw; stiffly mute, it was all that held me standing.

It had been the kind of excitement that makes you put small animals in tight containers, makes you kick them, makes you wring their necks while staring into their eyes.

Adrenaline stings, shooting through artery walls; breath is heavy, skin walks on its own.

People think animals don't have feelings, but I know they do.

But I was seven and forgotten;
"the baby is
not quite
right,"
they said.

Maniacal laughter
replaced
by the deepest of
inward flowing silence;
I thought my eyeballs
would explode
from the vacuum
created by
the absence of
sound:

Sudden guilt,
and the animal was
not moving;
playing God
was not
all it was
cracked up
to be.

A scream, then a shush;
the neck was limp
and folded
like a garden
hose, kinked
and trampled,
becoming limber
in the sun.

Face to face with
power,
I did not know
I had it in me.

But for them, the clock had already struck midnight, my panic but a drop in their bucket.

"Emily, the baby won't be normal," she said.

Yellow crackle, then silence, crawling in confusion to the closet.
Black cotton shirtsleeves cover his tattoos.
Big words cover his, “What you trying a say mufucka.”
Forced smiles help shade his bright hate.
Weed’s glassy film covers what’s under his eyes,
and eighty proof cognac dampens the red
that makes him swing on air while he dreams.

But not really.
Pints, fifths, forties, blunts—
they only dull the red;
it’s always there.

In five years he’ll probably drive a new car.
In five years he’ll probably pretend he knows God again.
In five years he’ll probably talk like he’s from the suburbs.
In five years someone will probably call him daddy.

But the headless fetus
who had his eyes still watches him
while he pretends to make love:
slug-shredded ribs don’t heal;
miniature babies who cry for rocks don’t stop moaning;
blood-stained knives, guns, fists, bats,
they don’t get clean.

God doesn’t forget these things;
if he did, everyone could be forgiven,
and everyone can’t.
Catching Grandpa's Breath

We are out in the backyard
with grass up to our knees
and Grandpa can't breathe again.
We rush to find the oxygen.
Grandpa's slim fingers fumble with the tubes.
A hiss, and a breath, and silence.
Richard gets the car ready,
just in case.

Grandpa begins to speak
about the war and a bomb he dropped.
The ocean filling with blood and
everyone in his plane laughing.
We all sit in silence
wondering if this is all Grandpa has to say.

Grandpa was once a young man
with blue eyes.
Like then, he is now righteous and cruel,
a Biblical patriarch
harboring money and love.
Harboring the truly important things
until my father cries,
grasping for approval.
Or until Christmas when the check arrives.

There is a story he tells
about a Dutch boy and a dam about to break.
Amsterdam saved by one boy at the levee.

Grandpa tells the story over and over
and I feel that it's my finger holding back the water.

When Grandpa cannot,
Grandma straps on his oxygen tank.
She does not believe he is dying.
She calls his shortness of breath passion.
She remembers the war, and wondering if he would return, like it was a love story.
I.
How do I become cleansed of my past? Do I throw letters into a river? Do I whisper the memories into a bowl? Do I lock them away in a museum?

II.
At the Museum, the Conservation department kept the artifacts in perfect condition. I had the keys to the Plexiglass barriers and some slow days I would go behind them and play with the toys of children long dead.

III.
The toys of dead children are dead too. Toys are always dead, but I was terrified to roll over onto my stuffed animals at night for fear of suffocating them. My first doll, which I found in the attic, I named Mimi. Me. Me. My mother hated the name but I insisted.

IV.
I insist through the tears that I have to be perfect or people will hate me.

V.
People hate me. They run away from me in disgust because inside I am dirty. I have a small twisted rope instead of a heart. Anyone can pull it till it hurts, and pain is pure. When I hurt myself I am taking away sin.

VI.
Boredom takes sin away, too. When I pray I drop into a stupor until the words are slurred and only the rhythm pulses in my mumblings. This is why
God hasn't taken my pain away. He can't hear me.

VII.
He can't hear me because purity is not-hearing. Salvation lies in the fog in my head.

VIII.
In my head there's a cast of thousands. They wait around until I pull them into place, they set up elaborate scenes for me and tear them down when I want. They know that I am the heroine of the scene and it is all my fault. There are rumors of mutiny, though. Fear is coursing in great waves underneath, but not everyone can sense it.

IX.
Not everyone can sense what I want. When I cling to my mother's skirt in the morning, begging her not to go, she shakes me off like static and I roll under the table. I may as well get him going now. Maybe he'll finish up screaming before twelve and I won't have to deal with him again for the rest of the day, but there is always the danger of being too early so he works up another beating by mid-afternoon. It's cheaper than betting on dog races.

X.
Betting on dog races, going to the shooting range, to the forensics lab in Detroit with the Cub Scout troop, I go along but I am not really there. I am not learning any girl things. When I get to school the others have bows in their hair and all I have is leaves and dirt. I wouldn't mind if I could participate, but my purpose, while he shops or plays the great leader, is to be small and quiet.
XI.
Quiet in a store is not true quiet; Muzak and low chatter. My quiet is not true quiet; it is inverse noise, a roaring to which his ears are accustomed. I am surprised when Christmas ornaments and lamps do not break when I walk by.

XII.
I walk by churches, I walk in the rain, I take showers and scrub myself so hard I rip my hair out. I cleanse with a vigorous hand and burning heart but neither are stilled. Insomnia does not purify. Neither does nakedness, I am still marked.

XII.
I am still marked. My self is a rat's nest and god is face down in his spaghetti. No, God is falling down the stairs and even though I did not push him my wish was strong enough. As he falls his arms flail about as if he is trying to gather the invisible.

XIV.
I am trying to gather faith. I should be swimming in holy water.
Eggs

There was a man who worked in a plant, packing eggs. The rejects, ones with twin and triplet yolks, ones that would have been treasured in another time as signs of plenty, he collected and brought home in cartons for the family. Irregularities like these frightened people. An unusually bumpy shell could set off the freak alarm; a dot of blood like the point of a pen was enough to inspire nausea in some. This day there was an oversight at the farm, some illicit union, a conception. Back home, the man got up one morning and found his young daughter in the kitchen. The carton of eggs lay open. Her long child-legs were bare. Her chin was propped on the counter. She poked with a fork at the cold red pool in her bowl. The butter in the hot skillet began to burn.
You stand there in my memory, gaunt under the colors of your school, purple and white, the robes of a strong queen, your hands outstretched, sinews taut where the fat vanished, stark like the poplars in winter near the Huron. I wish I could have dressed your body for burial, closed your eyes and folded your hands around oak leaves gathered from the Sky-Come-Down trail. I wish I could have floated you down the river, clothed in purple satin to hide the bruises from the port in your chest. I wish I could have lit your pyre and shoved it from the shore while the blue herons stared and the hawks scattered, and, slowly, climbed the stairs to the scenic overlook, and watched the heavy current slide your grave to the east.

This, I feel, would do more thorough justice to the green leaves, scent of water, and fallen trees that grace your memory like the swollen orange harvest moon my brother and I watched with you after cookies and cider in the nature center— we could still see it, driving home, solid above the violet fringe of the trees.
First sorrowful mystery—
He rolled the beads of his rosary
between his index finger and thumb,
he sung oh sauna and swayed
gently on his knees,
he moved his arthritic wrist
letting it crack, he watched the
candlelight flicker against
Jesus on the wall,
it was number two in a sequence,
the joyful mystery whispered
between ten Hail Marys,
that prayer to papa dios
and the oh my Jesus
and the glory be
and the sound his
shoes made as they touched
and I can hear him move to
the glorious mystery
and I can smell the wax
from the candle set on
Great Uncle Wilfred's
coffin cross and I watched
in awe as the secrets of the
universe unraveled in the sweet
poetry of the cardinals and saints
and I smelled his shoe polish
underscore the religious ecstasy
with discipline—
Saint Anthony, Saint Theresa Little
Flower, Saint Anne, Saint Margaret
Mary, Saint Paul, Saint Peter, Saint
James the Greater and Lesser, Saint
Augustine, Saint Bernard, Saint Francis
of Assisi, Padre Pio with his stigmata,
Our Lady of Guadeloupe, Our Lady of
Lourdes, Our Lady of Fatima, Our Lady
of Sorrows,
staring down at me
as I had my identity scrutinized,
as I was told what it meant to be a
Catholic man,
as I was told what I was not,
as my bliss was taken from me—
Sorrowful Mystery.
I place my father face down on the scanner bed, pressing him between plastic and glass. I wait for his image to form on my screen. He smiles over his cup of coffee. The mountain slopes down, and the lowland stretches out beyond his left shoulder. I am nine at this time, we are hunting, and tomorrow his partner will castrate a Dall sheep. No one will ever forget.

I adjust the color balance, then draw a small circle on his cheek and remove a fleck of dust. It may be the closest we have ever come to intimacy.
Four picture frames of faces hang in the dining room of my father's parents. Perfectly straight lines divide us, like soldiers sorted into regiments, one frame for the children of each son. From our perches on the wall, we stare out at the diners. As they eat on the good plates with the real silver, we sit mute, on show, wearing our best shirts and our studio smiles. My cousins and I perpetually hold our chins at the exact angle specified by the photographer, shoulders tall, back-lit, air-brushed.

My grandmother replaces these school pictures mid-fall every year when the new yearbook photos are taken. But I stopped changing. The image of me staring out from the wall remains as I appeared four years ago in my senior picture. I am the oldest, the first one immortalized on the wall, forever wearing that red shirt that isn't even mine. Next comes my brother's immortalization, then that of a cousin. Soon, all of us will linger on as we were at eighteen while our past gathers dust behind us. Behind the current faces, the old ones press out. The photo snapped each fall pushes the current image toward the glass. The full frames are all near capacity and don't need a cardboard backing to hold the front picture taut. Frozen moments seen through the photographer's lens; thirteen of them, K-12, hold the final image in place. The perfect face in front—the airbrushed eighteen year old, honor student, pretty, pure girl—buries our history.

What of these posed photos draws my grandmother to them? We are perfect in the photographer's lens. This thought surely appeals: that your children and grandchildren appear always as they do on picture day—wearing the best shirt, hair combed, and their "say candy" smile. Truth complicates this ideal. Outside of the frame, our shirts aren't tucked in and we wear old shorts that don't cover our scuffed knees. Our mothers fought with us that morning to comb our hair and the studio airbrushed our freckles and pimples. But just for a moment we are angelic. Just the right aspects show and the colors match.

Years of these photos flatten behind the glass of the four picture frames while we sit in front of them, living with our dirty knees and obstinate hair and secrets that don't show up under studio
lighting. We try to behave as we should. Sometimes it works, and we give our grandparents newspaper clippings to post on the fridge. Sometimes youth overwhelms us, and we misbehave. I fear the grandchildren they want to see are the ones posing on the walls, people we do not know. They can't see outside the frames, into the spaces where we live our lives, so we act in accordance with our pictures when we go to visit. We conduct Christmas programs. The cousins bring their instruments, and Grandma provides the white booklets of carols in each key needed. We eat proper meals of meat, potatoes, and rolls with a colorful vegetable and a salad bowl. Interactions have structure, and we wear our picture day clothes.

Around the corner at my mother's childhood home, photos peek out from everywhere. The school portraits exist in their 5x7 frames, but they hide in the darker corners. Larger matted frames containing a multitude of faces overshadow them. In one, I only know half of the people, and half of those don't come around anymore because of divorces. Some I know by sight; some are faces without names. The resemblance between some faces shows more clearly than between others. Occasionally when these likenesses surface, they connect an old photo to the same person in later years. The hair has thinned, the shoulders rounded, the picture in sharper focus, more vibrant color than the memory of earlier times in the next mat over.

Through the mat, we peek out — different faces, different occasions, different decades. This family pulls together like a crazy quilt, bits and pieces saved up and stitched together in a hodgepodge fashion that comes out beautiful without even trying. We are so many! When we crowd the house at Christmas, chairs emerge from all corners plus the fruit cellar and most of us still sit on the floor. And we all have a place in the frames—children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, cousins and sisters and brothers and ex-daughter-in-laws both with grandchildren and with new husbands and new children.

Upstairs in the attic, boxes that once held office paper now hold old quilt pieces and more photographs. Neither has yet been tied
together. My grandmother and I stand at the ironing board sorting out the faces. Penciled in names identify some of the faces on older photos. These are the women that neither of us met; yet together we try to find familiar features.

Pictures are scattered all around the house; they bring people back to me, keep them close, transmit the silent love I see in their eyes, captured by a camera without premeditation, posing, good light, good clothes or straightened hair. I prefer the snapshots — my aunt, my grandmother as a woman my age, myself next to her just a few years ago, sharing a laugh and our smile and eyes and the apples of our cheeks — they give me a comfort of sorts. They tell the person's story, not that of the yearbook photographer.

When I make my own pictures, I tell my own stories. In the dark bathroom with the glow of one red light bulb reflected in the mirror, I stoop over negative images, focusing until I can see each fine grain that comprises the shades of light and dark. I sometimes wonder if other people will ever look at my photographs as closely as I do. Would my brother or grandmother peer into the paper eyes and look for the true images as I did? Away from light, away from all noise but the hum of the bathroom vent and the crackle of the enlarger head as it moves up and down at imperceptible intervals, I create memories. I steal images onto film, sometimes with permission, sometimes with a lens long enough to catch their expression but not attention. I make the images tangible. I make them mine in the chemical tainted air of the red lit bathroom.

Overly dark negatives complicate the task. It takes more time to pull the image forth from the darkness. The light must burn through the film and make it onto the paper before the message can be relayed. The clarity of light bores through the plastic film and I push it further, boring into the past, the history of the person. I concentrate on the darkness of time and wish I could find the perfect amount of exposure to blow it clear, project all of the grains onto the paper below my fingertips. My hands swirl over the areas with too much light so the picture doesn't become too dark. I block the light in whirling random patterns just over the emulsion paper so the light
doesn't obliterate one part of the image as it clarifies another. Outside the metal frames of the easel holding the paper still to absorb the image, I can see bits of the pictures that don't make it onto the paper. The dirty knees and cluttered tables can't hide in the darkroom. What reality do I sacrifice for the sake of composition? I make the choices, determining the image that hangs framed on the wall; I know what images lie in a scrap pile, missing the cut, excluded from the frame.

Eating dinner at my grandparents' house one night, I turn around and see myself looking out of my hole in the matting, next to my brothers. I think of the man who took the photo. He must have taken two hundred identical ones that day, Senior Picture day. He saw us come in with make-upped faces and hair-sprayed heads above our best shirts. Below the belt, our shirts were not tucked in because we were wearing gym shorts, or jeans with holes in the knees. I think of printing my own pictures, sometimes adjusting the easel and raising the enlarger head to the perfect point where the picture gets enough information to make sense, but not enough to complicate things. These yearbook photos are not complicated: they are ideal.

We are complicated people; cropping the picture just under the shoulders somehow simplifies us. Looking outside the frames, beyond the boundaries of good behavior and grooming, past the wall of death, and peeking into a space where we may not be comfortable looking, the picture becomes complete.
The Cadillac

You know, every Saturday morning we went to Perkins. Me and my brothers, Ralph and Jimmy, and some other guys maybe. One Saturday, Ralph says to me, “Sonny, eh uh why don’t you come by and pick up my Cadillac today.”

I says, “What’s it need, Ralph? You want me to take it in for ya?”

“No,” he says, “I want you to come pick it up.”

“What, you want me to watch it? Are you going out of town?”

“No, I want you to come pick up the damn car for yourself.”

“Oh no, Ralph, I don’t want your Cadillac.”

Ralph says, “What you mean you don’t want it? How can you not want a Cadillac? Do you remember when I was supposed to buy you a pony?”

“Oh but Ralph that was years ago.”

“Eh,” he says, “when I was in the army, Mama wrote me a letter saying that you was failing fourth grade and I better do something. So I wrote you a letter saying I’d buy you a pony if you passed fourth grade. And I never bought you a pony, so take the Cadillac.”

I says to him, “Ralph I don’t care about the pony. I failed the fourth grade anyway.”

Ralph insists, “Sonny, listen to Ralph. He’s giving you a Cadillac. You better take it before he changes his mind.”

I keep saying I don’t want Ralph’s Cadillac, that I didn’t earn the pony. And finally, this guy sitting at the table next us, looks up from his soup and says, “Stuff the pony up your ass and take the goddamn Cadillac.”

So I picked up the Cadillac that day. It’s a beautiful car.
Would you like to buy a flower?
I've been sitting here for hours
and nobody's come in.
I'm beginning to think I should close
the store and head home,
pick up a movie
along the way. Perhaps watch it alone,
get some munchies, fire up the doobie,
then tomorrow, do it all over again.

I sell candy, too

Jelly beans, Jube Jels, Brach's Real Lemon drops,
Reese's Peanut Butter Bites.
For the diabetics—Life Saver's Sugar-Free Delites.
Whoppers, Whatchamacalits, Tootsie Roll Pops
(three colors).

Uh-oh, Hershey's, move over
'cause here comes Russell Stover
with mint patties and chocolate-covered cherries.
I hope you're not lactose intolerant
because it's milk chocolate—dairy.

Sometimes I consider stuff

Junk, junk, junk. It's all junk, I want to say
as the customers pass through
on their way
to see sick relatives, injured friends or their wives
who work on the seventh floor. I wonder what they do
once they get up there with their balloons
and crossword puzzles. Do they
jump right in, swoon
to the patient's bed. Or might they wait outside, pause, say a little prayer.

*I talk to old dudes*

I look up and this old dude is standing in front of the counter. So we start to chat about something I think will amount to nothing but I don't want to be rude so I act interested.

He's a trucker down from Paw-Paw on his way through to Chicago where it's nice to be above the road driving the big rigs. Haul all sorts of stuff—ice for the meat packers, pigs so the ice guys have something to pack. And it is then that I realize, as he walks away, looking at the back of his teamsters jacket, that I don't just punch buttons.

*Sometimes I get bitter*

Upon looking at the operations manual I find out that I am not allowed to comment on the prices. *Look at that shirt. Isn't it just darling. What is it? Flannel?* So I think to myself, Fuck it, "yeah and it costs more than the black market price for your daughter." She didn't think that was too nice,

gave me a look and dragged her kid off to the smoking hut. Then it hits me, I'm tired of the same old shit—people poking at me, How much for that paperweight? "Bend over and I'll show ya." What are they gonna do? Fire me.
it was a systematic word play with streams & beams
and the invention of the automobile.
an uppity car ride to the south,
where the red beans come in cans.
she sat startled for eight great
hours tugging at her hair-
pulling loose strands out.
Does it rain in Ohio?
Or do the clouds choose other
midwestern states
to saturate?
It was November, late
and we were ready for snow or sun,
had had enough of this ‘in-between.’
Scars

Hers

Just past noon and we’ve slept in, the sheets swathed in our new affection, cradling us closer, and I notice, for the first time, her elbow. Jointing her fleshy arm; then this raised curved path she’s got dribbling across the skin. Basketball, she explains, yawning. Took on some boys when she was twelve, proved her toughness by letting it bleed. I slid my thumb over the scar, marvelling at its shape, its unskinlike feel. I’ve got others, she says. There’s the appendix, the pink gash struck across her pale belly and how she screamed at the doctor. And I was chopping garlic once, she says.

I like examining them on her, absorbing the stories, what they tell about her as a child, her as a human. There’s something nice about sharing scars like this, more intimate than some kisses. And the first time I dream about her, it’s just her chest, marked with two tissue lines, criss-crossing her torso and scraping down, down . . .

First Accident

To know me from my scars, you’d think I was rough and tumble as a kid, ran around a lot outside. But my parents were always sure, they told me while bathing my stitch-lined arm, that my brother would be the first one to break a bone, to get cut and bruised, to be raced to the hospital with constant pressure on the wound or an icepack on an ankle. The more athletic one, he’d injure something sliding into second base or slipping over a soccer ball. But I beat him to the punch on a simple playground mishap, some time I wasn’t reading or dreaming but crossing the monkey bars:

The mid-air bump, the fall, the push: the comedy of the swingset disappeared when I glimpsed the yellowish flesh bursting out of my seven-year-old skin. And I cried. How nothing scared me so much, as a kid, as the internal body, later nightmares about derailed trains and severed livers. But all that’s left is this barely perceptible boomerang.
Histories

There's actually an interesting story behind that one . . .

(I) . . . we had this birdcage hanging from the ceiling in our basement, right, but there was this wire hanging loose, and do you wanna see, I'm gonna flash you, it cut in right there, and while it was first scabbing over, you could see my heart beating from underneath . . .

(II) . . . so my best friend and I decided to put my cat in the dryer, so we put him in, just for a few seconds, let him spin around, and when we opened the door, this cat was pissed and just went crazy, just clawing at my chest . . .

(III) . . . she thought I was yelling don't go away, I was saying my hand's in the way . . .

Here, and they tug down their collar or roll up their jeans. Here, you see what I've done and you know where I've been. Here are the cigarette burns, the knives, here are forearms full of nicks. Here's my grinning pride: all these disasters I can display.

Second Accident

Something about the park's stillness, the distant insects, the perpetual arcs my legs carved into the lonesome midnight sky, this gave me some sense of control. And so when I next swung back, I risked letting go. I flipped my wrists, held the chain less secure, felt for that moment the thrill of the swing.

But I was shot off the seat within seconds, limp limbs, skidding into cool gravel chin-first. People can't fly. Ten years later, the swings still sting. On this scar, you can make out the exact impressions of the pebbles, spots which make it difficult to shave.
Meanings

They say, *I like my scars, or maybe, I don’t ever really think about them...* They create myths, tell how the knife slipped under circumcision, *so I always called him Scarface,* or, the tissue has a way of expanding, *so my dad tells everyone a tiger attacked him...* They lay guilt on the people who’ve scarred them, or they wear them as symbols of love and sacrifice. *If that dog hadn’t bit me,* she says, *it might’ve killed my sister.* The gash is tremendous. 

She says, *I think about my sister.*

Mine

We’re driving at two in the morning, and Kelsey mentions breast reduction. Been there, done that, I sigh. She looks at me funny. I always get some odd pleasure in broaching my final scar story out of the blue. Nobody ever believes it anyway, so it doesn’t matter whether I make an intimate confession or blurt it out on the way to the donut shop. They teased me, I say, I was in junior high, and I was more developed than some of the girls. And I lift up my shirt to show her the vestiges of the stitching under my nipples, half-moons where they made the incisions.

Usually, I’m blasé about these scars, amused at the reactions to my unusual surgery. But now, for some reason, I get choked up. It was really difficult, I whisper. She stops the car. Reaches across to me. And these scars, the looking and the listening, have made us both alive.
You have it easy, he said, spreading his fingers wide and cupping my breast. You weren’t taught what I was, you don’t know how it is, as he kisses the flesh around my middle, lays his head on the soft spot between my navel and the pelvic bone. It’s a part of who I am, and I don’t think—rubbing the stubble of his cheek against my skin, I don’t think it’s something I’ll be able to bring to you, to lay down at your feet, and offer it as Ours—he says, picking up his head, bringing his hand to my face. He is my God—not yours.
Before I ask where you were,
before I begin to speculate
I will tell you how it was without you.
I waited.
Seated in that dim place which so stubbornly
resists the day's light.
I drummed my fingers on the table.
And people came and went and fell about
each other
and made themselves feel better.
I talked to them but didn't talk to them,
I wasn't even listening to myself.
My eyes slipped around their sides,
out to where the winter was melting.
I rose and joined the throng,
sniffing out the usual place,
pretending I had some business there.

I was never in the right place,
and I never outdistanced my fear.
Nights I sit on my dilapidated backporch stoop
beneath the sky attempting to distinguish itself from the branches.
I trade the airplanes flying beneath the towers.
I watch the neon lights flicker in the distance.
Sometimes I hear a voice and, I swear,
it is my own.
During these eleven years as a nun, I have had plenty of mornings when I have woken up and thought, Why? I could be doing similar work anywhere. Usually, all I have to do is think about how these years with the sisters have been the best years. If that doesn’t work, I think back to my old life. All those days, years, those seventeen years at the supermarket being only Bet the cashier. Empty. I know this doesn’t make any sense, but I lately, I had been feeling like there was something about her life that I missed.

Yesterday, I saw Louis at the Quickie Job. The Louis, the Lou-Lou . . . from the Meats and Seafood Department from the old store. He was hired in two years after I started. He has these honest eyes, a slight stutter and a wife, though I never saw her.

Some time after lunch, I took the mini-van for an oil change at one of those drive-through places. I knew it was Louis as soon as I saw him ducking out from under the half-raised door of the garage. He had a neon pink plastic clipboard under his arm, and he was walking to my side of the van. My entire body—it was as if something in me had cracked and all of these immobilizing fluids were free to flow. I was surprised at how little control over it I had. It was just like I was twenty-three again, enduring what I guess I would have called aching back then from having to see him everyday, knowing that I could not, but would I ever. And he was just too good of a man.

I’d play this game. We both knew what was going on. Whenever a customer needed a price check on some sirloin special, flounder fillets or whatnot, instead of paging, I’d go back and find him, usually fussing about the fish display, but sometimes alone, chopping, in the meat freezer. When he would see me coming around the corner with a little pink or blue styrofoam package of this or that, he always did the same thing. He’d spot me but then he would quickly look down at his meat as if it suddenly demanded his undivided attention. When he’d look up again, trying hard to, I always liked to think, disguise some sort of secret, he would say, “Bet, what, what are you doing back here. Y-y-you don’t have to come l-l-looking for me. I’m usually back here, so next time. Just page.”

Sometimes, if we were alone, he would wipe off his hands on the underside of his apron and lay one on mine. God knows, there has never been any thing, anyone since, except for God of course, who
has filled me with so much, well, desire. It got to the point where I could have done something bad. If he hadn't been transferred to the new store out of town, if it hadn't been for that, if his wife wasn't expecting, I told myself later, I could have been just one day of courage away from going back into that butcher cooler, ripping off that gunky apron of his, tossing my cashier's smock aside and smothering myself in him. At the very least, have driven away somewhere far. In my head, I promised myself to him something like four thousand times.

All of a sudden, the Louis was at my window, gesturing for me to roll it down so that he could slide the clipboard through. As soon as my fingers touched the plastic, he looked up. For a few moments, we stared at each other through the four inch crack of my unrolled window. He pushed the clipboard through and then, practically running, he went to the passenger side and gestured, more frantically this time, for me to unlock the door. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't back up. There were already three cars behind me. So as I reached over to unlock the door, I prayed a little prayer, and allowed Louis to come rushing in again.

He got in the car, slammed the door, and then just stared. "B-b-betty." He reached for my hand. My soft insides went softer. "How are you? I've m-m-missed you so much, s-s-so much." His face was creviced, grayer, like he had been left outdoors, uncovered for the last twenty-four years, fading and drying up as he was slaughtered by days and nights of hard weather. But you know, his eyes were clearer than ever.

I was trying to think of something to say when I noticed Louis staring at the rings on my finger. And then I started to get nervous when I saw his mouth start to cinch up, tighter and thinner. Something told me that he had spent years expecting this moment to be something like my old fantasy reruns. He gave my hand two pats, almost as if he was consoling me, and then pulled his away. I wanted to explain to Louis that it wasn't another man I was married to. It was God. I didn't know where to begin. So I didn't.

I sat there. I actually thought that this could be God giving me my long awaited opportunity to drive away with my old Louis. I thought, maybe God really is urging me on, and maybe, maybe, this is
fate sitting right here in my passenger seat. The more seriously I thought about it, the more that—I—the more Sister Betty Margaret of St. Joseph from Nazareth—emptied out of my body. I mean, that is what it felt like. The fantasizing Bet, the dishwater blond, twenty-three year old, the Vintage Wine lipstick wearing, love-sick cashier from Food City took over Sister Betty’s God-devoted body by filling it up with, oh my, emotional concoctions of forgotten sensations and some kind of young heat. It was like molten spectrums were shooting out of every cell of my fleshy torso. And, I guess, it is the only justification that I have for almost doing what I was about to do.

“Lou?,” I said in a voice deeper than usual. I repositioned my body in the driver’s seat so that more of me could look at him. But I stopped before I began because I noticed that Lou’s face was contorting and his mouth was working extraordinarily hard to say something. It almost looked like he was trying to get his lips around a really large invisible sandwich. It wasn’t natural and it kind of scared me. I thought well, maybe he is having some kind of seizure. Then I thought, I don’t know anything about this man. Sitting alone in the van with him, I started to feel unsure, old and common.

The line of cars was moving, I looked over. His mouth was open but slack now. He was staring at me, staring back at him. This is hard to explain, this next part. I mean, in as much time as it would have taken to get through the garage, I was willing to rationalize it all away, the whole entire promise. I looked at his face and I saw myself in his eyes. Now, I am not going to say that they are God’s eyes but they are something divine. Looking at him staring at me made me feel like I was made of God again.

“Lou, I’m in a relationship but not with a person, Lou. I’m a nun. I am in love with God.” I had never said it that way. I am in love with God.

His mouth relaxed and I was relieved. He looked up, his old face less gray.

“Oh. I didn’t kn-know,” he said embarrassed and surprised and apologetic. Things were going to be fine, just fine. Then his eyebrows started to furrow. “W-why though?” he stammered out, like the saddest little boy.
"Because Lou-Lou." I exhaled twice. "Because, because I said I would, even in tough times. Because I wake up every morning and say I will. I say I will be a sister to the sisters and a friend and I will live in this world in the way that I said I would. Because I said I would, Lou. It fills me. And it is a promise that I made."

Louis looked down and nodded. I reached over to cover my hand with his, which I noticed was deeply etched with grease. It reminded me of why I came.

"I need an oil change, Lou," I said as I held the clipboard in his face. I am sure that it was my way of saying something else. He seemed to get it. He reached for the clipboard, then slowly leaned across me, smiling faintly, as he double checked the mileage I had written down. His large body was entirely stretched across my lap though not quite touching. I could smell the garage on him. I stopped breathing through my nose. He twisted around so that he could turn his face toward mine. For some reason, I didn’t close my eyes when Louis pressed his dry lips hard against my cheek. I put my car into drive and eased off the brake. Louis took his time to stutter out something like a vow of his own and as he did, the garage door opened. A young man walked out and without any more delay, waved us through.
when I came over we
put on water for the tea but
ended up
sinking back onto your narrow bed
by the time we got up
it had just finished boiling over
and all that remained
were a few wraithlike twistings
of steam

it was always about forgetting, wasn't it?
the class the tea the marx to read
and, finally,
each other.
You and I we're like a stray dog and a can of baked beans.

I am this dog, beat, tired, one of my eyes has gone crooked in my head so even though I am looking dead at you it seems like I am staring out over trees and power lines and houses with telephones and toilet paper. Staring off into a horizon that never changes and a future that's open as a flight of stairs. My right hind paw drags a bit ever since it took a bead of shot in its fleshy palm; a shoe salesman drinking Budweiser out of a paper cup gave me this limp. I am starving. I eat what I can find, drunk fucks and back seat blowjobs: the scraps of love. I wander down by these train tracks racing off east and west sniffing soot from the rocks and smelling animals in the woods screeching somewhere in their burrows. My stomach, a tin kerosene can with only a little gas rolling back and forth along the bottom, my hunger, my oneness, scrapes my ribs raw. Then I find you and there you are like a north star guiding my three wise feet towards Bethlehem, a full stomach, a brimming heart. I can smell the pale bacon of your heart, and the beans of your soul swimming in the smoky red of your childhood and it makes me ache like a 1948 Ford truck pushing up and over a hill one last time. You are the best thing that two tired eyes, one crooked and the other true, have ever seen. I roll you in the dirt as my teeth work to open what I can sense inside your aluminum walls, but for all my work you do not open for me. You cannot let your flesh spill out for this broken dog. I tried to open you so I could see inside, so that I might fill the hollow in me, but I just end up putting marks in you, just like all the other dogs before me. I move on tired, and my hind paw drags a little slower now . . . sometimes I don't eat for years.
I was the moth and you were the bulb.
I was the problem and you were the solve.
I was the night crawler, you were the hook.
You were the fashion and I had the look.
You were the brick and I was the shatter.
I was the fat and you were the flatter.
Putting out fire with gasoline,
We were just flies in the Vaseline.
You were the calliope, I was the crank.
I was the monkey and you were the spank.
You were the spit and I was the swallow.
I was the heart with the three months of hollow.
You wore the crown and I wore the thorn.
You were decision, I was the torn.
You were withdrawal, I was the touch.
The absent howl that I was too much.
You are the oil drum, I am the lake.
You were my gunshot, I'm your mistake.
Tempest

Tempest, Tempest, Tempest.  
No one says tempest enough.  
A tempest is coming. Hide.  
Thunder  
Storm, Lamp  
Light, All  
Ways.  
Thank you deep green grass, unmoving cliff.  
Wind  
Blowing hair in waves of derision.  
Beneath the small house there is a path  
Winding through a thicket of creatures  
With small eyes and fingernails.  
Take them, take them, and take them with you.  
Gray clouds,  
Quickly.  
Movement in the window.  
Whispers through hands.  
Speak to the waves, you are alone.  
Spinning in a tiny circle with back on needle.  
Turning.  
Breaking stone and paintbrush strokes.  
Don’t listen to them; they aren’t with you.  
They are nothing, nothing, nothing.  
You are nothing, nothing, nothing.  
Dreams.  
Crooked fingers, decrepit and cackling.  
Look up. It is fading away.  
Look down. It is fading towards.  
Arms and legs in a wild firefly dance.  
Two step, two step, two step.  
Floating in the tide, holding an unstuffed animal.  
Soaking, bleeding.  
Cavern is open to rain.  
Tempest, Tempest, Tempest.
I mean, Dad was a funny, funny man. When his sister Snow died, they were all at the church and someone suggested that all of Snow's brothers and sisters line up in order of age to process in. And, uh, Mary wasn't there yet. And Dad was the oldest there and he started making this big fuss about not lining up until Mary got there. "Oh no, I'm not going first. I'm not going to be the next one to die!" He was making this joke, making a scene, at the funeral. At his sister's funeral. He really, uh . . . I don't know. He was a very funny man. I remember when we were really young. One night at dinner, Juliann announced with this enormous smile on her face, she said, "I want to die." Juliann actually said she wanted to die. There was this silence and we all looked at Dad. He was furious, you could see in his eyes and his hands, "Get out of here!" I mean, Juliann was very young, she was this very small child. And she ran out. And Billy started crying. Later I heard Dad talking to Juliann and she said that Sister Claire told her that when she died she could be with Jesus and she wanted to be with Jesus and she thought that was right. She said, "Do you want to be with Jesus, Papa?" And Dad said, "Eh, let's get you some dinner. I'll fly you in like an angel!"
I. Nana's hands were so ghostly white that only the ropes of blue veins wrapped around her knuckles distinguished them from the ivory keys. She played the piano with faraway eyes and rigid posture—her fingers alone fluttering across the keys. She never consulted sheet music and, in fact, she couldn't read it. Nevertheless, she had a piano bench filled with Mozart, Beethoven and assorted hymns. Sometimes she would hold up a thin sheet gingerly, gazing through the translucent paper at me. Although she has never had a music lesson in her life, she would always try to teach me. She would take my tiny finger in her gnarled hand and jam it down to key after key. She didn't understand that her nails were digging into my hand, that I was honestly trying. When my clumsy fingers lurched from one key to the next, she took them, roughly, and pushed them painfully into the hard ivory. She didn't understand why I would clench my hands at my sides, why I would demand Just show me how to play Silent Night, Nana, with one hand. Her foot nudged mine toward the pedals, her left hand tried to twist mine into a chord.

II. Later, when she started leaving the oven on all day and calling me Nelly, she played a constant loop of Silent Night, holding down the pedals the whole time with her blue Istonered foot. Each note hung in the air with the scent of Ben Gay and the burning newspapers closed in the electric oven, her metronome staring dumbly, silently on.
Emily's Sonnet

E said to me, *Emily you're an aunt.*
And I said, *Aaron?* And he laughed, *no me.*
Mother's a rich white girl from the suburbs:
it's the ghetto booty phenomenon.
Last Christmas all our relatives sent toys
and clothes for E's baby. I visited
him that New Year's Eve and he was sitting
on the floor under the pile of baby
stuff. He said, *she gave it all back.* And now
she only lets E see the baby when
she wants to hurt her mother. This year E
only gave his baby one Christmas gift:
a black leather rocking horse. Not a child's
toy, but it was the baby's favorite.
Death is to Love as the secret of eyes—
If the left finds the bird then the right must abide—
Without this connection—perfection of time—
Brilliance of vision—beheld by the blind—

Mother gives life to her Child through pain—
The child will feel it—it will feel the same—
For in this affection a promise is kept—
Devotion of Mother—severed by Death—

In Love one will enter—the threshold unchanged—
The body enduring—the exit maintained—
As well with the Mother—another will be—
And for no other reason than Nothing will leave.
Blood

I watch her look at herself in the mirror, turn to me, and point out the fact that her skin is becoming translucent. You can see the blue of her veins that run beneath her breasts. I wonder what kind of mother I will be.
You stand there in the kitchen with your hands raised up as if there's something you don't understand.

"You shouldn't wear white," you tell me. "It washes you out."

You are a woman of action. Are you bitter that I'm wasting my hips, squandering my mobility, while you've already suffered the knife, needed help onto the train?

"I'm not the mother you knew," you say to the receiver. You sleep often, even at the odd hours I call, seven time zones away.

Before walking exhausted you, I came home from being seventeen to find half of the walls painted the green of cooked spinach.

"I was tired of the white," you told me.

That year, we swirled around each other like the candy-cane stripes in front of the barbershop where you made them cut your hair, despite the sign that said "men." I stayed away, let your red catch the eye. I busied myself with being the background.

I'm facing one of the green walls when you tell me to cut my hair, stop wearing white, DO something, anything, just find some kind of passion. Just get over it.

It's what you would do.

I try to slip into your ideas like I slip into your closet, slip into your shoes.

We want the same things, you and I. What are they?

A peace? A fulfillment? A happiness like painted smiles on pet rocks?

That's an insult.

We want something more. "Let's start our own church," I tell you.

"It won't have rules or choir robes. Let's make Tuesday night our holy day."

You say, "It would be a lot of work." I take your arm as you ask your metal hip to bear your weight and disappointment rains on your face.

We drug the dog on stormy days. It saves her sanity and our carpet. She lies there sleeping, dreaming of sun, and the ability to stand up.

What did you dream of, those days you slept away the pain of
heredity, the pain of the incision?
I was gone for weeks while you were swathed in white bandages, surrounded by hospital smells of alcohol and green jello that made you sick, that made you well.
I was walking the streets of foreign cities, wearing my hair short already.

Look at us now.
Today the fire pushes out from your eyes in a way that scared me when I was being seventeen, afraid to cut my hair, afraid to look like you.
Your red, I prefer it to an itchy white heat. It’s a slow passion, an appreciation for climbing onto the train unassisted. It becomes you, a woman of action. And here I am, warming my hands on your fire, growing into your hips, stealing your shoes, trying to be you.
If she could, I think she would
become nothing more than wire-rims,
a sturdy desk, and a grating voice,
invisible and safe from being human.
Carefully burying all her fancies
with facts of molar mass and cations,
her heart burned by someone (an exothermic reaction,
combustion leaving only fumes and carbon).
A sickly grin and that voice emerges,
contradicting all the students' answers;
then she turns back again to grading papers,
and is happy for a moment with dead powders.
She is not one cut out for teaching;
perhaps the only thing to insulate her
from coping is to analyze the students
as proteins, lipids, carbohydrates,
heterogeneous mixtures of mostly water.
Feed your cross to the termites.

Beat it with the fattest pillow and don't sweep up the feathers;
Just pour massage oil over the mess and light it with a Zippo.
Shake dreams from your hair;
Watch them snap and wriggle on the hardwood floor
And roll into the cracks like hot mercury.
Goodwill wants the shoebox of old photos under your bed.
Tear the pages out, snip words from pages 2 and 45,
Throw them into the air and leave them where they land.
"Rubber love eats intrinsic milk and poppy seeds" makes sense now.
Spill the ashes from the jar, kick the cigarette butts under the door;
Let them catch between your senile grandmother's toes.
Behead dried roses and glue
the thorns on the drunken homecoming queen's tiara.
Mash pink lipstick and oil-free powder on his voodoo body.
Pin him where it hurts and feel him pull it out.
Bellow your tone-deaf notes out the window.
Compete with the sparrows that sit on the pane.
Watch them fly away with the bones of your old loves in their mouths.
Watch them cement their nests with marrow.
Throw stones into the well until it's so full
You can stand on the heap
And call it resurrection.
Who ever said their life was "pure gravy?"
Because when my friends go out to the bar on Thursday and
Tuesday and Monday night and I am at home playing tinker toys,
it feels like oatmeal.
And when the alarm goes off at six am, before my son's God turns
the steering wheel and brings up the sun, that feels like oatmeal.
And when I get a speeding ticket for six miles faster than twenty-
five, that is definitely oatmeal.
And I know these are small things, and I know gravy swimmers look
at the whole picture, but it is so hard to see through oatmeal.
Like the time when my coward ex-boyfriend, who called my son, his
son, a bastard, died.
And when I carried my blond scarlet boy at my chest up the aisle for
communion at that funeral, the same aisle that a blushing bride had
walked down earlier that Saturday, it felt like oatmeal.
Because everyone was staring at me, knowing the dead boy was my
comrade in sin, hating me for destroying the plastic halo over his
embalmed head.
And it felt like oatmeal, because the priest asked the congregation
to pray for the parents and sister and grandparents and classmates
and girlfriend and football team members and fellow soldiers that
the boy left behind.
Maybe that was when the oatmeal was the lumpiest, because I
knew what the priest didn't know.
I knew that my boy was the scarlet boy of the dead hero soldier
boy who came home from military school forever, delivered in a
cherry casket.
Still, there are sometimes when I know I am beginning to understand
why someone said "gravy."
Because, each time I hold my boy on Christmas, and Easter, and his
birthday and my birthday and Valentine's Day and during the lunar
eclipse and every weekend for the rest of my life, I am learning that
the funeral oatmeal was lucky gravy.
I know it is gravy, because there is no boy-man dragging his high
school girlfriend to my door, looking for my little boy, for the rest of
my life. And now that corner of my life is all gravy. Maybe I am still too young to swim in gravy; maybe I will know when I am dying how lucky I was to eat oatmeal everyday.
What happens when your body turns against you ... she asks.

It eats from the inside out. That is my answer.

This disease lies wreathed in my belly; it rumbles with the rise of morning, scrapes my walls with its ulcers, and I bleed. It sucks my soul inside itself, pulling energy from my arteries. Deficient. In iron. In calcium. Its power lies in its pervasiveness; no part of me is untouched. My gut becomes the center of my body and the center of my mind. Toxins in my blood hold me awake at night, or barely asleep beneath twisted consuming dreams. It is consuming my body; my white blood cells are turning against me in inflammation. I am twenty. My disease is two and a half.

He is eighty-three. My grandfather shows me his right arm, blackened blue with someone else’s blood. The skin sags, old muscle slack, slender hands, fingers, twisted, bones with yellow curving nails. He harbors no disease, but his body has been broken into, and scars lace his skin. This time he had his carotid cleared and widened, metal tube inserted through the femoral artery at his groin, tracing the twisted blood highways up, across his chest, to his neck. The needle in his arm slipped from vein to tissue, blood transfusing into his muscle and flesh. The doctors say it will spread, this foreign blood, across his chest and neck. He is weakened.

This man is old. Sometimes he shows me the knob protruding beneath the skin of his lower back. That’s what happened when I was in Alaska, he says. Remember, when I was so sick and in bed all that time. That was the year when my grandparents took care of my brother and me. 1985. It’s the metal rod, he tells me, it moved out of place. The doctors say that if they open it up infection will begin. That year, he ordered a back brace airmail from Michigan to Alaska and still lives with this metal knob, cushioning his chair with extra pillows. After a time, I’ve found that scars become a part of you.
My mother lived in Fairbanks that year, going to school to get her teaching certificate, and my father worked in Glennallen building the new high school. I was accustomed to Dad working away from home, but Mom not living at home was new. I followed her downstairs to the bathroom the morning she left and hugged her waist, told her I didn’t want her to leave. We visited her in her tiny, narrow dorm room in Fairbanks, with its built-in beds, closets, desks and single window. It was cold, maybe 30 below, and as we drove away I looked up at the tall building with its many rows of windows. My mother leaned out of her window and waved to us. I cried and tried to hide the tears from my father’s knowing eyes. For my eighth birthday she sent me a fuzzy white bear that still squats on my shelf at home. I opened the tiny package from my father last—bird earrings and a seal ring made from ivory by the Yupik Eskimos of Nunivak Island. Delicate carvings, and strong. They are stored inside a pink shell, on my shelf, at home.

Before he became sick, and before fall turned to winter, Grandpa shouted at my brother for throwing the foam boomerang that swung around and struck me in the neck. We had never heard him raise his voice before, and we exchanged raised eyebrows, amused smiles. That year, I would refuse petulantly to take my bi-nightly baths, and Grandma would have to cajole me into the bathtub, taking me piggy-back down the stairs. That year, my brother hit me in the face with an iceball one dark evening while we were playing in the snow. It left a bleeding gash just below my right eye. At my brother’s urging I lied and said that I fell, in order to protect both of us—him from my father, and me from the beating that would surely follow if I tattled on him. It rained in the middle of that winter, an event wondrously absurd to me, coating the snow and roads with two inches of pure ice. Running late to the bus the morning after it rained, my brother ran ahead with the flashlight, leaving me slipping and falling in tears in the pitch dark. I remember looking back through the trees at just the right angle and seeing the propane light shining in our kitchen. In my rush and fear, I lost my clutched little leather purse of $2.50 for the special spaghetti and whoopie pie lunch at school. But, I found it somehow,
searching the ice with mittened hands, my brother yelling that he was going to tell the bus driver to leave if I didn’t hurry up. We were late to school anyhow. We stopped to put thick chains on the bus tires, and slid down the iced highway hill on our 3-ring binders, slipping backward and laughing when we tried to walk back up.

The moose took to the highways that year, the crust of ice raking their forelegs bloody and lame.

Grandpa lay in my parents’ bed, on the new mattress that they had purchased especially for him and his back. It was continually dark, winter dark, his slender form just visible beneath the covers. Continually chilled. I didn’t understand the illness then, but I had the idea it was closely related to weakness. But in reality, I didn’t understand the meaning of strength. Nor did I understand facing up. I came down with strep throat that winter. My brother caught it first, and a day later I lay in a chilly dim corner of the living room in my pink flannel nightgown assuring my grandma I didn’t have a fever. I could feel it spreading up my cheeks, red heat betraying my resolve, illness within, something un-right inside my body.

Sickness spreads like blood on peeling linoleum, rising color in the cheeks, tugging at the corners of the eyes. . . . I am betrayed by my insides, my guts turning against me, scarring and telling me of frailty. Of rawness. Of vulnerability.

Many years later I catch strep again, at the tail end of my freshman year in college. I’m much too busy to be sick. I have finals, band, concerts, work, volunteer work, extracurricular activities, books to read, papers to write. White spots coat my tonsils. I cough. I hack. I fever. I suck on Sucrets. I can bear the discomfort, be strong. This time it is only my roommate who tells me I should see a doctor—and I can fend her off; I am older and more willful. I haven’t the time for this, my body hasn’t the right, it will be overruled. Strep passes on. I finish the quarter and my job. I go home for the summer. I have A’s.
I spend a year with severe abdominal pain, diarrhea and denial before I seek out a gastroenterologist. He is bald, sweaty, pudgy and brusque. I dislike him. He tells me I have Crohn's Disease. He explains the granulomas he saw inside my intestines. He gives me pills, tells me to call in three weeks. I am confused, but heroic, and I buy a book for explanation. The next doctor is tall, dark-haired, lean and handsome. More polite. I ask for a second opinion. Another abhorrent colonoscopy—flexible tube with a camera inserted inside of me, exploring my bowel in search of a reason, a name, while I search the past for an explanation. I have a barium X-ray. I throw up the white chalk, "tastes like a milkshake" into the toilet, groggy beneath Valium and Demerol. Crohn's Disease. He gives me pictures of the interior of my small bowel and shows me the ulceration and inflammation. My bowel is bulbous and dark yellow. Crohn's Disease. I know more now—no cure, no cause, chronic. Lifelong. Always. Knob in my back. We discuss medication. I tell him the pain is there, but it's nothing I can't handle. His eyes catch mine and he asks if that's true, or if I'm just a stoic.

I cry in the movie theater, watching skin stretched over cancer, a body decaying while alive; I cry at the movie I'm using to escape from my present.

Soon after, I fly to England to study for six months. My mother tells me to come home if I need to—the doctors in Britain may be good, but you have your mother here, she says. The first months are teary. Emotionally labile, in the technical lingo. Sick. Moody, Sicker. Frantic in my lethargy and angry, I get by, day by day, toilet flush after toilet flush, tell my family that, "I'm not too bad. Doing all right." Admit to a friend or two that I feel lost. My boy-best-friend allows me to gnaw through my moods, hours of pain, stacks of research, our relationship. He holds steady. I ricochet about searching for my center, my lost peace, and, as if I'm attached to a bungee cord, I always reel back to look within myself and realize yet again that the peace I'm searching for encompasses mind, spirit and body. Alignment. I become intimate
with my disease, understand it, listen to its whims. Yet it eats, from the inside out.

My grandpa scrapes his arm against a doorframe. The skin tears, easily, like soft bread dough. Pale blood flows. I fix the bandage a few days later, taping on the gauze pad carefully, surprised at the baby softness of his aged skin, supple beneath my fingertips. In the early morning I fill the toilet bowl with blood and find my way back to bed; the sun is rising, and I listen to the songbirds perched on the tree beside my window.

I lost my cat that year, 1985. Smoky, black tomcat, the first life I ever cared for, fed, watched over, loved. I decided that he disliked my grandparents living in his house; I was sure he would return after they left. Yet I searched my woods, calling for hours, days, checking all his hiding places beneath hollowed out banks, tree roots and rocks, searching mud for delicate cat tracks. I put food out in the evening at Mom's counsel, dusting flour around the bowl to see if he crept in during the night to eat. Only bird tracks appeared by morning. I cried out my compassion at night, tears soaking the dark. I thought that one day I would stumble upon his body, eaten, slender bones picked clean and bleaching on the moss, his black fur clinging in soft tufts. I never have. I have found only my fears and stood beneath them. I have retraced my understanding and listened.
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