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Finally, to the writers and artists who shared their work in hope of becoming published, thank you. Although we are unable to select everything for the final product, we are impressed by the caliber of the submissions we received.
I was born a quiet thing.
My bones were spun on my mother's wheel.
My skin was stolen and buried.
Because of this, I walk as woman, but I taste salt.
I learned the world as earth where there should be water,
hard, where it should be soft and vice-versa.
This is my taking hold.
This is my learning to walk.
I was born a quiet thing and I have found my voice.

Last night I had a dream about a little sister.
She was only a toddler then, and I carried her solid little frame through a tiny grocery store, down aisles of grapefruits.
Grapefruits and trail mix heaped in my shopping cart which seemed to be propelled out in front of me as if it were on ice.
I stroked her little pumpkin head and touched my nose to her fontanel, inhaling the smell of Johnson's Baby Magic.
I leaned down to pick up some bottled water and realized that this child was looking up at me with my own blue eyes.
Sara Wiener

I had a daughter and her name was purity.
I had a daughter.
She disappeared into the bathtub, under the bubbles of the bath,
between the molecules of dirt and sweat and grime
I rubbed free.
I let her free when I stopped writing her into my fiction,
when I stopped allowing her to be my ideal life.
I drew her down, into the water,
silently under. She slipped.

I had a daughter and she was femininity.
She predatorily wandered,
the crown of thorns in her bra,
serpents between her thighs.
She bathed me in jealousy
when she found my accessible flaw.
Wrapping her serpent legs around me,
inserting her private tenderness,
she found my waiting home.

I had a daughter who was the fallen cavalry:
the duct-taped breasts
the plugged up blood
the cotton fed mouth
the concaved ears.

She haunted me,
my daughter.

My daughter of youth
of authority
of privilege
of sin.

Laura Hayes
Divine Crow Award Winner

Sometimes I'd follow Mr. Faulkner around the grocery store, especially on summer days. I guess the grocery store doesn't ring my chimes anymore, but when I was eleven and it was hot outside and my mother got tired of me being underfoot, she'd give me a dime and tell me to fetch something for her and suddenly -- if I'd been acting sullen or stubborn or been bossing around the little brothers -- I'd lose interest in that activity and get excited about how grown up I was, going to the grocery store all by myself. I'd ride my blue bicycle or walk with one or other of the brothers.

I preferred Bonnie Blue, the bicycle. It was too big for me, but I rode it skillfully, or so it seemed to me at the time, right alongside the slow, hot-black cars. I guess the cars were made nervous at the sight of a skinny, russet-headed girl on a bike too big for her and watched out for me, but in those days, pedaling fast, it was my energy against the engines. I got so hot on the way to the grocery store! And the faintly dusty smell of coolness in summer in the grocery store with eggs to buy for Mama and the sweet burn of Coca from the melting ice was the result of my very rapid replacement of one place for another, challenging engines, by myself.

The best was when I saw Mr. Faulkner. I thought him handsome, in the energetic, dark way that my Cousin Flora's husband, Stephen Till, was. Mama laughed when I said that about Mr. Faulkner and said she reckoned Stephen and Count No Account would both be more handsome and energetic if they drank less whiskey. So I didn't comment on Mr. Faulkner's dark energy to her anymore, but when I saw him, in the cool, dark place I -- my self -- had replaced, I thought about all the names of the places I'd been told he'd been: New Orleans, Memphis, New York. I had seen New York at the picture show, and Daddy had told me stories about the fishermen and clowns on the
riverfront in New Orleans, and I wondered about how someone could cut through place somehow with time, and then come back to the grocery store again.

I tried to walk coolly past him two or three times if we happened to be in the grocery store at the same time, taking little peeks at his items: looking for clues, I guess. He'd have whiskey and pipe tobacco or carrots and sugar cubes for the horses, maybe some cheap red pens. These were all mundane things, except for the whiskey, which my Daddy never drank—and they gave me no knowledge of what made Mr. Faulkner, or anybody else, tailors of time and place. So, since nothing else made itself apparent, I figured the whiskey must somehow be responsible. I started scheming about how to obtain some. I was gonna drink whiskey and see what it did to time and place, because even though I knew it was responsible for so many people's eternities in hell, I had often heard Daddy and others call summer days 'hot as hell' and I figured I could stand it, if whiskey yielded some other truth.

I had a hard time getting the whiskey. It was just after the end of Prohibition, 1933, and no one in their right mind was going to sell an eleven-year-old girl whiskey, even if I'd had money to buy any. I thought maybe I was just gonna have to steal some: often in the afternoons of a summer, I'd go to Cousin Flora's and help her snap pole beans or clip mint for the tea, and I'd try to notice where Stephen Till kept his liquor. I knew stealing was wrong, but Mama had often said that Stephen Till should drink less whiskey, so I was just gonna help him out. I would make like I was gonna dust cousin Flora's furniture or water the plants and I'd take every possible opportunity to pilfer around and be sneaky. It's really a measure of the darkness of my soul that such activity made me feel smart and sly rather than guilty.

One day, I was helping Mr. Ezekiel, the yard man, weed the garden, and he said, "Missy Jean, I sure would be grateful if you'd go look in Mr. Till's tool shed and bring me a spade." For some reason, I'd never checked the tool shed, so I stood up and cut a beeline for the shed.

The shed was dark and hot, really a bit scary; I was sure spiders lurked there. I left the door wide open for light and made like I was searching for the spade, even though I'd already seen it. High on a shelf, I spotted two bottles of whiskey: one half-gone and the other unopened. I should have known better than to try and take one just then, but I was so excited I set about getting up to the whiskey bottles and bringing one down. I had my hands around one of the bottles when Mr. Ezekiel came in.

"You havin' trouble findin that spa- -," he said.
"Missy, what you think you doin' with that whiskey up there?" He'd scared me out of about ten years of growth, absorbed as I was in stealing the whiskey, and I had very nearly jumped out of my skin.
"I... I'm thirsty." Mr. Ezekiel laughed.
"Lil' Missy Jean just thought she'd take herself a nip, huh? Miss Flora would have ol' Ezekiel's hide if she smelled whiskey on your breath. Go get yourself some tea child, and stop trying to get Zeke in trouble."

I sidled past Mr. Ezekiel and went to get us some tea. We drank our tea (with the mint I had clipped) slowly in the heat of the afternoon, and I piddled around in the garden for a bit. I told Mr. Ezekiel I had to go home to dinner. I went to the gate where my bike was leaning, inert, and got on. All of a sudden the garden was behind me, getting farther and farther behind me, and I was heading toward the river.

It was late in the afternoon and I was heading toward the river. I didn't know why I was heading toward the river. I knew only that the sun had beat down on me all day and all summer and that there was no escaping the sun's heat, just as there was no escaping my thirst or my conscience. So I kept pedal-
ing, passing the hot-black cars, thinking of the water oaks along the river and their shade: the reaching, sheltering limbs of the trees in their appeal to the Spanish moss to take up residence, so that -- as moss and tree, they could continue shading and sheltering, rustling in the wind, enduring the chill of winter and the assault of rain. When I came to the small bluff of the river I flung my bike aside and collapsed in the lap of water oak roots.

After several minutes, I got up and put my bike against the tree and picked my way down the trail that led to the riverbank. There was a small strip of sand that I avoided, walking instead along the thatch of pine needles and leaves worked through with roots. I walked for a long time, swatting mosquitoes and snagging my legs on an occasional thorn. It was still very hot, though the sun had dropped low, and there was a keening of cicadas. I passed a logging mill, where one of the loggers told me to get on home to my Mama's supper table. And walked past the logging mill, where the trees grew in corridors. After the corridors, there was a large, pronounced bend in the river where I was either going to have to wade (subjected to a strong current that had drowned a schoolmate the previous year) or turn back.

I reluctantly turned back, though I had an idea; I had seen a trail branch not far before the bend -- I would take it and see if it cut me through to the other side. The strange summer evening light of the woods, the greying gold of it through the trees, made things eerie. The trail was narrow and viney and I was about ready to turn around when I came upon a widening of the trail. In the small clearing was a stack of wood. I didn't think much of it -- it had to be someone's land and someone's wood -- until I smelled the wood's earthy oak-smell. Something Stephen Till had said came to my mind.

He had been talking to Mr. Ezekiel about how stu-
come to the river, though I wasn't sure what I would do when I got there, except try to find my way home.

I wondered if my Mama had missed me yet, or if she thought I had stayed for dinner at Cousin Flora’s. She would miss me soon enough, I thought, and my portion of the supper that she’d made would grow cold. The little brothers would cry and ask why Jean always got to do big stuff that they, even as boys, couldn’t do. Such thoughts of cold supper and crying brothers and worried Mama came to be very weighty indeed. The further I walked, the darker blue I got, like the night falling around me. I began to cry. I would not find the river, and I would not find my way home, and I would not keep my mother from fear and my brothers from crying and my supper from getting cold. With the last light of the day, I found a big oak tree and went and sat wretchedly under it.

I was still crying, not even thinking about what a noisy sobber I was, and I was hungry and tired and I had nothing, nothing, nothing. Except the whiskey. I had the whiskey, and I had the shelter of a tree, and a night that I was going to get in trouble for whether I had been drinking whiskey or not. For all I knew, whiskey staved hunger and chased thirst. Maybe it even did something to time and place.

I opened the bottle and smelled it. I was still sniffing and the odor made me cough. I held my nose and tipped back the bottle, took a big, wretching gulp, and spilled some down the front of my shirt. I swallowed and sputtered and cried some more, and slugged again. I must’ve had five slugs when I noticed my fingertips were starting to feel numb. I wasn’t hungry or thirsty anymore, so I put the lid back on, fumbling with it as I did so. I sat still for a bit and felt the whiskey spread through me. My thoughts came faster: I was still sad and worried, but I was buoyant, too, and I felt I was expanding. That must be what whiskey does, I thought, make a body bigger and less definite, more numb and more floaty. I thought it must affect time and place because the whiskey-filled body absorbs more of what lies outside it – time and place – and spreads around what makes us ourselves: memory, a warm body.

My body was very warm. It was so warm I decided to take my clothes off. I was wearing a green cotton shirt and khaki shorts, and I shed these, and my underpants, and since I didn’t have any chest yet, I had no brassiere and I was naked. I clambered around the tree, scrambling with the roots under my feet, feeling the coarseness of the bark. I got clean of the roots and started spinning around and dancing. I did this for a long time, stopping on occasion only to slug from the bottle. Eventually, of course, my bony, warm, eleven-year-old body couldn’t keep up with my spinning and drinking. I vomited and lost consciousness among the roots of my tree.

I woke the next morning at the sound of someone’s crackling through the woods. The early sun made my eyes hurt and my mouth was as dry as it had ever been. I discovered my nudity and jumped in my clothes. I turned to gather my whiskey bottle, and who else was standing there, but Mr. Faulkner with his hunting rifle? He had a very slight smile on his face, though his wrinkled forehead and drawn-together eyebrows mirrored my own.

"Are you the child who is either drowned or killed by Ezekiel? I heard about you this morning," he said. I started crying again. Everybody was either thinking I’d drowned or wanting to blame Mr. Ezekiel for my not coming home. Whiskey had not sufficiently dis-
placed time and place in order to absolve me. "You don't have to cry, child, they haven't hung Ezekiel yet."

This made me cry even harder. "I'm thirsty and I want to go home," I sobbed. "I don't want Mr. Ezekiel to hang."

"He won't. I'll take you home." Mr. Faulkner handed me his open canteen and I took half of it down. "I won't tell anyone you were in the woods getting drunk if you give me the bottle of whiskey."

"Thank you, sir." I felt so miserable I didn't even think of the buoyancy of the night before or have any desire to keep the whiskey. He bent down and picked up the bottle.

"Did Tutwiler sell you this?" he asked on examining the bottle.

"Well, sir, there was a lot of it..." He chuckled.

"How did you manage to find it?"

"Bootleggers ought to know better than to leave their slow-burning wood around for God an' everybody to see, sir." He laughed again.

"I'll have to scold Tutwiler on that point," he said. "But why did you feel it necessary to drink whiskey? Nice little girls don't steal whiskey and worry their town while they're off getting drunk in the woods." I couldn't meet his eye.

"It had to do with time and place," I said. He waited for me to say more. "But it was all for naught."

"It isn't always," he said. "But I'm sorry to say that it almost invariably is for little girls and young women. It can usually only make things worse." I followed Mr. Faulkner back to his car -- not far from the other side of the bend that I was trying to reach, as it turned out. He took me home to my punishment and Ezekiel's pardon and drove off with the rest of my whiskey.

All we wanted was a place to sleep outside. It seemed like a simple enough desire, but Holland State Park had the only campground nearby and it's small enough to miss, especially with confused gas station attendants and a poor sense of direction.

We eventually arrived to find a littered beach and a campground full of RVs. Feeling the disappointment of unfulfilled expectations, as if we'd all just finished a novel with a shoddy final chapter, we went for a walk and picked up discarded Coke bottles along the way.

From the top of the tall sand dune we could see a scattering of industrial buildings not far to the east. We decided that the spot was perfect anyway, and in the decision made it so.

In the afternoon we drew chickens in the sand, played with gravity as we leapt down the steep hill, and discovered that holes can be dug with breath alone. We watched the grains spiral outward as if they were water and our mouths the sky that exhaled long, slowly-falling rain drops.

At night, we returned with our sleeping bags wrapped around our shoulders like scarves. The hill seemed to be telling us to go back to the campground. Each time it made our feet slide down, but we didn't listen. We crawled into our sleeping bags to watch the stars, barely dulled by the civilization below us. The cold fell on the sand and froze it in the shapes in which our bodies lay.

The next morning, not knowing the time, but knowing that we should go, we flew down the hill for the last time, got back in the car and began our trip to the Interstate leading back to the world we'd left, our pockets full of sand, ready for life.
and we stood there hugging and crying because it was the last time we would ever see each other the African queen and the American hippie we sat together every day with our books and our slicing grins and those little ketchup packets of liquor and cigarettes are not for women and Africa is not for white gay boys with long hair but together we thrust ourselves into the only two comfortable chairs because the bartender knew our drinks and we knew each other enough to kiss in front of drunkards dragging their narrow asses in to tell her of her beauty and ask if I was her boyfriend a close friend as close as they come I never told her I was gay and she never told me she was in love with me being so young her 29 years had made her face solid had healed her womb from her bastard son I never met her anywhere but the bar but where else would we be but sitting next to each other laughing and letting our legs touch and holding hands like refugees or a king and queen holding court but we both retired when we clung to each other out back of the bar crying
Every morning I stumble out of bed and head towards the Black and Decker coffeepot. I dump three-fourths of a cup of Starbucks into the coffee filter and I pour four cups of purified water into the pot. I recall how I simply drove my new Pontiac Sunfire to the Starbucks coffee shop, the one inside Barnes and Noble. I remember how I complained the whole way there because of traffic.

Dad gags at the faintest smell of the beverage. He recalls the days when the government yanked him and his classmates out of school and ordered them to go to the coffee plantation. Their education was ignored in order to fill the export quota. My dad detested those long hours spent in the sweltering heat. Dying of thirst, he was given small rations of parasitic water. His belly ached even more, as the worms consumed last night's dinner. Ratonsito Blanco, they called him (skinny little white rat). His fingertips are permanently dyed blood red from popping open the coffee cherries and picking out the beans. His shoulders, cheeks, nose, and hands are all scorched from the years he worked in the inferno, laying out the beans to roast in the ultraviolet sun.

I add a spoonful of sugar to my coffee. Without sugar exportation I never would have been brought into this world. I see my father, abuelo, and two tias inside a cargo train, piled on top of each other, sealed inside a dark sugar cane box on their way to freedom. I see their bribed accomplice unhinge the box. They take off running, dodging bullets as they climb over the concave wall that leads to Guantanamo Bay Air Force Base.

Every morning when I breathe in the rich aroma that infiltrates my room, I thank the man who probably was killed for helping my family in and out of the sugar cane box. I thank the soldiers who shot at my family for having a bad aim. I remember that things have changed for some, but not for all. As I swivel around in my desk chair and drink my coffee, I see the plantation workers swivel their shovels, and their lives, into the ground.

Do you understand what I am sayin? Here I am upon my knees — saylon and prayin to give birth to something Hot, because sista it's cold outside — and even when it's not, it still is.

You see, street cats always ask me what real is (not listening to the Ghetto's hymn), like they know what the dilly is. So I say that the Ghetto's attire — be what real is...you know crack, rocks, pot, heroin shots and vacant lots.

When I first came to her, I was a little afraid of her. So I shamed her, restrained her, maimed her, put my shit down and became lame to her.

When I left, all the older cats maintained and gave fame to her, laid claim to her, spit game to her, but they never put a name to her — so I call her my fue, like so many dark streets I lit up for her.

For her plights, little brothas killed for her and little sistas sacrificed their Fed aid for her. Even street vets wound up dead for her.

She will not attempt to straight pimp you — she will. To deal with her you must have skills. You'll scream "fuck the world" and soon give in too.
She claimed that my ghettoish esteem was way far from being black. And that I had style but it was the "blackness" I lacked, somewhat like the Gangster night calls with gunshots in the back.

She asked me if I was white or black, and I said neither one, or somewhere in between. Plus she was mean and had been seen in places where cats got big faces. Has made some trade free will for free bases.

I knew that I would get in trouble for settlin', but I kept on peddlin', I got caught up before my mind got rich — trying to make some scraps like trigger fingers that itch.

She said that she would call me an ambulance if I ever became a snitch. So I, I tried to be online, but the ghetto matrix had a major glitch.

She said my style could never switch, and that I was her daughter for life. She said her peeps could not pronounce Ijeoma Onwuneme, but they could pronounce us together for life.

To the script I attempted to flip-flop-flip-flop into whiteness — NO — to the Ghetto streets.
place, though. Dad built it for me and Ava when he found out we were coming for the summer. Ava acted like she was too old for it, but really I think she just wouldn't play in it to spite Dad. She didn't like him all the time, either, because of the new wife. I loved the treehouse though, and Dad. The first level was about eight feet up. It had a railing around the three sides that faced out from the tree, in case we were going to fall off. There was a hole cut in the platform next to the tree and that was where you would climb up, using the planks that Dad had nailed into the tree as your hand and footholds. I didn't like that first level much, though. There were too many ants running around and they'd bite real hard. The second level was up another eight feet or so. You would have to climb this knotted rope that Dad had hung around a big branch to get up there. It was just a little platform, only four by four feet big. That one was okay, but I always kept on climbing. My place was a little forked branch about twenty-five or thirty feet high.

I thought that crook was the best place in the world, and I sure wasn't going to tell Ava about it. She could read the entire county library on the sunny front porch swing, for all I cared. My place was better. The ants didn't come up that far and nothing really bothered me at all. Certainly no hornets. I would sit in my crook, wrap my arms around the tree trunk and let my legs dangle. It was like a great green cradle and sometimes I would even fall asleep, lying there all drowsy. The branches were more slender up near the top and when the wind blew, the tree would sway real gently. The sun would filter through the chinks of dark green foliage like brilliance itself and I'd close my eyes and watch the patterns on my eyelids dance.

I daydreamed. I let my head get all warm and fuzzy, got lost inside it, and went someplace more exciting than ten acres of cedar swamp and firebrush in the country. I was a slave girl tied to the mast of a ship that was swaying on an ocean storm. The wind rustling in the leaves became the wings of hungry seagulls flapping around my head. The seagulls were going to eat my eyes out of my skull and tear my clothes to tatters, so I'd be half-naked and blind and completely at the mercy of that rough, dark pirate who'd kidnapped me. I'd press myself against the trunk of the tree and kiss the smooth bark and run my hands up and down the limb. Then the wind would die and the leaves would fall still and I'd let go and lean back with wide-open eyes, up in the tree again but not quite on earth.

One time when I opened my eyes, Ava was standing there at the bottom of the tree. She had a strange look on her face. "I saw you," she said. I told her she didn't see nothing, and to get away, the tree house was mine. I was mad that she had snuck up on me and I hadn't even heard her coming. She had a stealthy way of coming upon you doing just what you didn't want anybody to see, and then lording it over you. It went with her secretive nature and her closed face that didn't betray anything but annoyance. And I saw enough of that, I know. Oh, we were like the sun and the moon, Ava and I. I was the sun, all warm and glowing and constant. She was the cold moon, shining an irresistible light like a pale path across a lake. You never knew where it was going to end or what shape it'd take that night. She could make you go mad. You never knew what Ava was thinking.

I spent a whole lot of time trying to figure that out, what Ava was thinking. I would confess something, like, Don't tell anyone, but I have a crush on Jon Plummer. Then I would wait for her to say something back, but she'd never tell me who she liked in return. Instead, she'd snort and say, Jon Plummer, the pig farmer's son? And I'd feel all stupid and silly and offer something up, Well, he's got a trampoline
and...and he's the fastest boy in my class! Then she'd roll her eyes and tell me to go away, I was boring her. If I had loved Ava a little less, I think I would have been a lot happier. My heart never ached so bad as it did when she dismissed me like that.

One day towards the end of the first month, we had been excused from the dinner table and I was on my way outside. Ava must've finished her stack of library books, because she stopped me and asked where I was going. I told her that I was just going for a bike ride and she asked me if she could come along. I tried to conceal my surprise. Ava wanted to go for a bike ride with me? Not wanting to appear too eager, I told her whatever, if I didn't care. So we started off down the dirt road, our pink Huffys kicking up the dry dust as they bumped and lurched over the stones and sandy patches. My beautiful sister sat up straight on her bike, her long slender legs whirling around much faster than my short, chubby ones. Her long dark hair hung loosely down her back in a haphazard braid. I let her bike in front of me so that I could watch her braid swinging back and forth. It was important to her that she be first, and I could play my inferior role well, if it made Ava happy.

About a half mile past Dad's house, the road cleaved in two. The dirt road curved left and continued down a windy hill lined with shacks and trailers towards the lake below. Straight ahead, the road became the paved property of a cookie cutter subdivision. I always went left. In the subdivision, there was perfection in the manicured lawns, hedges and flowerbeds maintained by stay-at-home moms with manicured nails; manicured husbands in suits and ties arrived home at 6 p.m. and greeted their manicured children and wives at the door. The times I had biked through there, I became all too aware of my own Kmart clothing, scabby knees, and disheveled hair. The subdivision had its perverse draw on me, but I preferred to go left and bike with superiority past the ramshackle ply-board houses of the dirt road, even if I did become enveloped in a cloud of dry dust that would stick in a layer of grime to my sun-dampened skin.

When Ava stopped her bike at the fort, I nearly ran into her. She was looking over her shoulder at me as I lurched breathlessly to a stop. "Delaine, let's go straight," she said. It was Ava, so I agreed, not that I had much of a choice. If I said no, she would have gone on without me.

In the fading light, the subdivision was even more perfect than in the glare of high noon. I hadn't been through it in three weeks, and a small transformation had taken place. The grass was greener, the flowering bushes more lush, the lights coming on one by one in the family rooms were softer and warmer. I was even more intensely aware of a life that I would never have. Ava, in her beauty, biking proudly in front of me, did little to alleviate my grudge. Was she oblivious to the sick perfection of these cookie cutter families? Or did she just not care like I did? The ache was in my chest. I missed my mother's arms.

At the top of the hill, Ava stopped again. The lake reached into indigo darkness around a curve. We could not see it, but I knew that the lights of the summer cottages were coming on in parallels, one bound in the fabric of reality and the other, a fanciful reflection on the surface of the water. I felt like the shimmering reflection, only half-alive and in the dark. This was Ava's world, not mine, and she moved through it with ease while I fumbled along behind her. Come on, she said to me, I want to show you something. We hid our bikes in the ditch, then, and walked along the side of the road. She pulled something out of her pocket. In the dark, I couldn't see what it was. She stopped and so I stopped, too. A small yellow flame flickered in her hand; she was cupping the other
hand around a cigarette, trying to light it. I watched her as she inhaled deeply and blew smoke into the night.

"Where'd you get those?" I asked.

"Stole them." She tilted her chin up and exhaled a cloud over my head like an Indian smoke signal. The conversation was over, I knew, so I didn't ask anymore. They were the same cigarettes that Dad's new wife smoked.

Ava held the burning cigarette like a torch in one hand, and grabbed my wrist with the other. I tried to ask her where we were going, but she shushed me, so I shut up. The night was thick as a dream, but I could feel the sharp edges of Ava's fingernails imbedded in my wrist. She'd gotten in the habit of filing them into points because of the boys on the school bus. I tried to swallow the thick lump of wrong that was rising up in my throat. In front of a blue house, Ava slowed. She crouched down behind a manicured shrub at the end of the driveway and stubbed her cigarette out in the gravel. A light was on in the family room. I saw the mother cross the room with a tray of glasses and bend down out of sight. The room flickered with the blue glow of a television. Ava's grip on my wrist tightened as she pulled me closer to the house. Now we were below the window. My heart was pounding as we stood on our tiptoes and peered through the glass at the family inside.

It was like watching some 1950's television show. The father reclined in an easy chair with the newspaper in his hands and the remote control resting on his thigh. Two kids sat on the floor in front of a board game, a boy about Ava's age and a little girl. The tray with the glasses of milk and Chex mix was on the coffee table behind them. The mother was knitting and looking up to laugh periodically at the show on the TV. It was surreal in a way. I couldn't remember if we had ever done anything like that when our parents were married to each other. I wanted to ask Ava, but I didn't dare to speak. We just watched quietly for a long time. If any of them had turned around, they would have seen two pale faces with transfixed eyes in the window. But none of them suspected they were being watched. Why would they really?

After a time, Ava pulled me down and we crept silently back to our bikes. Once we got out of the subdivision and back on our dirt road, we were giddy with laughter. We hadn't been caught, they hadn't even known we were there. They were so stupid. We nicknamed them the Cleavers and told jokes about them all the way home. I felt the lump in my chest dissolve as Ava's warm laughter enveloped me in the darkness. It became our secret. We had a secret between the two of us, and I loved that more than anything.

After dinner each night, I would wait for her to say something. When she didn't it was pure agony. She would curl up in front of the fireplace with a book and I'd be stuck playing piano for dad and his wife or some other boring fake family thing which Ava always got out of but I felt obligated to do so that Dad wouldn't think we both hated him. But on a night when she'd turn to me and suggest a bike ride, I'd be out on my pink HuffY in a flash. Dad would tousle our heads and say how nice it was we were finally getting along. Then we'd be down the road on our bikes, heading straight into the dusk-laden subdivision to choose a window for the night.

By the end of the summer, we'd spied on most every house in that subdivision, but the blue house was by far our favorite. I liked to watch the young couple with the baby, but Ava said they were boring, she had no time for babies. There was also a house with teenagers, which fascinated us both, but it was too dangerous. We'd almost gotten caught by them once and had to make a quick getaway. What had
happened was, the teenage daughter was home by herself watching a movie with her boyfriend. They were on the sofa kissing all over each other, and I had gotten the giggles. The harder Ava pinched me, the harder I giggled into my hand, until I was crossing my legs I had to pee so bad. It got so bad I couldn't hold it back and I just snorted out loud, wetting my pants a little at the same time. The daughter sat straight up and started buttoning her shirt, saying that she thought she'd heard something. She went to the light switch and flicked it on and off three times. The last thing I saw was the boyfriend storming towards the door, all flushed and angry looking. That was when Ava and I took off running across the road into the woods like whitetail deer, snapping branches, leaping over fallen logs, and rustling up the dry leaves under our feet. Ava was just in front of me and let a green branch snap back into my face. It left a welt across my cheek, but I didn't care right then. We finally collapsed in a pile of leaves in the sinkhole of a rotted stump and listened to the blood pounding in our ears, just enough light from the half-full moon to see that we weren't being followed. However, all up and down the street, lights were flickering on and off inside the houses, a Neighborhood Watch in effect. My heart had near exploded that night and I swore I'd never do it again, but, well, I couldn't say no to Ava. The blue house was a good house, though. They never once suspected that two small faces at the window were becoming integrated in their lives forever.

The mother was plump and soft. She liked to bake and would always be bringing out trays of cookies and brownies to the family room. The husband was hard, with round muscles. He'd always wave her cookies away, but the kids would have one each as they played their games on the floor. We watched as she devoured whole platters of goodies behind her family's back, picking up the last few crumbs with her fingertips.

Between ourselves, we called her Fatty Butt, but I felt sorry for her that no one wanted to eat her cookies so she had to eat them all herself. If I had been one of her kids, I would have eaten more of them. They never even said thanks. I'd have said thanks at least. We called the husband the Bronco because of this one time we saw him crawling around the floor on all fours while his daughter, in a cowgirl hat, rode on his back. The girl wasn't too interesting, except for sometimes she'd have a tantrum if she thought her brother was cheating her. Her face would get red and she'd start to scream. The husband would look up from his paper, real annoyed like, and say, "Game over." Then he would pick her up under his arm and take her to her room, I guess. The mom and the son would give each other a look and then pack up the game. When the husband came back, they'd all watch TV silently. We'd usually leave then.

I gathered it was the boy that Ava was most interested in. He was maybe just a year older than she was. It was hard for me to tell, since I was only just beginning to notice boys anyway. He looked like a Polish prince to me, with a round face and black hair in his eyes. I didn't like how he always got his sister in trouble, and I did see him cheat at Monopoly once, too. He was pilfering money from the bank when his sister wasn't looking. Not that she'd admit it, but Ava did the exact same thing to me. It made me mad, how older siblings always are trying to pull one over the younger ones. But whatever Ava's reasons were, we seemed to spend most of our time at the window of the blue house.

It was a night towards the end of August, after we'd hidden our bikes in the ditch and were walking towards the house, that I asked Ava if I could have a drag off of her cigarette. I hadn't asked her before, because I was pretty sure she'd say no, but that night I wanted to try one real badly. I reminded her that I
was almost eleven and that I'd been second-hand smoking all summer anyway. We stopped on the side of the road and she handed it to me. Ignoring the amused look in her eyes, I fumbled with it and finally got it placed between the index and middle fingers of my right hand, like I'd seen her do.

"Okay," she said. "Put it between your lips and just breathe in. Not too hard!" But it was too late for me, I'd taken a colossal puff and the blue smoke choked my lungs. Ava rolled her eyes as I hacked away, eyes watering and lungs struggling for a clean breath of air. Then she finished the cigarette and stubbed it out. I didn't ask for another puff, and I don't think she would have given me one. As we neared the window, I was strangely light-headed and nauseous. I clutched her arm, but she shook me off. She was annoyed because we were late and would have less time to watch the Cleavers before we had to get home.

The blue light of the television was flickering in an empty room. The tray was upset. Milk spread over the platter of cookies and dripped like clockwork onto the carpet. The pieces of the board game were scattered across the floor and the newspaper lay crumpled on the easy chair, pages fluttering as the ceiling fan whirred. The TV talked to an empty room. I felt like I was going to be sick from the cigarette. Ava, I said, we should go. But she gripped my wrist tightly. There was a strange, desirous light in her eyes. I think she wanted to see them fall.

We waited. After a long minute of milk dripping in the dead blue of a muted television, the silence broke. Fatty Butt came down the stairs. She held her little daughter in a white nightgown on one hip, and pulled the son by his arm with her free hand. Both the children looked frightened and the mother was crying with her whole body. It was just a flash, an instant in time, as she hurried them across the family room to the door, but it seemed to be on pause forever. I looked up at Ava, but her eyes were fixed to the window. She was trembling, just. We waited again, as the door slammed, the car revved up in the driveway, and red taillights disappeared around the curve. When the car was gone, the Bronco appeared in the family room. He was wearing boxers and his muscles bulged grotesquely in the flickering light. I hated him for whatever he'd done. Hated him from the pit of my stomach.

He turned towards the window then and looked in the direction that the car had gone. He was staring through us, as if we were reflections in the glass. I don't think he saw us at first. We stood like rabbits caught in the headlights. My head was still spinning, and Ava's fingernails dug painfully into my arm. Then his eyes narrowed and he gave a start.

Ava and I didn't stick around to see what he'd do. We high-tailed it out of his lawn as fast as we could. Ava on her long legs was leaving me behind. I couldn't see her up ahead in the pitch black, but I could hear her feet pounding on the pavement. I imagined that he was behind me. Any minute his hand would fasten around my neck and I would be caught. This was nothing like the pirate daydream I used to have up in my tree. If he caught me, there would be no more trees or sunny afternoons spent daydreaming. That much I knew for sure.

When I got to the bikes, Ava was gone. The moon was just a sliver and it was very dark. I slung a leg over my bike and looked around. All was quiet and she was nowhere. I headed down the hill towards the lake and took the long way home, back up through the honest shacks of the dirt road. Dad yelled at us for getting home late and at Ava for deserting me. I could have been killed biking in the dark by myself, he said. I felt like I had been killed, only I hadn't been hit by a car. Part of me had drowned in a reflection of a blue,
flickering room.

We were grounded for that last week of the summer. I tried to ask Ava one time what she thought had happened at the blue house, but she wouldn't say. I had my own theories, but for once, I kept them to myself. When Mom's car finally drove up the driveway late one night to take us home, we both ran outside and threw our arms around her as she kissed our foreheads. Dad had tears in his eyes as he put our suitcases in Mom's car, so I tried not to look too excited to be going home. We waved goodbye out the back window, as he stood on the front porch with his arm around the waist of his new wife, but as soon as we pulled out onto the road, Ava and I let out whoops of joy. In the car, as we drove southward, I let Ava and Mom make jokes about Dad and his new wife all the way home without telling them to stop. It was better that we were all flawed together, but I didn't join in either.

Sometimes
I finally get quiet
And this thing stops gnawing
And we can lie on our backs
Staring up at the leaves.

The sun swallows us and
The shade spits us back out
And we just let the leaves
Photosynthesize.

I know that this thing, this love
Is good and natural.
We were born out of the same tree
(brother lover friend).
Its leaves make up our notebooks
And we write write write out our lives
With green blood,
With tree sap.

You smile over at me,
Leaves in your hair.
I pluck one out and
Watch you wince.

You shrug, as if to say

\textit{don't matter much,}

Reach out and pluck something
From between my breasts.
It hurts, a little, like picking a scab--
I can feel old skin tearing.
There in your hand is a leaf,
Scarlet with gold shot through.

I say,
Keep it.
Let it grow.
I am in love with the sound of my own voice.
We go on regular dates, to dinner parties and coffeehouses,
like this one; we read words aloud.
My voice's turn-ons are umlauts, diphthongs,
and tildes over n. Turn-offs are
apostrophes after s and silent m.
My lover and I share personal malaprops, several
bad accents, and an entire cast of sketch-comedy characters.
With so much in common, how could it not be
a match?
Our current favorite words are
anorak, Monongahela, effervescent, ramekin.
Aloof is on the all-time list.
Honore de Balzac's favorite word was
the French for hemorrhoids, but who could pronounce that?
Except for maybe Toulouse-Lautrec: ah.
Words roll and break like little orgasms,
until our glories are unmatched by La Diva Tetrazzini,
Melba, Anderson, Fleming.
In Jim Morrison's first concert appearances, he sang
with his back turned to the audience from stagefright. No one cared.
It was his voice that mattered, rich
baritone laced with drugs and phlegm, his voice
that was the sound of rock and roll, the sound of sex.
It's always the voice.
Mine is a smooth alto
that fades into mezzo more often than I'd like,
squeaks and becomes raspy without provocation,
that can't sing on pitch. I adore it.
Sound familiar? No? This is the secret life of the voice you know.
It's the voice inside my head
as I read to myself, the one only I can hear.
Its reverberations inside my skull
are the first and last sounds I will know.
Do you understand I have nothing else to love, nothing so pliant?
The sound of your true voice is the only part of yourself
completely secret, completely perfect, completely free.
Indescribable. If I heard your true voice I know I would weep.
The purest eloquence is silence.
Andrew Minnelli

The Storm

The storm rolls in--
Stampeding boulders in the sky.

It springs upon the harbor--
Deafening big engine booms
and winds of cometing rain.

Shroudlines slap the masts and
the frigate birds scream crazily.

Rip Tide

This is how it is--

One tumbles
and turns in the swimming blackness.
There is a torn promise in the sound of the water
ripping into the Atlantic's frigid currents.

One speaks, or is about to speak,
not that it matters.

What matters is this--

The currents are thawing.
I have been struggling against the tides
yet something keeps me afloat.

The Hourglass

When I saw the hourglass,
grains of sand fell,
a shape rose up in my mind:
Over the gulf of fate
a panicked sea turtle
struggled — consumed by
the hurricane's eye,
deep within certainty.
The big Simon Says game. We always have it at the end of the camp season during "Olympics Week." The winner at the end of the game gets fifty points for his team. I never win. But I get to stay in the game until at least half of the camp is out because I hide in the back row so nobody can tell that I put my hands on my head when they say shoulders or something like that. Rick, the camp director, always runs this game. He's a big guy. We all like him; he's a good artist so we all want to be on his team for Pictionary.

Today is so hot, and I can't wait for the game to be over so I can jump in the pool. I can feel the sweat beading on my forehead and the armpits of my T-shirt getting soaked. I stand in line with a group of Small Fries, but I am an Apache. That's the group for nine-year-old boys. At first Rick starts saying everything slowly. This is so the Small Fries can stay in for a little while. He starts calling. "Simon says touch your feet. Simon says touch your head. Simon says touch your nose," he says as he touches his ears. Some of the people in the front rows get called out. Another reason why I like the back. I can't see Rick from here and he can't mess me up. Then he starts calling faster. "Simon says touch your knees, Simon says touch your butt, Simon says touch your stomach, Simon says touch your neck, Simon says touch your thighs, touch your feet." And he touches his shoulders. More people, out. They sit down and watch us from the side, cheering on their friends.

I am forced to move up a few rows, still in the game. But I have messed up a couple times. Small Fries don't like to call people out. They're afraid of the older boys, and if they call out, say, an Apache, they might get thrown in the deep end of the pool, or a stray arrow might hit them in archery. Not that I would do that of course. My Small Fry community is gone. I'm up in Cherokee line territory now. Those are the twelve-year-old boys. At sleepovers they get to make s'mores in the fire and they always run around to the Small Fry tents and make the little boys pee in their sleeping bags. In the morning the Small Fries drag their bags through the dirt, smelly and still wet, to their mommies and daddies. They cry to them and tell them the camp is haunted, and never ever to make them sleep here again.

Behind me is a six-year old. When Rick starts calling, he notices I can't keep up. "Touch your shoulders-Simon saystouch your knees-Simon saystouch your elbows-Simon saystouch your eyes-Simon saystouch your mouth-Simon saystouch your feet." I bend over, trying to touch the lower regions and when "head" is called, I'm still touching my feet. Rick looks at everyone, to see they're in the right position.

"Riiiiiiick!" I hear the Black Foot yell from behind me. "Riiiiick! Harper's touchin' his feet! He was, anyway. He's a cheater." I look over my shoulder at him and Rick tells me to sit down. I walk to the back of the field and kick the Black Foot in the back of the kneecaps. He loses balance and when he falls over he still has his hands on his head.

"Harper," Rick says. "Cut that shit out." They usually threaten us with not being able to go on a Friday field trip, but since it's the last day of camp, there isn't one. And I can't get in trouble.

I go over and sit with the rest of the Apaches. We've all been kicked to the curb. I look over at Mike who's rubbing the scar on his hand. We all have the same scar; it's from our Blood Brothers initiation. I grab the watermelon out of my cooler and start spitting the seeds at that stupid Black Foot.


"Go sit down, Chris." Rick says when he notices that only one of Chris' hands is in the right spot.

"But I was flickin' a seed off me! Harper keeps spittin' watermelon seeds at me and it's disgustin'."

"Fine, stay in. Harper, stop spitting seeds at him."
I nod my head. "Alright. I'm sorry, Rick." There are only ten people left in the game. "Cher-o-kee. Cher-o-kee. Cher-o-kee." The twelve-year old boys are cheering on the six in their group who have stayed in.

"Cherokees suck," Mike says to one of the dyslexics in the older tribe. "Why don't you say that to my face?"

"I just did. CHEROKEES SUCK."

"How many Apaches are there in there, twerp? Hmmmmm...I don't see any. Why don't you learn your body parts before you tell us we suck."

"Why don't you learn how to read," Mike says. The dyslexic tackles Mike and Mike knees him in the balls and then someone says, "FIGHT!" and we all jump in.

One by one we are pulled out of the pile by Rick the almighty. Mike and Dyslexic are at the bottom. I am at the top though, using my sharp knees and elbows to try and bruise the Cherokees beneath me. Mike could only use his chin after everybody jumped on, and by the looks of the other guy he did a good job.

"You guys are all disqualified from the Olympics. And no swimming pool either. You all will meet with me after this game is finished."

"Okay, Rick." We all nod our heads and inspect bruises and blood.

"Go get cleaned up. See the nurse. I don't care," Rick says as he gets back to the game.

We sit down again and watch the game. Now we move to the other side of the field, facing the Cherokees. The lifeguard comes and sits down with us. He's also our soccer coach and he's Rick's best friend.

"Youse guys trying to beat up them Cherokees?"

"Yeah. We woulda killed 'em if Rick didn't jump in," Mike informs Tim. Tim nods his head and tells us that he can show us a few tricks. When he was in camp, he beat up one of the Cherokees when he was an Apache too.

"FIRST ONE TO TIM'S HAT IS THE WINNER," Rick says as the final decider of who will win the Olympic game. Four people race over to Tim's hat and one stays behind.

"Ha ha, you stupids. He didn't say Simon says," Mike says and throws a twig at the fools. Rick picks Chrissie the Sissy up over his head and declares him the winner. All of Chris's tribesmen run over and surround Rick, reaching for their champion. Rick takes him over to the pool and throws him in. Clothes and all. Rick comes to the fence, facing us. He flips his hat around backwards and sticks his pointer at me.

Mike says, "Good luck, dude. And don't forget to not pick on the poor Cherokee wusses." I kick all the dirt from the baseball field to the pool office, pretending the rocks are Rick's head. He gets up from his seat and shuts the door behind me. And locks it. Was that a lock I heard? And tells me to sit down.

"Simon says sit down." I grab a roll-y chair and sit on it, not even swirling around.

"No. Not there," he says as he brushes his shorts. "Simon says sit on my lap." I look at his lap and then back at his face. I squint my eyes and bite my cheek.

"Ut-uh," I say as I shake my head. He pats his lap again and motions me over. I shake my head again, glancing back at the door.

"Harper, it's okay. Trust me. Mike does it all the time." I look back at his lap and it looks even more rotten than before. I walk to the door and start to twist the knob, but I can't open it. Rick starts to laugh and I look back at him, the big guy that sings goofy songs on long bus rides.

He gets up and leans against the door, over my head. "You ain't getting out. Come and sit down and we can talk about this. I won't tell your parents that you started that fight. You know they won't let you come back next year. You'll have to baby sit your little sister and mow the lawn. No more fun at Camp Sprindrift."

My eyes close down again from the weight of my
forehead and I start to scream. "Get me out of here! Somebody help! I'm locked in! Fire! Fire! Fire!"

My mom used to make me go to "just say no" clinics and I was always the loudest screamer. They always taught us to say fire if something bad was happening. Nobody would come if I said, "Help! Rick's trying to get me to sit on his lap!" And I'd be stuck in here forever.

The Small Fry leader busts the door in and gives us a surprised look when he sees no fire. I run around him and out the door before he can say anything. I run up the dirt path to the parking lot and decide to walk home; Rick would be my bus chaperone and I don't want to see him again. I try and decide what to tell my parents and I hear a beep from behind me. I move over a couple of feet, so the leaves are scraping my face. I look over and see Rick's car door open.

"Get in."

"No, get away from me."

"Get in. I want to talk to you about this. It was just a joke, you know? You can even ask Mike, he knows it's a joke too. Ask him." I start walking as fast as I can, headed for my house.

"Harper, Jesus Christ! Listen to me! He drags his hand across his shaved head. "Just don't tell your parents, okay? I won't ever joke like that with you again. Okay, Harper? I see a police car driving on the other side and I flag him down. I jump up and down and flail my arms.

"Help! Help!"

"Shit." Rick says, rubbing the skin between his eyes. The cop car stops and I run across the street.

"What's the problem, son?"

"He's following me," I say pointing to Rick and his red Jeep. He gets out of his car and grabs his belt, pulling his pants up higher. I watch from behind the hood of his car as he crosses over to Rick.

"You bothering this boy? He says you're bothering him. That true?"

"No, sir. I was just trying to give him a ride home. He lives pretty far from here. I'm his camp coun-

selor." The man looks back at me, squinting in the sunlight. "You a camp counselor? You know my boy, Mikie Pallazola? I was just goin' to pick him up."

"Yeah, I know Mike. He's one of Harper's friends."

"Okay, man. I can take the boy from here." And he pats the hood of Rick's jeep. "Come on. We'll go pick up Mike, get some ice cream, and then I'm dropping you off. Then I have to go back to work. So you don't like that man, son?"

"No, sir. Not after today," I say as I fasten the seat belt in the front seat.

"You get into a fight? Kicked outta camp? That why you're walking home?" he asks as he examines my blood and scrapes. I nod my head. Something like that.

"Glad my Mikie boy wasn't with you. He won't be back at camp if he gets into another fight. Swear that boy likes to throw punches. Just like his mama." He looks at me and laughs.

"This is the first time I've ridden in a cop car."

"Well, I'm glad my son is hanging out with the good boys! Even though he don't act like one." I examine the buttons and switches and look for the word "EJECT" on one of them. Because I would like to be ejected. Ejected from Mike's dad, ejected from camp, from Apaches, from counselors, from Simon Says. Eject me from life.

We pull into the parking lot and I get out so Mike can sit between me and his dad. I feel safer with Mike around. I look into his eyes. I want to look in and see if he ever sat on Rick's lap. If he wants to be ejected like I do. I can't tell. Instead I look down at our hands, and I rub my scar against his.

He looks down and whispers so his dad can't hear, "Apache leader says no camp for us next year. Too much trouble."

"That's what I says too."
I had no choice but to wear the bright orange belt.
To stand in front of the steaming cars
on impossibly cold Detroit mornings.
To hear Dick Purton's frail voice flying from the barely open window.
I didn't really enjoy standing out in the cold.
It was more of a pain, showing up to the empty parking lot in
the death of morning, watching headless cars
drive by in search of work, release — not pleasure.

As the children arrived in their meaningless
Town and Country I would walk the thick yellow lines,
dulled by a dust of salt, wondering what would happen
if I were run down by one of the crazed soccer moms
searching for one more second in the day.
Would I go to crossing guard heaven,
enshrined as a crossing guard martyr,
remembered in the annals of crossing guard history?
The first bell would ring me out of my reverie.
As the children ran inside.
Once again, I would be alone.

The stragglers were always the same.
Tony Fuller, David Lawrence, running by
when I told them to walk. As the second bell rang
I would remember
the math homework I had so carelessly neglected,
the history assignment I had conveniently forgotten,
and the twenty dollars I had liberated from my mother.

I stood against the lifeless telephone pole
watching hot air escape through virgin lips.
I turned as the last student ran through the brown doors
and as the third bell rang
I wondered what would happen if I walked away,
if I turned west and crossed the black asphalt lot?
But I always kept east, and wrote on long green chalk boards,
"I Will Not Throw Red Apples At My Classmates."

His breath always smelled like boiling skunk, rotting saliva, and dirty underwear so for Christmas
that year his students bought him a case of Crests.
They thought they had fallen upon a new idea, an ingenious one, as they collected worn dollar bills from
the students' pockets each day before the old man got back from lunch. They would slide their mascara
wands over their lashes, spray designer knock-off perfumes in the small spaces between their sprouting
breasts, tease their bangs into a ball, all while balancing a mirror atop their social studies book, ducking
down to catch their reflection. They would belch his five syllable last name, tasting again their tater tots and hot dog skin. They slapped hands, slapped asses, drew naked tits and hairy cunts on the board before he arrived. But when he arrived, and he always did in the same manner he had every day for the last thirty years (nearly chasing the sound of the end-of-lunchtime-bell to his classroom door), he paused on the threshold, today unnoticed by his students. Pivoting on the heel of his worn loafers, he turned north down the hallway, cupped his hands over his mouth, nose, and exhaled.
I was tall and skinny and she was short and fat. My clothes fit me correctly (and I say that with an emphasis), hers were too damn tight. Her hair was dirt blonde colors and smelled like cheese, and mine were long, coarse and red. It smelled like Blue Magic hair grease — the green kind. I always wore shoes, the K-Mart "Jesus" sandals and she didn't—just bare dirty flesh. When her mother gave orders, her words were sweetish sour like strawberry rhubarb pie. Her daughter would not respond and instead she talked over her mother — disobeyed orders and complained. When my mother gave orders she gave specific instructions to be carried out with no questions, and no complaining. Her words were stern and tasty like mustard greens with hot sauce. And behind my mother's mustard greens words, I listened, said nothing and followed her orders.

"It's time to come into the house and do your chores," her mother instructed her daughter.

"I don't want to...you do it."

"Come on in now."

"I hate you...why don't you do it?" Her mother stood there on her front porch and said nothing. This confused me; all of it was new to me. You're not supposed to talk back to your mother.

"Don't talk back to your mother," I told her, "or I won't play with you. Tell her you are sorry...NOW," I said. "Ok...I won't do it again...I apologize mom."

Her mother smiled at me surpassingly and graciously. For the rest of the summer, she followed her mother's instructions carefully and decisively. From then on, when I talked she eagerly listened. If I gave her orders she eagerly followed them. She wanted to please me and I tried my hardest not to please her.

Nikki is a white girl. She was my first white friend — my best friend during the summer of 1986. She was trailer trash and I was ghetto fabulous. I spent the first six years of my life in a housing project called Patwood, and Nikki lived in a trailer behind Versalues, the baseball park next to Patwood.

My skin is black and hers white. My skin is white and hers white. Her eyes are blue and mine brown. Nikki's skin is black and mine's black. Our colors mixed together well. We became one — a mushy gray color.

After long days of playing, my mama would spray us with the water hose to cool off. I let her take a lick of my grape freeze cup and comb my kinky hair. Nikki asked me why my hair was so nappy, and in a smart reply I told her that it was not nappy, just a little angry. My mama smiled.

I hated our mushy gray skin. It made people stare and laugh at us when we played, talked and walked together. They called us "two little white girls" — trailer trash and Ghetto and I told them, "fuck you" and kept on playing.

I was the only kid in the housing project willing to play with Nikki. My black friends would ask me why I wanted to play with her, and I told them because she was different—not like us. Nikki smelled like bologna and puppy breath and I smelled like summer must.
We sit in a class together and he tells me stories of how he's gotten in trouble. One time, our principal was walking this really fucking ugly dog and as he drove by with his friends he squirted our principal with a watergun. He got in trouble.

One time, he had this HUGE party at his house and the cops came to break it up. He got in trouble again.

I see him sitting next to me. He lifts up the left side of his flannel shirt and shows a scar near his heart. He tells me he got in a knife fight once and almost died; almost.

He tells me that he has drowned himself a hundred times in alcohol, he admits that he is an alcoholic.

He tells me he doesn’t think much about God; he used to be religious. I used to be too.

He tells me that he’ll worry about God when he’s 80 and gonna die cause right now he just wants to have fun. He is 17.

I see him in the hallway.

He’ll get in trouble tomorrow for bringing drugs to school and will be suspended.

He’ll consider taking a train to stay with a friend in Detroit.

Classes are in session right now and we are the only two people in this hall.

We walk towards each other, his step lighter on one foot, adds a bounce to his stride.

A smile creeps slowly across his face.

He’ll dye his hair orange in two days.

He’ll decide against the trip and go out for a night of drinking on Sunday.

I disappear into his arms.

I feel his heartbeat because I am so short.

When I tell him this, he laughs at me, that laugh that hurtles itself from the depths of his gut.

He’ll come home too late and his step-dad will be there.

We laugh together.

We part.

I hear about him 4 days later.

He got in trouble.

I see him on the 7th day.

He is lying down, his hands are folded; it looks as if he has put on skin-tight gloves that almost match his natural hands; almost.

His lips are chapped, darker than they usually are.

He now has a double chin; his head nearly rests on his chest.

His eyes are closed; the lids seem stretched and drawn down too far.

A faint tint of orange can be detected by the searching eye.

Where is the laugh?

Where are the warm eyes?

Where is the sly smile?

I wonder about the old scar beneath that suit.

I wonder where the new scars lie.

He was almost 18; almost.
The smell of nail polish remover getting all caught up in it. This is not what I need right now. It liberated the wax from the tether that is my floor. Revealing scratches and nicks.

Nick. Nick Mint. Nick Mint nick mint nickmint. Mintnick. "I'm sorry Nick, but I can't, I don't know how." "Don't be so stupid, you're a child of the twentieth century, you can do it." "No, Nick, please."

I mopped up the liquid eraser with a yellow sponge. Yellow. The color of Mountain Dew. Mellow Yellow. They call me mellow yellow, and I'm just wild about saffron. Why isn't there a Gap in this town? There is a gap in the shopping opportunities. He called me a child of the twentieth century. Nick Mint.

It wasn't my fault. I'm sorry.

They'll be here soon. We're going to watch Footloose, the movie that made Kevin Bacon a star. Mmmm...bacon. She would only make it on Christmas and Easter. We would sit around the table laughing. What was so funny? Why did we laugh so much? Why does life have to be so hard? The smell of nail polish remover getting all caught up in it.

"Can you connect Kevin Bacon to Liz Taylor?"

"Of course I can, pet name." I called him pet name, I could never think of a good cute thing to call him.

"Well then?" Let's see...Liz taylor was in cat on a hot tin roof with paul newman paul newman was in what hmmm he was in the sting with robert redford I'm sorry I'm having a mental block of redford movies was he in prince of tides no that was nick nolte I'm sorry.

Can you believe it's my birthday? I'm a whole year older. 18 years of living. What have I done with my life? Britney Spears is my age and she already has two gold records. She's been named the voice of my generation. By who? Or by whom? It's who. The smell of nail polish remover getting all caught up in it. Nick mint nick mint nick mint. 18 years old. I hope people come. I should finish cleaning my room. I should go get my laundry. I'm sorry.

Who turned off my dryer? I don't need this right now. My clothes have to be dry. What am I going to do now? Oh well, it's too late now. Too late. Why did Nick go?

I'll walk up the stairs this way, I'll cross over on the other floor, then I can walk by Josh's room. Maybe the door will be open and I can talk to him. Wait, I'm going up the wrong staircase. Oh well. Walking down the hall. Walking, walking down a twentieth century hall. Whoa. What's that? "Jill why do you have a ladder in your room?" Where did she get that ladder? Oh they put lights up on the ceiling. Crazy. Ladders, you don't see stuff like that at college. I miss domestic objects.


Where are they? They said they would be here soon. Maybe I should repaint my toenails. Is the tape rewound? Our century is crazy, everything moves so fast, we have to rewind it and watch it over and over again. Over and over. Over and over. Whoa! That was deep I should write it down. Where's my journal? Journal. Journal come here. I need you. Where are you? Here journal journal.

"I'm sorry I'm having a mental block of Robert Redford movies." "Come on I know you can think of one." "Does it count if he directed it?" "Only if he was in it too." "Give me a hint, Nick." "No, I can't, that's not how you play the game." What a fantastic jerk. What was his deal?
Let's Make a Deal
I never saw that show. It was over before my memory starts. My memory starts with an episode of Wheel of Fortune. Shakespeare wrote about the wheel:

*Out, out, thou strumpet Fortune! All you gods*
*In general synod take away her power;*
*Break all the spokes and fellies from her wheel,*
*And bowl the round nave down the hill of heaven*
*As low as to the fiends.*

Who knew the first player was so fond of Pat Sajak? The smell of nail polish remover getting all caught up in it. What's the deal with Regis?

Good the tape is rewound. We've gotta cut loose, footloose. There's some Coke in the fridge. I wish we could have chips and salsa. It's my birthday I should be able to have salsa.

Why no salsa? Where is it?
Nick I'm sorry I can't do it.
Yes you can.
Leave me alone.
Maybe I should.
What are you saying?
I'm saying maybe we weren't such a good couple after all.
Shut up. You don't know what you're saying.
Maybe I should go, 20th century girl.
Pet name, look at me, I can work it out. Let's see, Redford movies, *The Horse Whisperer?*
I shouldn't have to help you.
Maybe that's the problem, you never want to extend yourself.
Hey, I do a lot for you. You have to be able to take care of yourself.
Why don't you leave Nick.
Fine, I'm outta here.
Everybody cut loose, footloose. "Hi, come on in, there's Coke in the fridge, sit down."
They say that time heals all wounds, eventually.
What if you get third-degree burns and die the next week?
All third wounds they time eventually get the degree... and heals!
Say, what burns that week if you die next?
I picked the fruit from the barren tree, no more leaves.
It was a worm that tunneled through, carving a bitter trail.
Carving the bitter fruit from a barren worm, I picked the leaves no more.
Now you've left, sowing the earth of my soul with your salt.
Your dangerous seed feeds on seeping poison, laced with wine.
The seeping wine feeds on your poison with sowing salt now.
Time picked the tunneled earth barren of seed, seeping through next week.
The dangerous fruit burns off the wounds you've left now.

People live through such pain only once; pain comes again, but it finds a tougher surface... She felt resentful toward that stupid, good-natured child.
How much older she was now, and how much harder! She was going away to fight, and she was going away forever.

—Willa Cather, The Song of the Lark

We do not conspire these days, my sister and I, now that we have moved away from home.
We have earned that precious distance, our right to objectivity — we are reckless, made audacious by distance — we talk about home like concerned parents and delight in our newfound ruse.
My sister still shares her life with them, her obstacles and victories, the way a river learns to regulate its pressure at a dam, streaming through evenly, crashing past with flat commitment.
They hurt her, too, before she taught herself to bend with pain, the way bridges absorb shocks of freezing air, keeping travelers safe from storms and rapids with steel.
She may not remember our secret meetings, the times we two sisters hid in my closet like soldiers in trenches. We promised, swore, to protect each other.
Today she has memorized immunity and what it cost her: her own surrender to our wills, the task of keeping our secrets.
When conspiracy failed us, or we failed it, I chose provocation, believing my conviction
to be stronger than theirs, remembering one New Year's Eve when they were drunk, and fighting, and I tried to stop them. I will never forget the weight of my mother's body as she came into my room that night, as heavy as her slap was sharp, as she trapped me between herself and the covers, trying to apologize. I taught myself to survive that night, tensing my muscles and closing my eyes, birthing myself from under my mother's body. It was then I learned that some families are not stirred by love or convenience, but by the grave compulsion to endure, to make it out alive, and alone.
The first time I saw Gabriel Lars, I was doing ninety-three miles per hour down Interstate 25, about twenty miles outside of town called Cimarron. The New Mexico landscape was a bleak and oppressing brown, a dead beige color that wouldn't go away even when I closed my eyes. It was my second day in New Mexico; I'd blown a flat outside Santa Fe the day before and had ended up staying the night there, so I was struggling to make up the time I'd lost.

He was standing on the shoulder of the highway, one arm held out toward the road, thumb extended, and the other hand in the pocket of his faded blue jeans. His long blonde hair was pushed back over the top of his head and came to rest just above his shoulders. He was wearing a white tee shirt that said "Heaven or Bust."

I put on my blinker and pulled slowly over to the side of the road. I overshotted by about thirty feet and had to back it up while he strolled, nonchalantly, toward the car. My car was a 1988 Toyota Corolla Hatchback, and a piece of shit. I shoveled empty bottles, cigarette butts and half-eaten McDonald's off of the passenger seat as he approached.

"Where you headed?" I asked him when he'd reached the car, squinting into the afternoon sun. I shielded my eyes with one hand as I looked up at him.

"Anywhere."

Thirty seconds later we were flying down the highway, the terrible beige New Mexico emptiness sprawling around us as far as we could see. He introduced himself as Gabriel Lars, and asked if I wanted to smoke a joint.

"What's that?" he asked. I think he'd been in the middle of telling me about Virginia.

"Nothing, man, forget it." I felt stupid. I hadn't smoked reefer in almost a year, and I was a lightweight. "This is some really good shit, man."

"Thanks, dude...I grew it myself. One hit-quit stuff, you know?"

I laughed. We must have been on our thirtieth hit each. I grew briefly concerned with my ability to keep the car between the lines on the road. Gabriel was still talking next to me; out of the corner of my eye I saw him turn to me, focus on my face and speak at it. I could see his lips moving, but his words were like a foreign language to me. He appeared to be expecting an answer. I snapped back into a shambles of reality.

"Huh?" I mustered.

"I said, what's your story, man? Where are you from? Where are you going?"

"Um." My speech had degenerated into monosyllables. "Well, um, my name is Richard Wayne, and I'm thirty-five years old, and I'm from Madison, Wisconsin. And I'm coming from Phoenix, Arizona, where I just lost my job to a high school student, and I'm going to Montpelier, Vermont to watch my father die."

There was silence in the car for a moment. I pulled a cigarette out of the soft pack in my pocket and lit it, inhaled the rich, thick smoke while the beige wasteland rolled by us. I turned on the radio and played with the stations for a minute. Gabriel occupied himself with finishing the joint.

And then: "Sorry, dude...that sucks. About your
father and the job, I mean." There was a long pause.

And then: "Don't worry about it, man."

The wasteland was a blur now, a formless beige mass. We drove on.

Around noon the next day Gabriel started asking questions as we were sitting in a Burger King drive-through, waiting for spicy chicken sandwiches and french fries. We'd been smoking joints and cigarettes for three hours and I felt as though I could eat a small franchise.

"So hey, man..." He started practically every sentence with something like this. "What did you do before you got canned?"

The woman at the window handed me two sodas and I passed them over to Gabriel.

"Advertising." The word seemed almost dirty to me. To tell the truth, I can't stand advertising; I don't watch television, and almost never listen to the radio. I do it because I'm good at it, but I hated every second of that job and part of me had been elated when I showed up to work the previous Friday and was handed my pink slip.

"They gave my job to some nineteen year-old with no college education and bad taste in shirts." This was my biggest beef with having just lost my job. It's not that hard to pick out a nice shirt. "They want younger, hipper people...I guess I'm a dinosaur, in the grand scheme of things."

"I don't think you're a dinosaur, man," Gabriel said softly. I smiled at his naivete, but his words held little comfort for me. I was a dinosaur. I was thirty-five years old and I was obsolete. I'd spent the last thirteen years slaving away forty-two-and-a-half hours per week in a tiny office with a corner desk and a wonderful view of the dumpster below the window, writing stupid catchy jingles for products that invariably never reached production. Forty-two-and-a-half hours per week multiplied by fifty-two weeks a year multiplied by thirteen years equals twenty-eight thousand, seven hundred thirty hours.

For twenty-eight thousand, seven hundred thirty hours I had been a busy little bee, a slave to the hive mind of mother culture. And for twenty-eight thousand, seven hundred thirty hours something inside of me had been seething and festering and slowly growing. I could feel it there in my chest like a boil, biding its time, waiting to burst: pure, unadulterated rage.

We almost made it to Broken Arrow before the Corolla gave out. I'd been running it into the ground for eleven years, and when it finally died, the rear axle snapping at eighty-nine miles per hour and ripping the underside of the car apart, I can't say I was really surprised. We spun out in fascinating slow motion before flipping twice and coming to rest, reluctantly, against the side of an underpass.

Automobile accidents can be fascinating things. I felt a remarkable peace come over me as a steering wheel was wrenched from my hands. All of the things I always thought I'd be thinking about during my last few moments on earth flew out of my head and I was left wondering whether or not all of the marijuana I'd been smoking would show up on the post-mortem.

When the car finally did come to a halt, I was not dead. Nor was Gabriel. He rocked back and forth with one hand on his head and said, "shit." My body was unbroken, barely even scratched. I was unimpressed.

The upshot of the entire experience was that four hours later, after we had been treated and released at the hospital in Broken Arrow, we were back on the road, this time in a rented 1997 Ford Escort with a better stereo system. The accident had bonded us somehow; I had started to develop a greater fondness for Gabriel since our shared near-death experience.

The Escort was a welcome change. As we drove I touched my sore knee; like the job, I knew that once the painkillers gave out, I was going to be in pain, but I felt a strange satisfaction at my injury. It was the same satisfaction I felt about losing my car. I felt like I was shedding pieces of my unhappy life one by one, leaving them like pink slips and flaming wreckage at
the sides of underpasses. I looked over at Gabriel and saw him absently rubbing the bandage on his head.

The rest of the trip passed without serious incident. We took turns driving and smoking joints. We listened to classic rock and told stories and laughed. And on the last day, as we were driving through Massachusetts, I told Gabriel why it was that I hated my father. And he listened, and he didn't judge me. Just said, "Uh huh," where it was appropriate and, when it was over, "Wow."

"What are you going to do now, man?" he asked me after a long silence.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, well, Jesus, man, you've got some sorting out to do, you know?" I smiled. Gabriel always sounded stoned when he talked.

"Well, man, it seems to me like this is one of those, you know, junctures in your life, man, and you've got some choices to make, dude, I think."

I pondered his words. I hadn't really considered what I was going to do. I had been so frightened at the prospect of seeing my father again that I hadn't bothered to realize that my old life was, pretty much, a shambles. I decided then and there that I wasn't going back.

"I'm not going back, dude," I said.

"Cool, man," Gabriel said. "I think you're making the right decision." And I was relieved to hear that.

Gabriel stayed until Burlington, Vermont. There were friends he had to meet up with there, he explained. Before he left he handed me a wad of bills and said, "Here, man, this should cover my half." I didn't bother counting it, just stuffed it into my pocket. Before he left he rolled me a big joint and I stuck it in my cigarette pack, a gift for a rainy day.

We stood there awkwardly, in front of the Dunkin' Donuts where Gabriel's friend Michael was supposed to meet him. We shook hands, and then we hugged. And then Gabriel went into his backpack and pulled out a white tee shirt and handed it to me.

"Here, man. I want you to have this." He was holding the shirt he'd been wearing the first time I saw him, the one that said 'Heaven or bust.' "I know it's a little dirty, man, but I think maybe you need it more than I do, right now."

I accepted it gratefully, although not really understanding why. We hugged again and then I left, got back into the Ford Escort and drove it to Montpelier, where I returned it to the rental car company. And I sat at the side of my father's bed for two days while he moaned and shouted and cried to people that hadn't existed in years, if at all.

And I sat there when, at the last, he told me that he loved me, and that he was proud of me. And that he was sorry. And that was enough. The rage I had been cultivating in secret for so long finally broke, and I cried big wet tears and held my father as he lay dying.

I left a week after the old man was buried. I stuck around long enough to get his estate settled and to get myself together, and then I took off. I put on Gabriel's tee shirt, freshly washed, and a pair of my old, faded blue jeans, and I hit the road around Interstate 95. It was hard to get anybody to pull over at first, but someone finally did, a pretty woman in her early thirties who turned out to be named Rachel, and a very capable lover.

"Where you headed?" she asked me, shielding her eyes with one hand as she squinted up at me.

"Anywhere," I said.
A boy is crossing the road with his dog. If he stumbles, setting the dog loose, can the car coming at him be to blame?

The boy searches for the dog for days, making a picture, hanging up flyers. His parents offer a fifty-dollar reward, post it in the local paper; but a week later, the dog is still missing. The boy does not snap out of it as expected. He speculates for hours at a time, staring at the empty food dish. The parents tell themselves, we did what we could. While they are angry, they yell. They pay no attention to the lost dog, he is still missing, the key to the apartment, for whatever reason. They lecture their son when he comes home, he is always losing things. They decide between themselves to replace the locks now, no telling who could find that key or when, and we could ask who? The crew? The wife? The city commission? The parents offer a fifty-dollar reward, post it in the local paper; Old Mr. Hanson, whose name is painted in green and gold lettering on the side of that truck that never made it to the street where the boy fell and eventually lost the thing that mattered to him most? Is he to blame? Can anyone take credit for the bumbling feet of a seven-year-old?

The car was coming at him. Did I say that before? It's what drove his attention away from the road in front of him as he crossed, moved the focus off of his feet for that second, that one second into which he fell. The car didn't have to stop or anything, it wasn't a close call at all, really, but what if it were? What if she did have to stop? What if, say, when the boy stumbles, he not only loses the dog, but drops the key to the apartment, for whatever reason. The driver gets out, shaken to say the least, if she did have to stop? What if, say, the car hits the boy and the boy dies on impact? The driver gets out, shaken to say the least, she didn't ask for this seven-year-old to suddenly become a corpse on the hood of her vehicle, and she is confused, doesn't know he's dead, at first, until people crowd around, and eventually ambulances, too, and when the ambulance guy says it and the police start to ask her questions, she realizes. She never thinks of herself as a murderer, even years later, when it's all finally processed and been in the papers, and she is found not to blame, for who in the world could estimate the stumbling feet of a boy and his animal, so she is found not to blame, but she still thinks, am I a murderer? No matter how she tries, she always thinks, no. No, I am not to blame. I was just the driver of that hapless car, somehow destined to end the life of a boy on a road full of potholes.

The dog had been waiting to get free. He'd never run away before, but he's wanted to, just never had the chance, until that second...
when the boy slipped just so, and the angles and the curves were right so his neck could slip through the collar of the leash just so, and then he was off, and he didn’t look back, not once, for the boy, who could have been dead in the middle of the road or just standing there with his mouth open, for all the dog cared. And he didn’t, the dog just didn’t care.

Maybe the dog would accept responsibility, if asked, maybe he would say he planned it, pulled on the leash a little too hard at just the right moment, knowing full well that things would transpire as they did, that he could make it happen. It’s what he’d wanted all along, so, yeah, why shouldn’t he claim the credit? But it wouldn’t be true, even if he did tell it that way; ’cause everyone who knows him knows that he’s never planned a day of his life. When the opportunity arose, he took it. That’s all. Buried bones in the back yard, ate out of the dish and the hand, but then ditched it all when he had the chance for a roll in some other dog’s shit and the right to screw any hitch he wanted, unhindered, unquestioned.

Truth is a funny thing. If you give it to someone, you’ve got power over them. And if someone gives it to you, you have made yourself their slave. But the power of truth lies not in the hearing nor the knowing, but the understanding. I can’t make you understand what I have to say, but because I am a slave to the dogs of Florence, Italy (the barking kind, not the sleazy ones in black leather jackets riding scooters), I must tell you what they have shown me.

Humans have souls. There is something beyond this trivial millimeter of time that we call life. I know many of you probably already know this, but I’ve seen it. And it wasn’t in some holy place like a church or some pilgrimage site, or in a place of beauty, like the top of the Dolomite Mountains or in the middle of the Adriatic Sea. Unless you would call the Florence train station a place of beauty, but after having been there at eleven o’clock at night I sure wouldn’t call it beautiful. Its only saving grace is the two-story McDonald’s that’s open twenty-four hours a day and caters to all the American students backpacking their way through Europe, only stopping in Florence long enough to see David and Venus on the Half-shell.

I was on my way to Zurich, and had an overnight train. After lugging my black Delsey "roller" suitcase over all the cobblestones to town, all I wanted upon my arrival at the station was two cheeseburgers, a small fry and a large Coke. To my surprise, the McDonald’s was closed, and I was forced to resign myself to a bottle of Lucozade and a box of Ritz crackers. The next task was to find an empty seat, and the whole middle of the platform (where most of the seats were, of course) was blocked because of construction, and partitioned off by red and white tape.

Then I spotted it. One single seat was left on the outside of the tape, although it was right next to it and facing the middle. But it was a seat and I didn’t care that it faced in, so I made a beeline for it. I sat down, opened my crackers and Lucozade, pulled up my favorite traveling companion, Jostein Gaarder’s The Solitaire Mystery, and tried to blend in as well I could in my bright red Columbia jacket amidst a sea of Versace. I read for a couple minutes and then glanced into the middle to see what they were building. But there weren’t any workers. There wasn’t
any equipment. There wasn't even a big hole in the floor. Just a dead body, covered with white paper towels, twenty feet from my chair.

A real, live, dead body.

Now, I'm a big believer in destiny. I've always taken comfort in the fact that someone besides myself knows where my life is going, or at least where I'll end up. But I don't think anyone would take comfort in the fact that they were to end up a corpse on the floor of the Florence train station. What had happened to him? Was it a heart attack? A stroke? Had he slipped on a Chicken McNugget trying to take his tray to the garbage can and slipped down the stairs?

No, wait. This is Italy. Mafia.

A couple of men were standing right behind me, and I turned to them and asked what had happened.

"He's dead," the man replied, and I heard him mutter "American..." as he walked away.

It is so frustrating to be sitting in a foreign train station with a dead body covered with paper towels only twenty feet from you, and not know what happened. That's the best argument I have for learning foreign languages.

A siren got louder and a police car pulled up to the station, and two policemen came into the middle of the station. And, in good Italian fashion, they stood around and did nothing. Right behind the police car was an ambulance and paramedic. Four men dressed in black cassocks and white gloves carried a brown plastic coffin into the middle. They shook hands with the police. People started gathering around the tape now, and I thought to myself, "Now they're jealous they don't have my seat!"

A priest was next to arrive, and he came into the middle, shook hands, and stood around, now bringing the number of important people up to seven (maybe seven and a half with the body).

And, in good Italian fashion, the policemen, paramedic, coffin men, and priest stood around doing nothing.

We all waited. But for what? The answer was soon to come as I saw the crowd part, and two station officials led in a small, white-haired man. He shook hands with all the people, and on some inaudible cue they all formed a tight circle around the body, and one of the policemen lifted up the towel covering the corpse's head. The old man nodded, and tears began to race down the crinkles of his wrinkled face. They put the towel back down, and everyone stood up and folded their hands, and the priest began to speak.

He was administering the last rites! Thank God I had converted to Catholicism just a year before, and even though I didn't speak Italian or much Latin, I knew what to do. Catechism—like fractions, something you think you'll never need to use.

When the priest finished, we all made the sign of the cross, and the brown plastic coffin was opened, and the four cassocked men placed the body in the coffin, and they led the procession out of the middle and to the ambulance and drove off into the night.

Thirty seconds later the tape was down, and people were on their merry way. Two pieces of paper towel were still stuck to the floor, and a dewy outline of the blood was still visible. Finally a station official noticed this, and someone was brought in to sweep the remnants away. The dew was gone, but the towels were still stuck where the corpse's head had been. This, too, was noticed, and a Zamboni-like cleaner came in, swirling the remaining evidence up with the rest of the Florence dust into its large bristles. I still had a while to wait for my train, and I soon realized that I was the only one left in the station who had seen what had happened.

I'm a writer. I'm not a theologian, nor a philosopher, nor do I belong to any other academic discipline. But it seems to me that a human life is worth something. I expected the tape to stay up longer, people to talk about it, at least a reporter or two. But there was nothing. No mention in the papers the next day at all.

I stayed in my seat, getting increasingly frustrated because none of my questions were being answered. People zoomed by with their luggage, catching trains that took them to Paris, Rome, Trieste, Innsbruck, anywhere. But the odd thing was, every time a dog would go by, it would strain on its leash toward the middle where the body had been until it was about six inches away from the scraps of paper towel that was still stuck to the floor, and then the dog would lay its ears back and scampers back to its owner with its tail between its legs.

There are a lot of dogs in Italy.
He wants to tell them he's an anesthesiologist, but he falls asleep between the forest of i and the warm cave of a. He is the guardian of lost time, of the little death that protects you from the real one. He is also the days blocked off on your calendar, the light between the blinds in the recovery room, and the only face you have to blame. This is what your nightmares are about.

On career day, he tells the children he puts things to sleep so doctors can fix them. A little girl asks if he killed her dog. People, he says. Only people. He can't remember if he kills them, or just brings them back. But isn't the doctor who worked night and day to save Little Nell the lost twin brother of the man who chloroformed her under Battersea Bridge? He wants to go back to his name, making a blanket of its soporificity. He thinks if he could dodge branches falling in the forest, avoid tripping, and surmount l's cliff, they would let him sleep in the second cave, as long as he brought his own mask.

I. Freshman fall brought with it a number of changes, realizations, successes, and disappointments, which was of course to be expected. I left in the winter with the intention of foregoing my second semester at school and trying to make a career in soccer. I traveled to Germany, by myself, still riding high on the delusions of personal success from earlier that fall. (Our team had done well and I especially had played a good season.) I cleaned out my then-familiar dorm room, said goodbye to my newly made friends, accepted their good wishes, letters, promises to write, and drove off like it didn't bother me.

I spent the next month putting things off, trying not to think about the fact that I was leaving, and I didn't cry until the morning of the flight. My mom started the tears, and I kept them coming until the moment of departure. She sat on my blue bedspread, at my side, holding me in her arms, and between the two of us, we went through an entire package of Zewa pocket tissues.

The one part of the whole story that I don't mind telling people when they ask me why I didn't stay in Germany is the part about how I had the same stewardesses on the way there and on the way back. Most people laugh when I reveal that part of the journey, and I am glad that they can laugh, because I can tell they usually feel really embarrassed for me when I claim homesickness to be the reason I left so early.

Customs searched my bag when I got back to Detroit; it was a random check, and summed up the whole trip for me. When I saw my parents' faces in the waiting area, I almost cried. It had been years since I had last seen them, in my mind at least. When I think about it now, years don't seem to be too great an exaggeration; I experienced way more in those two days than I had in the eighteen years of life that led up to the trip.

The moment I decided to return home was a scary one, but it was a decision so easily made at the time. My grandpa sat in the other room while I talked on the phone in tears to my family. I don't think he even knew I was upset. But his wife, the woman he left my real Grandma for, she knew something was wrong. Despite the late stage onset of Alzheimer's, she knew something was troubling me, and it scared her. She began speaking to my
Grandpa in her broken German, and although I was trying to listen to the advice and encouragement from my mom and dad, I couldn't help but hear her when she said the words that to the best of my knowledge meant "he cannot stay." She had acted similarly in the past, threatening to call the police when my Grandpa's brother and sister stayed for a weekend, and now I was the problem. I told my mom what I had heard—my mother, who herself had tried to visit him when she was younger and returned home only two days into her trip—and she confirmed the translation. My mother's tone didn't change all that much when I told her what I was hearing, because deep down, she wanted me to come home too; the fact that I couldn't stay more than a night because of my grandpa's wife's insecurity was simply a convenient excuse to call the airline company and request a next-day ticket. Perhaps it wasn't a good idea to let my grandpa know I was coming; after all, he otherwise never would have gotten the chance to invite me to stay with him had he not known of my intentions to come. My mom still finds it hard to love the man who left her mother and family for another woman and another life, leaving my mom to take care of things at home while my grandma fought to keep food on the table. Despite his high position at the Frankfurt National Banking firm, he refused to help her go to college, and yet today he still has the means to send my sister and me a hefty check come birthdays and major holidays.

When I arrived in Frankfurt, my grandpa was the first person I noticed. He was waiting beside the taxi driver he had hired to bring him and me back to his home from the airport, and was holding one of those signs that limousine drivers use. Written in thick, black lettering was my name: "DAVID." Seeing the sign and his fixed look, I knew it was him, and became very excited. After all, I had not seen this man, an immediate member of my family, since his visit to the states when I was in my early elementary school years. He, like me, had left weeks earlier than expected on that trip. And yet unlike me, he did not want to leave, but was forced to go because my mother couldn't stand it anymore; his very presence put her in a state of anger and panic.

When we arrived at his home in Eltville, a small vil-

lage-like suburb about an hour's drive from the Frankfurt National Airport, I realized first hand where my mother and I inherited our obsessive-compulsive tendencies. Everything was organized with a perfectionist's touch, from the refrigerator vegetable compartment to the letters and pictures sent by my mother from years past. I was given the tour and shown the room in which I would be sleeping for the next few days. I was only to stay for a few days, until I could get a hold of the family that I was to live with, and so I just set my suitcase on the floor and left it unpacked. The three of us ate a small lunch, and when I refused his frequent offers of swiss cheese (which I have never liked) with my belegtes Broet (open faced sandwich), he uttered his first generalization about his newly-met grandson:

"Du magst kein Kasee" ("You don't like cheese").

He said it with that stern sort of laugh that I could tell was meant to lighten the situation for me and criticize my taste at the same time; after all, I am the only one in my family that doesn't like swiss cheese. I laughed quietly and took another bite of my sandwich, as it was the only way I could escape the awkwardness of the situation without addressing him. I didn't blame him though; he was, after all, trying to learn about a person he had never really spoken to. I just didn't like cheese, and as I swallowed down the last piece of ham-covered bread that stood before me on the gloss-painted plate, I began to feel an uneasiness in my stomach. I had been awake since the morning before, and because I was six hours ahead now, I was very tired. I asked to be excused so that I could take a nap, and while my grandpa warned of the need to fight the exhaustion so as to acclimatize to the time shift, he could sense that I was too tired to comply. He told me he'd wake me up in an hour, a time he deemed long enough to rest but not so long that it would further throw off my sleep schedule. I laid myself on the square pillow he had given me, and closed my eyes as quickly as I could, because I could feel panic beginning to set in.

When I was awakened by my grandpa's voice, I felt an immediate sensation of cold. The rooms in his house were powered by a central gas heating unit, and it soon became clear to me that my room was the last to receive heat from this source. My feet especially were almost
numb, and as my teeth shook in the frigid household air, my stomach too began to quiver. I felt almost sick, and with this feeling came a wave of emotional weakness that was to last until I took off for home the next day. We went out to dinner, and I couldn't eat a bite. I had to hide my food under my napkin so as to fool my grandpa into thinking he had ordered well for me, and that I had enjoyed the coin steak in butter sauce. I made three trips to the bathroom in that dark restaurant, and yet none of them helped me to relieve the intense feelings of panic that kept invading my every thought. I felt as though I had become detached from myself, as though I was watching a movie in which the camera never left me, and I was tied down to my seat in the theater. I couldn't face the feelings alone any longer, and so I told my grandpa that I was feeling very homesick, and that I would need to use the phone when we got back to his house because I wanted to call home.

After I hung up with my parents for the final time that night (I called three times over the span of an hour, once to report my homesickness, once to confirm that I wanted to go home, and one final time to receive my flight information for the next morning), I wiped my eyes and turned around. My grandpa sat alone in his chair in the other room, looking sadly and yet adoringly upon his suffering wife. I knew I would have to tell him that I was leaving, that I had decided to give in to the homesickness and book the next flight. He gave a look that said he understood, and yet his face revealed a disappointment that I did not want to notice. He gave one final persuasive push for me to stay and stick it out, reminding me that I was leaving the opportunity of a lifetime, that professional footballers around the world are only noticed and given a chance at or before my prime age of eighteen. I nodded in acceptance of what he was saying; his sentiment had crossed my mind many times that day, and yet it did very little to counteract the feelings of sickness and anxiety. He then shifted his eyes, focusing no longer on my face but on my entire body, and uttered the words that have since remained clear in my subconscious:

"It is best to stay strong and fight the homesickness; you will be glad you did. I understand your decision, but you are making a mistake." I heard and understood him well, especially the English terms and phrases he sprinkled in his speech, and I looked back at him and sighed. He understood the gesture, showed me to my room, and helped me set the alarm clock to ensure that I wouldn't miss my early departure the next day.

II. Upon finishing my first year of college, I found myself in need of work — something to keep me busy during the mundane days of summer — and so my mom, who was getting paid under the table at a nearby nursing home, set me up with a job. In high school, I went and saw a movie with my friend about a boy who, like me, didn't know what to do with his life, despite his gift for something that could well have brought him riches and success. He worked as a janitor, all the while a mathematical genius, and spent his nights cleaning and waxing floors. I watched that movie more than ten times, and began to envy his simple position in life, as well as how neat it must have felt to hide such a wonderful secret from everyone. Although I understood that he, like me, would eventually have to stop wasting his potential and challenge himself, I wanted to experience that menial, unassuming lifestyle for awhile; after all, I had just attempted to pursue a dream, and although my mission never got underway, I somehow needed a rest from taking myself seriously. I decided to take this break in the same way as he had, as a janitor. So, with my mother's word, I was hired to work three days a week at the Beechwood Manor Assisted Living Facility.

The Beechwood Manor facility for the elderly is a one-story, rectangular building with eighty resident rooms. Only four to six of these uniformly constructed and similarly furnished rooms remain vacant throughout the typical year. In fact, there is sometimes a waiting list of residents during the summer months, as patients typically remain healthy and alive during the warm season that follows the harsh winter and cold spring. All rooms are maintained by cheaply employed housekeepers and janitors like myself, yet the vacant rooms must be thoroughly soaked, scrubbed, and polished during the interim between a former patient's death and a new patient's arrival. This disinfecting and tidying is where I found the bulk of my work, as the waiting list was being shortened.
that particular summer. Gordon, the director of maintenance, copied a key to the janitor’s closet and told me not to lose it, and with an hour or so of learning the ropes and cleaning policies, I was on my own.

Room 102, on the near corner of the “big rectangle” of rooms, was where I was to complete my first assignment, for the room was to be in pristine shape by the end of the week so that a new resident could move in. The name plate next to the door still read “Elnora Hauk,” for no one had taken the trouble to remove the paper since her death the week before. The worn white construction paper—decorated with a few flowers and sunshine in the upper right corner, beneath which sat the neatly written thick black cursive letters that formed her name—was probably the last evidence of her existence, along with a few plastic bags of thinly worn sweaters, dental products, and old slippers that were left in the closet (which I found when scrubbing its inside walls). Each room in the facility had a distinct smell common to its inhabitant, and yet all of them shared a hint of that mothball scent found only in basement cellars and household attics. Elnora’s room was no different; I could tell that she, while alive, loved to let the fresh air from outside mix with and bring out the scent of the dust on her dresser and nightstand. Elnora had used her main dresser as a television stand, and so it had taken the trouble to smooth out the surface. The walls were thick, and the window to the courtyard open, and because very few residents utilize the option of sitting out in the sun on the green painted benches, the only addition to the silence of the room was the rustling of the wind and trees on the quiet patio outside. Her bed was very soft, especially on my back when taking a break, but the softness came also from the many layers of cotton sheets and flannel blankets used to keep her warm at night.

As strangely pleasant as the fresh dustiness of each room may have smelled, the bathrooms were a far different story, as well as the area of each room near the bathroom. In addition to cleaning the vacant rooms of Elnora Hauk and various others, I had to mop the bathroom floors once a week for every room in the manor. This soon became my most dreaded role as a janitor, for the gagging smell of these rooms seemed to grow with time spent in there. Fecal matter, fallen hair, toilet paper; all of these things seemed to contribute their own special scent to the overall pungency of the room, and it was only with the Lysol-soaked mop that I was sometimes able to momentarily defeat the monster with a temporary mask of cleaning product scent. “Pacific Breeze” is what read on the bottle I used, and yet within an hour or so the Pacific would be drawn to the small white vent on the ceiling and exit the room, leaving the rotten smells of shower mold and human waste to take over. It was always a tremendous relief to shut the door on those small but powerful rooms, and to re-enter the cozy atmosphere of the vacant rooms that I was assigned to strip down, scrub, and disinfect.

Room 102, which had belonged to Elnora Hauk, stood directly across the hall from Room 104, which I soon found to be the blue-carpeted home of Ms. Alwine Boelster. When I first arrived at the manor, my mother took me around and introduced me to the residents she had gotten to know over her brief time at the home. I remember meeting Alwine out in the hallway, while she was being wheeled to the shower room, and being introduced to the “other German-born woman in the manor besides my mother.” At the time, I was so bewildered and overwhelmed by the people I had met already that I barely took notice of her soft eyes and strong resemblance to my mother and grandma. Although my first impressions of Alwine were limited by the briefness of our introduction, I was soon to see a lot more of her, especially when I was forced to keep the door to Elnora’s former room propped open. (Alwine’s door was always open, and so I could see her from across the hall).

When patients are in need of help or find themselves in distress, they are able to signal the nurses with a red button near their bed, a button that when pushed sounds the beeping light that hangs above their door so that the nurses can identify the room and address their needs. While some residents only utilize this call for attention in times of true emergency, Alwine activated her button at least twice a morning. Something was always wrong or
missing, and there was always something that needed to be taken care of. When the nurses grew tired of bringing her coffee and then the extra packet of sugar that had been forgotten, her cries would fall on deaf ears, with the exception of mine of course. I would hear her yelling, calling for help, like a child trapped under a car, yelling to be noticed by those out of sight. She would sometimes pause in these episodes, but for the most part she would yell until some annoyed nurse would come and haphazardly take care of the problem.

I sympathized with the nurses; after all, they had very little time away from the serious problems of the residents, and were understandably frustrated when asked to open a window or turn on a light for a woman who they felt was herself able to perform such tasks. On the other hand, I listened to those cries until they were addressed, and I couldn't help but feel sorry for the woman. She had a good heart, and as I eventually befriended her (she would always give me additional tasks to do when mopping her bathroom floor and because I complied right away, she grew to like me), I began to learn that she was not the lazy wretch that some of those nurses made her out to be. Sure she made a big deal out of little things (one time I had to bring her three cups of coffee before it was strong enough), and complained a little too much, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized that it was her right to seek comfort during those later days of her life. So, with the extra time that breaks and hasty cleaning afforded me, I would often lie on Elnora's bed (that new resident never did come in, and so her room remained vacant), half trying to sleep, but all the while keeping a listening ear for any possible cries that would likely come from across the hall. After a few weeks of work Alwine and I became as close to friends as was possible in such a place. She trusted me with her things and let me help her with personal tasks (one time she let me clip a loose finger nail that was bothering her, and once she asked me to pick her out a sweater to wear to lunch).

We developed a sort of routine over those days, and by the time lunch rolled around I would be waiting outside her door, ready to wheel her thinning body down to the cafeteria, where I would maneuver her wheelchair into her favorite spot at her assigned table. She didn't live far from the eatery, and yet it was a journey that when performed alone, under her own strength, took close to twenty minutes. She would have to wheel herself against the wall, and pull herself along the railing all the way down the hall. Her arms were too arthritis-stricken to gather enough consistent momentum on her chair, and so I took it upon myself to give her a ride to lunch whenever possible. It became our special time of the day, and she would never forget to thank me (as she often did the nurses who came to help her) as I left the cafeteria once she was settled in.

In accordance with the policies of Beechwood Manor, residents must be given the opportunity to self-improve and live independently. So, when the nurses saw me wheeling the woman they loved to hate, they would often suggest that I let her do it by herself; after all, it wasn't my job to help her move around. Initially, they made it sound as though pushing her down the hall was my choice, and that I should not feel obligated to do it. However, as I continued to "pick her up for lunch," so too did their suggestions grow more and more explicit, and yet as long as they presented it as a choice, I had no problem doing it.

"It's no big deal; I don't mind," became my favorite response to give, for it suggested nothing about the fact that I had other work to do.

However, the fateful day did finally come when this concern of the nurses attracted the attention of Mona, the woman in charge of the entire manor. She approached me during my lunch break, and with the same kind smile with which she gave me the job, told me that I really didn't have to push the residents, especially Alwine, to their desired destinations. Her tone never took on that authoritarian tone that I sort of expected when I realized why she had come to talk to me, and yet I could tell that her message was one to be taken seriously. I was to stop.

As she told me not to push the residents in their wheelchairs, I thought back to that day in which I had to tell my grandpa that I was going home. In moments of necessity, I always seem to have the courage to do what I know I have to do. And as I thought about that horrible night and the things I missed out on, I finished my lunch and trudged back to my janitor's closet. The small room had, like Elnora Hauk's former room, become a second
home in those tiring days of mopping floors and cleaning toilets, and I stared at the rusting basin of murky mop water and cleaning detergent. I slowly turned the knobs of the faucet that stood above the small holes and tarnished silver of the drain, washed my red chapped hands under the flow of warm water, and walked to the room of Alwine Boelster. As had become ritual, I found her attempting to wheel herself out of the room, making little progress, but doing her best to prove her willingness to get to her ultimate destination. When I appeared in the doorway, she gave her customary sigh. Only this time she followed with a return to trying to propel her wheelchair, as Mona had apparently warned her of the importance of doing things on her own. I let her get as far as the hallway, and then I moved into her room behind her and pulled the door from its idle position, thus initiating its slow and methodical closing swing. As the door swung towards me, blocking more and more of the room inside, I saw the clock on her mantle read from 11:55 to 11:5 to 11:10 to 11:1, and eventually to nothing, for now the polished brown mass of wood stood directly before me and consumed my view of the room. Turning my eyes back to Alwine, I was again reminded of that fateful trip to Germany that I had taken just months earlier that year, and as I thought about the face of my Grandpa, telling me of how my weakness for home was ruining the best opportunity of my life, I walked up behind the chair of old Ms. Boelster, and pushed her the rest of the way.

there has been no call for heaven or hell.
The dead who wish it are simply born again.
The dead who do not enter, en masse, the towering, elegant shell of the Book-Cadillac Hotel.

They wander there, blown about by the torrents that breach the opened windows, orchestrating unseen waterways that send the plaster of the walls sliding to the carpet. In this manner, they have cultivated the grand fungus that spreads across the floors of every room, the sodden mix of fallen cornices and rust that was once the faces of angels, the petals of roses.

They dance, clearfooted, across the mess that was the ceiling of the main ballroom, which now adorns the hardwood floor — the fame of many counties around, perhaps the nation as well, in its time. The echoes, the vibrations from their dancing have stripped every wall of its paint, and left it hanging in tatters, from the penthouse to the wine cellar. Support beams crash to the ground with their waltzes, wiring curls and snaps in time to their two-steps.

The dead, once they arrive and are welcomed, can no longer leave.
Sometimes I can see my mother's death, her failing in a perfect hospital on a pristine hill. It will be precise and dignified; she will be wearing makeup and looking solemn, silent, on white sheets. It will be executed with the poise which braces her now, in life—an event she will preside over until she sees a polite time to slip out, nearly unnoticed.

My own dying will leave residue. I will meet death in the outdoor market, where we'll inspect the thick coils of bloody meat and finger the flushed pink of the shrimp. I will let myself be taken home; I will let death crawl into my bed, drooling, leaving dandruff from his sweaty hair on the pillowcase, fingerprints on the picture frames, leaking slime into the carpet and I will remain there as long as I like.

Death will come to me unafraid of the garden slugs in his shoes, squeezing pus from his elbow, looking waxy and soggy as cold meatballs with cheese. I will know him in the grit on the linoleum, in the oil on fresh coffee beans, in earwigs and nausea and the green peppers rotting in plastic far back in the fridge. I want to whisper sins into death's humid ear, let him kick holes in the wall, linger over the sour aftertaste of his scabbed skin.

My mother and I have found few compromises in living, but sometimes I know that our deaths could touch in passing. I can think of the time when I was eight and brought home a head full of translucent, scaly lice — and how my mother, before we used terms like obsessive or compulsive, cried as she ground the medicine through my scalp, both sickened and desperate to stop the itch.

Perhaps death will come to us like that day in the bathroom and I will stand still, knowing I will feel the bones of her hands on the top of my skull forever.
Oh no, he's looking in the rearview mirror again. Just tell him what he wants to hear, then maybe he'll shut up. "Hey, how does this look?" he asks me as he brushes his wig into place.

"Good." I don't dare to venture more than that for fear of laughing. Whenever this happens, the image of him without his wig and his teeth appears before me. He was not allowed to wear them and had to have them removed when he was in a maximum security prison, and boy was that a scary sight.

His loafers scrape the ground as we walk into the seafood restaurant. He holds the door for me. I always have such high hopes for our intimate get-togethers, but they just never seem to be successful. Inside, he leaves his sunglasses on and the first few buttons of his shirt undone, and his jeans sag despite the leather belt.

We sit across from each other at the glossy, wooden table. He asks me what I want to eat, even though I already told him three times in the car. The waiter takes our order and my father orders me more than I could finish off in a week. Even then he doesn't think it's enough.

He begins to try to convince me that he is the smartest, strongest, best-looking person in the world, aside from me of course. "You know, Steffi-Amba-Em, what's ya name again? Yeah Steffi. You know Steffi, there's only one person in the world better lookin' than me. It's you. There's only one person in the whole world smarter than me. It's you. When you're a lawyer you can keep me outta jail," he informs me in his thick Boston accent. I will be a lawyer for his benefit, and when I was going to be a psychiatrist, guess who would have been my only patient.

"C'mon Steffi, tell me the truth. All your friends think I'm the most handsome man they've ever seen."

"Yeah Dad, it's true." Why me? I'm not hungry anymore. I want to go home and take a nap. Take a shower, too and get this smoky stink off of me.

"Eat up, honey. You're a Lebanese girl, you need more meat on your bones. That's my Lebanese baby. One-hundred percent. You're all me. None of your mother."

"By your logic, Dad, none of my kids are gonna be Lebanese."

"Don't you ever curse that on your children! Now eat some more, sweetie." He scratches his head and stares off into the ocean; we always go to restaurants that overlook the ocean. I am grateful for the silence. I notice that his year-round tan, courtesy of Sunbanque, is now a deep shade of red. His wig has some freshly died gray areas to make it "look more real". My brother calls him Convertible and he calls my brother T-top because of his receding hairline. They're fun to be around when they're together; it's a battle of the wits.

When he finally notices that I am hunched over the
table from having to force-feed myself to make him happy, he calls the waiter and asks for a doggie bag. We get the check and he pulls a wad of tens and twenties out of his shirt pocket. I suspect that there are even a few hundreds in there. He leaves a very generous tip, but "I don't have any money, and if I did, you know that you and your mother would get it all. Right, Steffi?" It is because of this generosity that he gave my mother $16,000 instead of the $40,000 that he owed her for child support. His lawyer got about the same as she did.

"Can we listen to the radio, Dad?"

"Sure, honey, we can listen to whatever you want." Hip-hop and R&B flow out from the speakers and I wonder how long it will be before the station is changed. 10.5 seconds. "Steffi, I don't like that stuff. Let's listen to this." The speakers aren't powerful enough to satisfy his craving for classic rock, but they are powerful enough to make my whole body vibrate. I get a little nervous when I glance over at him; he is murmuring the words and paying more attention to the scenery than to the road ahead.

The car floor is a mixture of trash and clothing, because "somebody broke in and messed it all up," or "the tornado just came through here." I roll the window all the way down and stick my head out to try and get away from the music, the smoke, and the stench of the air freshener. When I was younger he let me sit on his lap and try to drive the car. I loved the feel of his belly bulging against my back — it was like a safety cushion.

There was always a thrill of excitement whenever I was with him. We would go to Burger King and he would pull up to the drive-thru speaker. "Can I have a McCarrot?" he would say. "What? You don't have McCarrots? Well, do you have any McFilets?" He would look in the rear view mirror, smiling. In the back seat my brother and I were shaking from laughing so hard. We knew they didn't have Mc-anythings at Burger King.

My father pulls up to the sidewalk and he gives me the usual speech. "Tell your mother I should be gettin' that money soon. You remember what the Bible says, honey. First Commandment: always kiss your father."

As I lean over to kiss him on the cheek, his scent overcomes me: leather, money, expensive cologne. "Bye Steffi, I love you. Be a good girl."

As I stand on the corner and wave good-bye, I wait until the car disappears and then I do what I always do with his kisses: wipe them off.

Feeding the ducks bread crusts in winter, sitting on the wooden bench with cold slats pressing beneath us and into our backs, I ask you what you think death looks like.

"It looks like the dead-end sign at the beginning of my street," you say. "You know before you turn there that the street stops, but you don't know when, only that there is no way out."

I sit tearing and throwing crust at the ducks, brush crumbs from the lap of my black winter coat. "It's the ocean fading away into a night sky," I say.

Endless.
I let the dog out for the last time
at night, and stood waiting for her.
My hands gripped the bare steel
of the fence. The funeral was tomorrow.

Crickets, and the rumble of furnace vents,
the treble hush of wind through dry cottonwood leaves
still on the tree this late in the year.
A few stars were visible, but not many; the city
is too bright. Orion some nights, some nights Polaris.

Half of me in the live happiness
of having a warm human
to sleep with, and trade stories with,
and love — half of me
swimming laps in cold memory —
I had only heard rumors
of this possibility — finding the halfway point
between joy and grief, the dead
and the living, that comes,
like some comets,
once in a lifetime,
if you're lucky
and the night is clear.
crow (kro), n. 1. Any of various species of large, usually entirely glossy black, oscine birds of the genus Corvus; generally, in England, the carrion crow. Their general structure and intelligence have caused them to be regarded as the highest type of bird.

...as the crow flies...I've got a crow to pick with you...crowbait. crowbar. crowcall.

divine (di-vin), n. 1. Of or pertaining to God... 4. Godlike; heavenly; excellent in the highest degree; supremely admirable as, the divinest mind. "The divine Desdemona." 5. Sacred...a soothsayer...a minister of the gospel..."Poets were the first divines."
