Our faculty advisor, Diane Seuss, for her continued commitment to the magazine and her dedication to ensuring that the Cauldron and creative writing program at “K” continue to flourish and grow with each year.

Lisa Darling and the Publications staff for helping the writing and artistic community put our work on the page.

The English Department for their continuing support of the Cauldron.

Glenn Deutsch for the use of his critical eye in selecting the winners of the Divine Crow and for his editorial help.

The writers and artists whose works are the lifeblood of the Cauldron and who continually amaze and inspire the campus community with their honesty and creativity.

Thomas Beck, Kate Boehm, Caitlen Frank, Lauren Trager and Will Walkington for their amazing work and commitment to this year’s magazine and for expanding the Cauldron’s presence on campus.

Student Commission for finding value in the work of the Cauldron. Their funding allows us to produce a magazine of excellent quality every year.

Dianne and Robert Vibbert for supporting us in our wish to honor their daughter with The Stephanie Vibbert Award. This annual award is given to a piece of writing in the Cauldron that best demonstrates the important relationship between creative writing and political and social justice.

A special thanks to the readers for whom we hope the works in this magazine inspire. It is your support and encouragement that allows Kalamazoo College to publish the voices of its students. Without you, our words and images would go unseen.
Writing is powerful. The shaping of words into a flowing and meaningful form on a page can provide the writer with a space for healing, a place to set down what has to be said, and an outlet to share with others the stories that have been tattooed, unseen, onto our skin.

We open this year’s Cauldron with a writer’s journey, with an escaping breath, a piece that seeks a place to call home, but has the willingness to drift “like the spirits of the fireweed/ after their color is gone /rising/ just above the smoke.” Malia Johnson’s piece, “rising”, illustrates the curative voyage made possible by writing. Just as the person on this year’s cover is peering over the edge, searching the streets below for meaning, Malia’s words bring us to the edge of Alaska’s horizon and then push us into the unknown. This year, the Cauldron traces the paths taken by our contributing writers and artists to their personal horizons and beyond.

No matter the medium, the chance to express the pain of personal struggle and growth led to the creation of several incredible pieces in the magazine. Whether the overt messages of coping with loss in Matt Thielemann’s piece, “What Death Is Like”, or the subtle hardships of responsibility given to the post-divorce young man in Kyle Shelton’s “To-Do List,” writing has provided a place for the authors to unfold their experiences so that they no longer carry them alone.

On the skin of “Marie,” Sadie Sheldon scrawled sentences that tell us much more than the beautiful contrast of ink on skin. Sadie’s piece, coupled with the linguistic search of Danielle Badra in “A/B,” reminds us that “every letter’s evolution,” can be written on both “tongue and page.” Exploring the words that fill the lines of our bodies and echo in our voices bestows a significance that we would never have reached without creative work. As the person on the front of this year’s cover watches the loose papers blow away on the back cover, so we must watch our words exist beyond our bodies, our minds, and the page. Once written or drawn, our creations are no longer ours alone. We must be willing to let the wind pick up our words and images and let them fall away so that others can find the scattered pages. To our readers and witnesses—thank you. We encourage you to pick up the pen or camera or charcoal and join us.

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

* Denotes Divine Crow Award Winners

** Denotes Stephanie Vibbert Award Winner
The Way We Live

KELLY HURD
she cannot stay in this place she has escaped to

smoke has rolled fires in Eagle and the Yukon getting too close she needs to breathe again

it is her time to drive south now that the sunset does not come 'til morning

drive because she hates the planes not the flying but the landing those seconds when the wind catches up with her

maybe she will find home maybe in thirty more years maybe every time is home

now she will drift like the spirits of the fireweed after their color is gone rising just above the smoke
It was the Fourth of July and Dad had bought us some Black Cat Snappers—you know, the little firecrackers that sound like Rice Krispies on steroids. It was hot outside but the Brita was broken and we hated the metallic aftertaste of well water so we decided to let our piss turn gold like the fireworks that would split open the sky later in the evening. The roof of my mouth felt like sandpaper and I couldn't speak without scratching my tongue, so I was pretty quiet that day. Lauren and I walked down the driveway barefoot, cringing as the hot asphalt singed our heels. As we tossed the Snappers on the ground, I could feel aggression mount with each *pop!* I wanted to hurt someone with the Snappers. Hell, I wanted to kill someone. So we dropped the Snappers like atomic bombs onto a colony of ants helplessly burrowed in a crack. We were proud of ourselves for deafening a million ants until Lauren asked: *Do ants even have ears?* at which point she grabbed a magnifying glass from the house. We examined their spindly bodies, illuminated under the spotlight of the sun. I still don’t know if ants have ears, but I do know that as they convulsed beneath the lens, it looked like they were dancing for us.
To My Father,

I secretly know that we are the same age. Whether I am older, or you are younger, or we are meeting somewhere in between, I don’t know. But we are the same age, and I know you know this, too. You tell me stories of when you were a young man, and I tell you stories of when I was a young woman, but I don’t say them out loud, and you understand. You tell me about your adventures, and I tell you about mine; the adventures I took so long ago that they almost seem to be imagined. We talk about what old age is like, how being 80 was no walk in the park, except for the fact that those who loved us frequently touched our cheeks and pressed their hands upon our shoulders. It made us realize that people really do need to be touched. We talk about how funny it is that the older you get, the less you become just one age, and the more you relive all the ages you’ve already been—a baby, a child, a teenager, a 25-year-old, a middle-aged, a retiree—yet when you wake up in the morning and look in the mirror, you see that the progression never changes. We talk about our parents, and how they knew everything at one time, and how silly and damaging they were, and how we thought we would never be like them. And how we did become them—along with becoming all of our dreams and nightmares—because isn’t that how life works? We talk about death, and how terrifying it was to die, leaving the living behind, and we remember the moment when we knew we were going to die, and how we went through the emotions, and it was a completely singular, awesome experience. We talk about memories, and how that’s all we have in the end, and that no one else will ever really know all of ours but us, and that we will never matter again like we do right now. And we talk about our children and how they will never understand what we’ve done for them, never, ever understand, but that for a reason not explained by their blood or birth or tears, we love them more than we love breathing, that just thinking about how much we love them is worth more than the pulse in our throats. We talk about leaving together, and what a momentous promise that is, and we talk about our bond, how my one step forward means two steps back for you because we always meet halfway, and although we’re separated by 30 years of suns and zero nights, everyone knows the sun is one long stretch of continuous light, so we were never really separated, not before, during, or after life. And you hug me, and I hug you back, and we never forget that we are the same soul, the same heart, the same memories, that your life has transcended into mine and mine into yours, that I love you for my life and all that it has given me, that I love you as if you were my father, my child, my brother, my best friend, and my companion throughout life, my beautiful every person, and that no one could love you more than me, no one could ever let you go, because you’ve taught me that the purpose of life is not to live but rather to find people who are more life than life itself and to never let them go, not from your grasp or memory or heart, that I am the person that will never let you go—I will never let you go, Dad, I will never let you go—
To say Florence had red hair should have the same effect as saying someone had grown the most perfect tomatoes out of her skin. Florence had a German accent. Florence had large feet. But Florence had red hair, hair that inhaled her exhalés, so that she was continuously recycling herself. Even as she got old and grew down, she kept it long. Her hair wasn’t her beauty. It wasn’t her woman power, and its coarse strands didn’t coil into her definition. But it was there, and it wasn’t leaving. Its color mentioned to your eyes rooster crowns and raspberry stains and raw stomachs.

What are you going to do with that fat, she asked, and would pick the charred dripped crispings up off her grandchildren’s plates and stick it into her mouth, both fingers in. Her daughter-in-law would look away, eyes resting on a table Florence used to dust, now secreting the many long hairs of too many pet St. Bernards. Florence pretended not to mind. She knew she kept her nook of the house clean.

When her son and his wife let her out to baby-sit the kids in the rest of the house, Florence would call over Dodi, and they would take everyone to skinny-dip in the backyard pool, filmy with mosquito larvae and a mesh of tadpoles. She would pull off her long housedress and her comfortable shoes, and Dodi would snort, her own dress around her skinny ankles, twelve years younger than those of her friend. Florence’s youngest grandson would stand quiet in the wetness and watch her thin long breasts float on the film, at his chin level when he stood on the tips of his toes, his eyes when he stood flat. Their density, of course, depended on whether or not she laughed, and for how long. They made him hungry, resembling as they did the dough for her rhubarb pie, her blueberry mush.

Dodi taught Florence how to play poker. Florence taught Dodi how to drive. They taught each other many things to do with their hands. Their laughs were as sharp as cracking trees, and left a smell of candles that fingered its way down, from the countertops they rested their elbows and their rum on, out to the living room and up the stairs to the attic where all the grandchildren slept in rooms divided by patched sheets.

Humming low and rough, Florence baked in a dirty kitchen, carefully cupping in sugar with the blueberries and rhubarb her large hands had planted and picked. Ants crawled along the tops of jelly jars left open by her son, jars that sat in the cupboard built by her dead husband’s father. Her youngest grandson, the one she called Pi, stood in her kitchen, hers regardless of what the house deed said, and opened those cupboards, scraping off the ants to get to the jelly. Florence caught him, shouted a bit, then got sad and sat down for a long time. She looked at the crusted plates in the sink, plates she had brought over careful and clean, plates her daughter-in-law messed but said she was too tired, too sad to wash. Her grandson watched, his stomach wringing itself. She
opened the fridge and got out the full blueberry tin, got out the butter and the eggs. She took out a bowl. Carefully, she cupped in sugar. Pi’s eyes were very wide, and his hands very still, as she poured flour, nutmeg, brown sugar into a bottle, screwed on the lid, and shook the thing until her cheeks bloomed red and her shoulders cracked. She stirred it into the bowl. Somehow it all ended up in the oven, and the kitchen smelled like good dreams again. I’m finished, she said. Passed the bowl to Pi. He finished the rest, and got to lick the spoon. Florence smiled at him with her mouth closed, then hoisted herself up onto the countertop and let her body give its weight to the wall. Pi sat on the floor. They slept for two hours, maybe even three. When Pi woke up, he watched his grandmother sleep, some of her hair caught in her mouth, her chin tucked into herself. He began to understand that she was dying, and so was he, and that maybe death wasn’t terrible, that maybe it was.

Pi grew up and married my mom. He makes me blueberry mush for breakfast, but I don’t really like blueberries because when squished, they look to me like the insides of a caterpillar I once stepped on with my bare toe. For me, Pi makes apple slop instead. But before me and my breakfasts, my dad and my mom met and married and on the way my mom was introduced to Florence. At this point Florence wouldn’t admit it, but she was frightened by her age, by her lack of control, by her oddness. Her daughter-in-law was cold, her son colder. The room they kept her in the backside of the house was the coldest of all. Florence wondered what she did wrong. She thought she deserved it. She didn’t mind when her son put her bank account in his name. But she sobbed like a baby when my grandfather decided that it was his house after all, and about high time he tried his hand at gardening. Don’t let him cut down my lilacs, my great-grandmother told my mom in fierce gasps. The old skin of her neck shivered, and the younger woman putherpalm over my great-grandmother’s hand. Pull them out before he does. Keep some for yourself. My mom tried, but they were gone the summer before Florence. She was put into a nursing home in spring, and was allowed out once to go to my aunt Rachel’s wedding. Then she was put back in her place among beds with metal bars at the sides and linoleum that reflected the light of the bulbs above. Florence died before Christmas. At the funeral, my grandmother wailed. My mother threw up behind her car.

I read this and I see how easy it is to put a glaze of myth on a person like varnish on hardwood floors, ensuring that stains won’t stick. The only thing I know of my great-grandmother is not of her, but of remembering her. I was about three and fighting with one of my cousins about the color peach. We were in her two rooms, and before I left, crying about how peach and pink were not the same, I asked who used to live here. Great-Grandma, he said. Don’t you remember? And I did. I just don’t know what I remember now. I loop
together what I know with what I hope and call it good. I am able to put her into a myth, which is sort of a box of its own. There, she is kept. After all, it is easier to deal with someone’s power when it is secured in its own separate compartments, where we can deal with it when we feel adequate and sure of our own strength.

How is it different from the way she was kept by my grandparents? In the end, Florence stayed out of the attic of the home she had lived in since twenty. But the effect was the same. She was reduced to haunting while she still existed. Her threat to her daughter-in-law, my grandmother, I think came in the shape of something that couldn’t be held in fists. Florence was both nervous and confident. She could do some things with near perfection and she failed at others, but her strength was not something that could be locked in an attic trunk. Her self, her identity, as different from my grandmother’s as it seemed, was what was feared and envied. It was why she was pushed to live in the cold carpeted rooms at the edge of her own house, separated from her kitchen, from her grandchildren, by glass windows and screened doors. It is what makes her grandchildren dream about her in the night and it is what makes her great-grandchildren wish they did. It is why my dad, who used to skip out on church to go poke around the backyard creek, prays to her when someone is sick, and it is why he hears himself singing “This Little Pig” in faded German as he stirs some random deliciousness in a copper bowl. In her own family, she was other. And that was a threat terrifying to both her daughter-in-law and her son. Her very being reminded them that there are things in life real in a way that my grandparents could only long to be. Her living wasn’t half, and it wasn’t whole. It just was. And that was enough. Her impact blew out the insulation of her rooms, even if the walls remained up. Even now, she still seeps through, and my grandparents squirm as they step into puddles of a presence they can’t see. She is something they haven’t yet claimed in their own identities. She is worth remembering.

My great-grandmother is at a safe enough distance through time and world that I can believe her to be what I need her to be. I can make her into someone who would sympathize with me, a woman ancestor who is not as flawed as either my maternal or my paternal grandmother, a woman whose actions I envy and admire, not regret. I need her to be the tragic beloved woman who, because of the threat her soul and intellect offered, was banished in her own home. In the end, because there is no attic like the one in my head, I need her to show me the power to be found in being remembered. It presents a way of getting out, even if one doesn’t live on.

No one told me, but I would like to say I know Florence got naked at least once and traced the tops of her legs, needled through with skinny threads of veins. Using a permanent marker of the sharpest tip, she outlined the
parameter of some manic country. She was her own frontier. Ultimately, she was confined to two side rooms of the main house, then to the nursing home. But I would like to hope that she kept her borders her own. To have an internal safe space gives a woman a secret stronghold where she can go for protection, for healing, and for exploring who she is. Unfortunately, this space is only safe as long as someone else also recognizes its power. Until then, women will continue to be placed where they are not reminders to the rest of us of the power that lies in identities of truth, in choices that deviate from what mainstream society prescribes. They will continue to be reduced to haunting the attics of our own minds, pacing there until we allow them the choice to leave and find a room of their own.
Gathered in a circle at the feet of a Catholic priest, the third grade catechism class is supposed to ask questions about God because “You can love God more if you can understand Him.” Confused, an eight-year-old raises his hand. “What came first, Jesus or the dinosaurs?” The priest smiles. “What a clever little boy you are.” The catechism teacher mumbles a soft admonishment, and the priest, still smiling, asks, “Are there any other questions?”

Catholicism, a puzzle for an eight-year-old boy, leaves more questions than it answers. Chosen to lead the pious masses, a priest preaches the answers to the questions he knows, and mumbles the answers to those he doesn’t. Of course, Catholics know God, and God loves all creatures. The little boy wonders, “Doesn’t that include dinosaurs?” As always, God’s beacon of absolute truth leaves the boy confused.

Fair question. The little boy sleeps, dreams confused. Maybe God can answer these questions. Lord knows you’ll be a good Catholic someday, son. Dreams of dinosaurs fill the mind. John the Baptist on a pterodactyl, the one true priest of the hunt. And lead us not into temptation, Lord God, but deliver us from raptors. Amen. Prehistoric prayers of protection, sleepily mumbled.

Prayers are a conversation with God, and he hears all, even those mumbled from a drowsy child. Lord God will see you through. May you no longer be confused, here comes a messenger, truly sent by God, dressed in a stegosaurus skin loincloth. Finally, an answer! So many questions, bursting from a childish mind. Questions a priest couldn’t possibly understand. “Was Jesus afraid of the dinosaurs?”

“David’s Goliath? A tyrannosaurus rex. Wouldn’t you be afraid of the dinosaurs if the only protection your god provided you was a sling and a rock? You mumble that it is absurd, that it couldn’t be true. Well, any priest can tell you, it’s all a leap of faith. God created the world in seven days, and it confuses you. When were they created? Was that the eighth day? No matter, these questions do not need an answer. I have delivered a revelation to you, a true message from God.”

continued
With that, the angel with chest hair of flaxen gold straightens up and flies back to God. The boy, now awake, sits in his bed. Daniel, thrown not to lions, but to dinosaurs! Finally, the boy can sleep. Finally, his mind is at ease, his questions all answered. A leap of faith, nothing more, be it holy Scripture or nonsense mumbled by a madman on the street. There is no longer a need to be confused. If Moses can survive a T-rex, I can survive the uncertainty of my local priest.

God has a sense of humor, to give only half the story to his messenger, the priest, religious leader, indeed! How silly that the presence of dinosaurs leaves him confused! His are questions better asked by the lethargic mumbling of a little boy.
It would be dusk soon. The pink and orange splotches were fading from the sky, disappearing almost as rapidly as the heat of the day. The salmon-colored light streamed through the trees and glinted off the rose-red paint of the old convertible. Susan was glad that she wasn’t driving. Right before dusk was the worst time to drive, especially on the highway. She hated having to squint through evening sunshine, the rays aimed directly in her eyes. Beside her, Angie didn’t seem to mind at all. She always drove home from the beach, and Susan thought that Angie seemed happiest during these drives. Before leaving the lake, they had put the top of the convertible down, allowing the wind to dry their hair as they drove. Angie’s, still damp at the ends, whipped around her head, the tangled golden strands, the color of ripe corn, occasionally flying in her face and mouth as she sang along with the radio. Angie’s hair was gorgeous. The color reminded Susan of pictures of grain fields rippling in the wind, as though that line from “America the Beautiful” had been written especially about Angie’s hair. Her hair always seemed to glow brighter around dusk, as though it was responsible for draining the sun’s light from the sky. In the breeze, Susan recognized the distinctive smell of Angie’s hair: Johnson & Johnson’s baby shampoo and a faint hint of mayonnaise, her tried-and-true conditioner.

The sun glared through the trees, obscuring Susan’s vision. In the right lane, two semi trucks were moving along unhurriedly. Angie flicked on her turn signal and moved into the left lane. “My Girl” had come on the radio, and Angie was whispering the words as the car pulled alongside the first semi. The glare from the sun must have prevented her from seeing the semi’s turn signal. Their initial reaction when they realized that the semi was edging into their lane was one of disbelief. Susan’s grandfather had been a truck driver for years, and her mother had always said that truck drivers were the best drivers on the road because that’s what they did for a living. Maybe the glare had gotten the best of him, too; she would never know. Terror filled her chest as the tiny red convertible moved closer and closer to the edge of the ditch. Susan was appalled that the truck driver appeared not to notice that he was pushing their car off the road. The tires of the car squealed their resentment at being drug against their will across the asphalt. The smell of burnt rubber hung in the humid air, and Susan gasped for air as the car began to tip over the edge of the gravel shoulder and into the ditch below.

Susan lay in the ditch, not particularly conscious. Wet grass clung to her face and clothing. Dew had soaked through her shorts and tank top, reaching her already damp bathing suit. She was thinking about the beach, remembering the sun and the feeling of sand in her hair. She smelled something.

Mayonnaise. Her eyes snapped open. The back seat of the convertible loomed above her like the lid of a coffin. Her neck was pressed up against the side of the car. The car was still. Her own breath echoed. She freed her hands and struggled to push herself off of the damp ground. Pain, like a
shiver, crawled up her spine from her shoulder blade. She wasn’t deterred. Holding herself up on the battered passenger seat, Susan peered through the wreckage and saw that Angie had been half thrown out of the car, her head wedged between the side mirror and the door. The weight of the convertible had come down on her, crushing her neck and skull. Blood had flooded the driver’s side of the car. If she had been driving, it would have been her blood. Vomit rose in her throat. As she started to claw her way out of the car, she finally noticed the sirens. A yellow, gloved hand reached into the wreckage, beckoning Susan to crawl out. She hesitated, glancing back. Angie’s hair had never gotten the chance to fully dry. The ends, once damp with water from the lake, were now matted with blood. Susan turned, taking the hand offered, beginning only then to cry as the fireman pulled her out through the convertible’s mangled frame.
Me and my sister-love
clutch at each other
with moist hands.
Forms like leaves
striding forward
in black heels and
white petticoats,
squatting
watching something
small and blind.

Me and my sister-love
are damp puppy-tongue,
buried in red
two-toned leaves.

Me and my sister-love
we say:
“I am a wielder of words
a worker
a delicate watchmaker
who tinkers with the gears
of glistening vowels.”

Me and my sister-love
stretch sex-skin,
mouths
blowing cool
onto hot cream.

Me and my sister-love
scribble
*remember-me*
a declaration
reading like
black on white
noir.

Me and my sister-love
cut off our curly hair
in a cyclical circumcision.
Me and my sister-love
we ask
“Would I lean over
and lick his boy-kissing lips?”
“I want to suck on
woman-want.
I want the hardness
of a jutting chin.”

Me and my sister-love
two-souled,
a red woman with
a red woman riding
her bare back.
The worst thing about children, sticky hands aside, is the fact that they’re not particularly smart. Some of the less fortunate ones could even be called downright stupid, and with this stupidity comes a willingness to believe. Like a drowning man reaches out for any available piece of flotsam, stupid children reach out for information, little pieces of knowledge that they can call their own. I think it’s safe to say that we were all like this, once. That many years ago we watched our mothers get fat, but still wondered why the stork dropped our little sisters off at the hospital rather than our house. Funny how Mom happened to be sick in that same hospital at the time. One of life’s little coincidences, I guess. My parents told me this when I was seven, and I believed them. They were, after all, much taller than me which meant, I told myself, that they knew the answers to everything that I did not.

Words from the mouth of a parent were always infallible. They didn’t need to preface anything by saying “this is a fact,” because everything they said was taken literally. You know, like the Bible. My parents, like most, knew that this was the case but, unlike most, exploited it, took advantage of my childish stupidity. A great deal of things I learned from my parents I found out later to be not entirely or not at all true. And these were not your typical parental cover-ups.

“There is no Santa”
“Goldie is in fish heaven now”
“We aren’t your real parents”

These stories didn’t faze me. I still got presents on Christmas, Santa or no, I still had four other goldfish, and I couldn’t even spell the word “adopted” let alone knew what it meant. No, my parents could do better than that, my parents wanted the destruction of youth, corruption of the innocent, they wanted blood. They knew the wants and needs of every child, and they knew how to take them away.

Now think, for a moment, back to your childhood. Where did you live when you were five years old? Remember your house. It’s summertime, seven in the evening, there are two quarters in your slimy hands, and you’re sitting on the front porch, listening. At first, there is only the whine of cicadas, and your heart sinks, a little. But then you hear it: “Pop Goes the Weasel” in all of the glory that only a public-mounted address system can deliver. And you see it, white and rusted, and slow, as not to maim the neighborhood children. There are ice cream sandwiches, Choco-Tacos, color-changing popsicles. They’re all fifty cents, and they’re all perfect. They’re all just what you needed.
I remember the first time I heard the ice cream truck. I knew what it was from a friend who had told me earlier in the summer that he had bought ice cream from an aging bearded man driving a dirty truck that played music. Naturally, nothing sounded more appealing, so you can imagine the moment of pure excitement that came when I heard the music from the dining room table. There wasn’t a moment’s hesitation. I ran to my room, grabbed two quarters, and flew down the stairs. I could taste it. Or, at least, I thought I could. I had never had ice cream truck ice cream before, surely it tasted better than store bought. Surely, it was made from the purest chocolate, natural cane sugar, fresh cream. Surely, this ice cream was made in heaven. But my thoughts were interrupted. Mother was at the door. I remember thinking that I was in trouble, but when I looked up, she didn’t seem to be angry. Instead, she looked rather apologetic, almost sad. She knelt down, face level to mine. “Where are you going?” she asked, softly. “Mom!” my reply came garbled with excitement, “The ice cream truck is here! It’s here!”

I couldn’t imagine why the prospect of ice cream delivered to your door could make someone look so disheartened, but my mother put her hand on my shoulder and told me the terrible truth: “I’m sorry, sweetie, but when the ice cream truck is playing music, that means they’re out of ice cream.”

Perhaps, in a horrific moment of insight, my mother envisioned me bed-riddenly fat, balding at fifteen, wailing for more rocky road at the top of my cancerous lungs. I can see the steps her mind took into my future: “First he will get fat, then unable to lose weight, he will become depressed and start smoking, laying in bed all day watching television, wasting away.”

Obesity, cancer, loneliness, these are the plagues of the ice cream addicted youth of the early nineties. My mom knew it would happen, and so she spun her fabulous lie.

At the time, I was five-years-old, and rather stupid. I had no choice but to believe her because she was my mother, the intellectual giant standing in the doorway, repelling me with the infinite wisdom of her early thirties, the truth as she told it. I had no choice but to return to the dinner table, quarters clinking uselessly in my pocket. The truck came and went, and I had no choice but to be disappointed.

And I was disappointed the next day as well, when the rusty song echoing down my street announced that happiness had sold out. There has

continued
never been a song before or after capable of pulling so violently at the strings of my heart. The innocent, childish veneer that “Pop Goes the Weasel” leaves behind had been torn away. It had transformed and, no longer a playground chant, became the “Where Has My Childhood Gone Blues.”

Bruce Springsteen could bend the strings on his Telecaster and growl out the sad story of a million rejections at the hands of a million women with long blond hair and brilliant blue eyes, but he did not know the meaning of the word pain as I knew it. How could he? I was young, weak, and stupid. My parents had lied to deny me a decent childhood. He was talented and attractive, he had a successful career, millions of dollars, and as if that weren’t enough, I knew at the bottom of my heart that his parents let him eat ice cream.
What is this
quick exit, this death
I died? I remember
the helicopter’s familiar
buzz, the resistance of the air
as we landed. The rigged radio
under my seat. Then
the fragmenting
light.

If this
was murder, then murder
is not the killing but
the complication:

I am
not a man now. I am not
a whole. I am
a wet shadow glistening
on green
palm leaves, white shards
of tooth
or bone. A damp red mist
hanging in the air. A scattered
last breath. Parts
separated, begging for meaning
that does not come.

Don’t
misunderstand. This is not
another plea to end
the killing. Let those
who are qualified make
such pleas;

I helped
the fallen child to her feet. And
put my gun in her mouth.

Perhaps
her brother tied the black tangle
of the bomb’s wires, or her father,
or someone
who was
no relation.

continued
We
who were many
are one
and I
who was one
am many.
We all share
one cycle, one
conflict, one
wheel of white sparks
twisting
greater and hotter
at every attempt
to still its spin.
My sister bleeds Tabasco sauce. We found this out the summer I turned fifteen and she seventeen. It is early June and we are too tired, driving home from school, to think about what to prepare for dinner, too tired to think of anything much but the heat, the way the cumulus clouds looked like whipped egg whites, the way they teased us. It hasn’t rained in two months. We’d stopped going barefoot a month ago when the grass dried out and turned from rough to sharp enough to slice into the inside of my arch. We stop at Taco Bell to pick up dinner, the same one we always go to. It is the last Taco Bell in New Mexico before you hit the border, a fact its advertisers boast rather counter-productively as “The Last American Taco Before the Real Thing.” The guy working the take-out window is a friend of Angie’s so she flirts with him to get him to throw in a couple Choco-Tacos that we eat dripping on the way home, dessert before dinner, the way we like it best. Vanilla ice cream runs down Angie’s chin while she’s driving and she uses the back of her hand to wipe it off, and I think to myself, I’ll remember this. I drip ice cream on the inside of my thigh where my blue jean shorts ride up. I squirm in the seat trying to wipe it off but can’t reach, so I leave it there, reminded of it every time my legs rub against each other, thighs sticking together.

We get home and start cutting up the fresh tomatoes, cucumbers and avocados we bought at a vegetable stand to put on the tacos, which may defeat part of the purpose of going out to dinner; we could have just made our own tacos. But there’s something about those greased up Taco Bell taco shells, warm and sticking to that flimsy wrapper. We’d buy just the shells if we could. Angie always gets hard shell, I get soft.

She cuts herself while she is peeling an avocado with the knife we got in Tijuana one summer when we went on vacation there. The handle is decorated with pieces of yellow and red ceramic, like a decoupage, with bits of mirror reflecting light across the hand that grasps it. The knife’s blade is thin, almost delicate, but the blade is still as sharp as when we bought it, two years ago this summer, from a woman on the side of the road with a whole spread of knives on her red and blue blanket, looking like she had something better to do but no way to go and do it. That was the summer our mother left the hotel alone at two in the morning and drove to the beach, hit the sand and kept going until she parked on the bottom of the ocean floor. The night was probably alive with noise, cicadas snapping their wings into a song, a Mariachi Band at a beachside bar trying to out-do them, sand crabs burrowing in the sand trying to drown out both. But for Mom, there was nothing more than a dying hum as the car’s motor filled with water. She probably thought about how peaceful it was, the quiet she was always looking for when Angie and I were playing war with the neighbor kids and all she wanted to do was go and read somewhere. Stingrays and jellyfish probably floated past her window, the jellyfish lighting up her headlights as they passed, incandescent and eerie. Angie and I used to love any living thing that could light itself up and were jealous of them too. We used
to watch fireflies wink by when we went to the drive-in movie theater, touch our fingertips to the car window, trace their path in the condensation on the glass. Which made our father mad, that we liked watching the fireflies more than the movie he'd paid twenty-four bucks for the three of us to see, back when he was still trying to be our dad, back before he chose work, buying and selling, numbers he could control, over a grief he couldn't fix.

The knife slips and cuts cleanly into Angie's right index finger, sliding right off the meat of that slippery avocado, and burrowing deeply into her skin, like cutting through layers of tissue paper, her skin is that dry from this heat. She doesn't make a sound. She just sucks it on and reaches across the counter to grab the damp paper towel I had used to dry the lettuce, wrapping it tightly around her finger. In reaching, some of her blood drips into my soft shell.

“Give you five bucks to still eat that,” she says, not looking at me, wrapping the paper towel around tighter and wiping the knife off on the leg of her blue jeans.

“No way,” I say. “You might have a disease.”

She rolls her eyes at me, even though we both know that of the two of us, it’s more likely to be true of her. She is the one who puts eyeliner on every day, whose locker boys are always waiting around before first period, who walks like she knows. I’m the one who wears a ponytail and forgets her gym socks, and spends time in the library after school, waiting for her to finish making out with Jason Brinkley because her boyfriend is away at a soccer tournament. They hide in the janitor’s closet because they like the thrill of it, though I see nothing thrilling or sexy about the smell of bleach and Janitor Schaffer’s spare toupee hanging from a nail on the door. I can smell Pine-Sol on her when she drives us home in our grandmother’s Chevrolet.

“You’re a wimp, Sadie,” she says, putting the knife back in the drawer as if it’s clean. She turns away and gets out the blue-rimmed plates from the top cupboard.

I’m a wimp, so I do it. I always do what she tells me to when she calls me a wimp, a nerd, freak, loser, virgin. And it’s always exactly what I don’t want to do. I don’t want to taste her blood. But I do, and when I do, when I bite down and I taste that processed Taco Bell beef that could really be churned dog for all we know, that shell still warm, our chopped vegetables from the farmer’s stand, I taste too, Tabasco, burning my lips, my tongue. I swallow whole, forgetting to chew. We’ve never kept Tabasco in our house, never cooked with it because our mother used to get heartburn. Angie looks over at me from across the kitchen where she is setting the table, and grins, a smear of blood still on her front tooth.

She leaves after dinner, which we have eaten, the two of us, alone and quietly. She leaves because it is hot and her skin is on fire, like she’s broken out in a rash, though she hides it beneath a light sweater. She leaves brushing past me like static, like if she doesn’t get out now she’ll combust. The car keys dangle from the back pocket of her Levi’s. No one is here to tell her no. Our father is

continued
away on business, maybe to Seattle, maybe to New York, I never know and I’ve stopped asking.

I’m playing Boggle with our grandmother when Angie comes back later that night, taking the stairs two at a time without stopping to say hello. Grandma Tess got home at 6:30 from her shift at the hospital. I tell her Angie has left, and hand her the quesadilla we got her from Taco Bell, still in the take-out bag, a greasy splotch on the bottom of it looks vaguely like George Washington. Angie was George Washington once for Halloween. She liked when she heard that he had had wooden teeth, and asked our parents, after all her baby teeth had fallen out, if she could have wooden teeth too. Our mother made her a white wig out of her cotton balls.

Angie is drunk and I know it and Grandma Tess knows it but still we continue with our Boggle. I find plant, rant, and wane before I get up to check on Angie, leaving our grandmother nearly falling asleep at the table but determined to spend time with at least one of her granddaughters, even after her fourteen hour nursing shift.

The bathroom door is locked but I can hear her in there, whispers of her body moving.

“Ang,” I say. “Let me in.”

“Fuck off,” she says, and I can hear her shedding her clothes, zippers sliding down, socks thrown on the floor.

She picked up cursing from our mother, and drops every word she knows into conversations with anyone, even teachers, even our father, and with such ease that even I have to be impressed. Adults are so surprised at her cool audacity that they forget everything, even her words, seeing only the way she holds herself, this wild-eyed girl child, dressed in purple spandex and short skirts, bandanas and bell bottoms, trying to escape to any decade but this one. They see her as she wants to be seen, her wild red hair, bangs brushing the top of her eyelashes, her deep eyes sullen but never unaware, never ignorant, maybe drugged but only I can ever tell.

“Just let me in,” I say, and I hear the bathtub being filled. “Before you do something stupid like drown yourself.”

She hums to herself and then hiccups and I can hear bottles clanging together, a hollow sound, a melody of the lonely. She laughs, unlocks the door. I walk in and she’s sliding down into the tub.

“Angie,” I say, looking down at her. “Goddamn it.”

She’s looking up at me, hair piled on her head, eyeliner a little sloppy, eyes swimming, ready to cry, but she’s grinning. The tub is filled half way with water and she’s laying in it, pouring rum over her body casually like she’s mixing a drink. There’s a pile of glass bottles in the corner behind the toilet. I think about our father’s credit card she swiped from his wallet last week. The rum mixes in with the bath water making dark billowing clouds like the world has flipped and we’re looking down into a muddy brown sky. The tops of her knees
and breasts and the half moon of her abdomen show above the dark honey liquid, a color so old it stops me for a moment. I can barely hear her when she tells me, as I’m pulling her out, reaching for a towel, when Angie, giggling, leaning on me, her skin hot against mine, says that she has always wanted to know how it feels, smooth—like amber, she says, like a pearl necklace, like the skin of grapes—as smooth and cold on her skin as it is on her tongue.

A few summers later, Angie tells us she has HIV and we continue to live. A hot spell has come again and time suddenly seems unfocused. Blurry, the days run together and everything is hot and on edge, like oil just before it jumps out of the pan. By this time she is almost nineteen and has somehow graduated, finally free from the obligations of high school, free to join the world. Free in the sense that she’s working twenty hours a week at the local ice cream shop and living at home. I’m a sophomore and getting ready to take the PSAT. We live in the same house but I drive myself home from school now, Angie doesn’t always come home at night so I don’t wait up for her, and there are no more fireflies for us to watch. It is too dry, our swamps went long ago, our riverbeds are almost all shallow empty ditches now. Happens a lot in New Mexico, and the mexicanos sneaking across the border in the deep of the night are dismayed to find the same kind of battle they’d just left behind being waged here, against a sky that refuses to tear and let open a leak, even the tiniest of ones.

Angie tells me to take out the goddamn trash and to stop being such a goody two-shoes. She doesn’t like doing chores but she also doesn’t like to be outdone by me. I cleaned out the refrigerator last night because I couldn’t keep eating food from a refrigerator that was growing a colony of yellow spores in the egg holders on the door.

Her two demands are contradictory, and I tell her that, and I also tell her to go swear in front of Grandma so Grandma could clean her mouth out with soap. Maybe then her breath won’t smell like the tuna salad she ate two days ago.

“Whatever,” she says. “Could you just not be such a brownnoser for once and tell Grandma to go blow it out her ass when she tells you to clean the refrigerator? She’s not your mother.”

“I don’t swear,” I say, and even I can hear how stiff and defensive I sound, a hint of a whine to my voice like Lindsey Mackenzie’s, the teacher’s pet who’s in love with Mr. Hendricks and always tells him who carved the dirty words or the copulating couple into the fake wood of our desktops.

“Do you, or do you not, say the Apostle’s Creed in church?” Angie says, peeling an orange, her hands thinner now. I can see her bones and how they join together beneath her flesh, the ulna and radius touching briefly and connecting in the curve of her wrist. I think about the plastic skeleton in the back of the biology lab and how kids disconnect its bones, take out the ribs and point the feet backwards. Her body scares me. She’s not looking at me but I continued
know what her facial expression is anyway. That’s the thing about sisters. She could be in Alaska and there could be an avalanche, the connection could sound like the TV during a thunderstorm, and even just holding the phone, I would still be able to see her expression, the twitch of her eye, her nostril flaring.

“What does that have to do with anything?” I say, slamming my binder shut on the countertop, the metal twanging an echo in the kitchen that feels angry. I’m trying to do calculus homework, but the whole room is static with tension from the last three months, the ninety-two days since she told us. I wasn’t going to be the one to do anything about it though.

“He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended into HELL,” she says, and to mark her last word she tweaking some of the white skin of the orange at me, the part our mother used to tell us to leave on. High in fiber. Angie throws some of the orange peel at my face, drops the rest in the sink and skips out of the room, hair swinging, and says over her shoulder, “I knew you were going to church for some reason, all those years. Or maybe you’re in love with Father Bernard?”

She’s gone and there’s never anything I can say to her in return. I don’t even try. I go into my room and turn the radio on and lie on my bed and try to sleep. The radio is still on and I’m still awake when the sun comes up.

I show Angie one of those plastic molecular structures that I smuggled out of the biology room and arranged in the pattern of her T cells, so she can see what they’re up to, now that the HIV has progressed to AIDS, now that she’s always at home and not at work, now that her arms don’t have the strength to scoop ice cream from the deep freezer anymore.

“See,” I say, twisting the blue and red balls around, rearranging them with their black connectors, “Then the HIV cell attaches itself to the CD4 proteins and the T cells can’t recognize it anymore, that’s why—”

“Give it up, Sadie,” she says, struggling up off the couch, so tangled in the afghan she nearly falls over and I get up to help, but she stumps off, taking her Cosmopolitan magazine with her. “I don’t need your help,” she yells, her back turned towards me, walking awkwardly now that lesions have started appearing on the soles of her feet. “I need some better fucking doctors.”

She bleeds herself now, whenever we have tacos. She sits down with her knife and eats four, five tacos, holding out her forearm to sprinkle her dangling hold on life as if it’s seasoning for her dinner. She used to cut herself during high school with safety pins she took from our mother’s old sewing basket. She’d go to school in long sleeves and then take her shirt off in the car on the way to school. I’d hold the steering wheel while she stripped to a black tank top. At school, her friends all looked at each other’s raised skin, hardened scar tissue below the surface, inflamed and solid like a caterpillar was in there, waiting. She ran with the only crowd who could keep up with her pace, her wildfire way of living. Now there are scars running up the insides of her arms like train tracks.
On days when the AZT is working, when she can get out of bed and act alive, she laughs as she pricks her forearm with the knife we bought once in Tijuana. She holds her arm out over her plate, waiting for the drip, and says to me, “I’m not going to need it much longer anyway. Blood for the taking.” She winks, and tosses me some broken bits of tortilla chips she’s dipped in her blood for me to catch in my mouth. I turn away and let them fall on the tile floor and break into pieces. I can’t watch this. She eats and leaves and I pick up the broken chips from the floor and hold them in my mouth, one by one, until they are soggy, letting the salt and the taste of Tabasco grow in my mouth and run down my throat.

Later, when I am older and she is gone, tequila will remind me of this, the same taste, the same burn going down when you wonder what you are doing to your esophagus and why, and if the lining of your stomach will turn from blue to red and blister or pucker as if waiting for a kiss. I’ll think about commercials for heartburn medication that show that red line going down the middle of a white-chalk outline of the human figure to indicate where the pain is and where the antacid will attack its enemy. Later, when I have grown past the age that she reached in her short life, I’ll go home and fall into a drunken stupor and dream of Angie in a Mexican bar. It is a Mexican bar like those we’d seen in Tijuana, through the parts of town our father would drive through fast, not waiting to slow down on the curves. The bar is small and dim and shitty, a place only regulars can love, a place where the Tijuana workers, dusty from the fields, come. They come pollinated with pesticides that keep away bugs that will eat away at their cornfields anyway, pesticides that confound their wives who are trying unsuccessfully to get pregnant. The wives long to have a baby, to have a piece of their husbands with them for more than just the night hours when they eat, fuck, sleep, eat, fuck, sleep. But their babies will slipp through them, again and again, three, four, five miscarried babies later and suddenly they are old, both of them and the men still go to the bar, but they don’t care anymore. Everything they wanted in their youth has slipped away, has passed. They only have the same young señorita who has been at the bar all these years, their only constant, and she never ages, with the same deep eyes and red hair, serving them beer in sweating glasses. My sister. Angie wears what the other waitresses wear, a black top and a red apron, but she makes it look better somehow, like always, and in my dream I see her but she doesn’t see me. She goes on serving warm tortillas and loaves of bread as long as her skinny arm, and bowls of cheese melting, and beans, and rice. She keeps going over to the dusty jukebox and putting in wet quarters that she takes from the bottom of the glasses that customers leave. She chooses the same song again and again but no one in the bar seems to mind. I wake up just when I think she’s going to see me, just when I think, this time she will see me and she will sing to me the lines of the song our mother used to sing when she drove us to Tijuana.
The last day Angie is alive is the last day I go to high school. Her funeral is three days later and four days later I graduate.

She's been in the hospital for the past two months. I want her to die. Everyone has stopped coming to visit, her school friends have scattered since graduation, her friends from work always liked her very much and are very sorry, but there is ice cream to be scooped, hot fudge to be ladled, customers to be assured that the sugar free ice cream is in fact free of sugar. Even Grandma Tess has stopped coming. She says she can't watch her granddaughter buried under tubes, can't watch Angie sink into death, headed to a grave before she is. Our father, by this time, has left us, but neither of us feels this loss. We have too many losses to feel, the two of us, some as holy to us as a religion, essential, and some so small by comparison we can afford not to feel them.

Angie, on the day she dies, tells me that I should leave the knife from Tijuana at her gravesite.

"Be sure to prick my finger and make sure there's nothing left," she says cheerfully. I nod, twisting the two purple irises in my hands. I brought them with me to brighten her drab hospital room. They seem too few and silly now, but she gestures towards them.

"Remember the garden Mom used to keep?" she asks, red hair still flaming but her skin is an uncomfortable yellow to look at.

I nod again.

"Remember the hammock she had, hung up right over the peonies? I remember the smell of her flowers from that hammock. She used to like to sleep out there or read poetry out loud," she says, not looking at me. "I don't remember much."

I move my head slightly, just for the sake of agreeing with her.

"It's over, Sadie," she says suddenly.

"Don't," I say, but I don't finish.

"Do you remember the fig tree? The one shading the hammock?" she says, looking out the window at the few trees in the median of the hospital parking lot, whose leaves refuse to unfurl until they get some water, little fists at the end of their branches. "The one with the roots tangled in so much ivy that she was always hacking at it, trying to keep it from choking off the figs before they had the chance to round out and ripen?" She brushes a hair away from her mouth, and a chipped fingernail catches her bottom lip, cracked and dry, and draws a thin line of blood that follows her long red hair off her cheek. "It's been too long of a fight," she says now, more to the wall than to me.

"Angie," I say, but she waves me off with her hand.

"For everyone," she says, and I notice how rhythmic the morphine drip is, almost like a drum roll quietly finding its way into her veins through the IV in her arm. "You carve out a piece of life for yourself, fight your way to the top, fight for fairness, for other people to live," she plucks at the skin on her arm above the IV and her eyes close. "But after it's all over, when did you live?"
She rolls slightly, back and forth on the bed, sheets high around her shoulders but I can still see the outline of her body, how small and wasted underneath.

“It’s always someone else’s fight. Mom’s wasn’t over, you know? Not even at the bottom of that ocean?”

She wasn’t asking me. I laid the irises on her bed and left the room. I took out some change from my pocket and went to the vending machine. There were only some Little Debbie oatmeal cookies, the kind with white cream in the middle. Every single other thing was out. I bought two and walked back to the room. She was asleep. So I sat on the chair that the nurse put next to the bed for me and ate one of the cookies and stayed the rest of the night watching old shows, *I Love Lucy, I Dream of Jeanie, Bewitched*, until the sun came up and I left to catch the school bus at the stop around the corner from the hospital.

When I came back after school that day, she was gone. I picked up the irises and the other oatmeal cookie and left her body there for them to do what they would, stiff and yellow as it was, her red hair flowing from her small skull as if floating around her in the bathtub. I could hear it raining outside, it was pouring like the clouds couldn’t empty themselves fast enough. I started running. I didn’t make it out the door two steps before throwing up, there in the parking lot, the rain cold, my throat burning, my vomit laced with blood, and all around I smelled Tabasco.
Amish Buggies
And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord, and said, “If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the Lord’s, to be offered up by me as a burnt offering. Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah; and there was his daughter coming out to meet him with timbrels and with dancing. She was his only child; he had no son or daughter except her.”

Judges 11:30-31, 34

Willyou keep the knife from my breast?
I had been happy to see you, to feel strong
arms around my shoulders as though
I had been a first-born son, your fingers
vice-like, steel love. Now you declare
a sacrifice? You want my blood now, after I danced,
robes of grace worn for your arrival. Please
let me be, to walk behind our home.
The autumn leaves have covered the path,
created new fiery ways. We would follow
the dogs out, to the field, flushing quick-hearted
hares and whispered quail, shhhh. Quieter still,
and now my fingers harden, my toes disappear
in the middle of a dead field, glorious before.
Barren now, that’s what you say of women
and property, the same endearing tone
coats the top syllable of each word. And now
my promised hide belongs to your god.
Death is my father, his version of love
my throat slit from ear to ear. Burnt flesh
creates deified appetite, but give me more time
to find what it means to be a woman inside
and out, love until it kills you, trust
until a dagger thrust spills blood
within your ribcage, just below the heart.
“Her mother was Metis, goddess of wisdom and Zeus’ first wife. In fear that Metis would bear a son mightier than himself Zeus swallowed her and she began to make a robe and helmet for her daughter... Skilled Hephaestus ran to his father and split his skull open and from it emerged Athena, fully grown and wearing her mother’s robe and helmet.”

Sometimes I am convinced you birthed me:
like Athena was birthed from Zeus’ skull, so I burst through yours and climbed my way down your spindled black hair.
And now, when the rest of the world is still we part oceans of night, unfurl the sheets of shadows.
When our matching black holed hands hang suspended between us, the crows come crying and we dance.
We grab the bones of our ancestors, the bones we have chosen to carry and those that have been handed to us.
With the heaviness of this skeletal weight, we fall onto our knees and rise onto our hands. We use all four limbs to vault down streets, through hallways, into the bedrooms and dreams of women like us.
Women who use the weight to become vixens. Women who make our daughters robes and helmets so they can break forth to build cities.
the nurse is between: my legs: at least it wasn’t a violent rape: she says

as she inserts the camera. pictures snapped. images taken: captured.

She says: you’re red and swollen: but rape exams never offer enough proof:
photographs of my body, sketches of bruises, descriptions of inside: me

if you would have come in sooner: we could have tested for drugs, she says
if I would have come in sooner: if a needle was stuck into my vein: if blood
flowed into vials: if he drugged me if: then. oops: she says: when she sticks the
speculum in: my body jerks, clenches, tightens to protect: oops:

she says: I should have warned you I was going in: going in: going in.
I should have warned you: at least it wasn’t a violent rape: she says.
What the news sounds like

You step into the house and your mom asks you what you want for dinner. You hear the TV turn on, the nightly news woman giving a monotone play-by-play of the day's tragedies. You hear the medals on your varsity jacket clinking as you walk to your room. Your wet shoes squeak on the wood floors. Your mother plays the answering machine—the female robotic voice says you have only one message. Your grandmother tells the tape: *Your father has been in an accident. They don't think he is going to make it.* A car screeches as it pulls to the stop sign outside. Your mother tells you: *We can go to the hospital if you would like,* as the car keys jingle in your step-father’s hand.

What it smells like

Like stale bubble gum, the gel used in the dentist’s office. Like latex gloves, your grandfather’s musty house. Goo-Gone and recycled air. Like re-used clothes. The dry dust of a Kleenex tissue.

What it sounds like

Like air traffic control. Like Robocop’s heart. Like a test of the emergency broadcast system that is played once a month on TV. Like Darth Vader’s breath. Like pumping up your bike tire or football.

What it feels like

It’s like your body is a hot air balloon. It’s like you’re breathing helium and you can float to the ceiling without trying at all. And all the world is still, like when Santa comes on Christmas Eve and time stops. It’s like you’re a Greek statue, posing in stone. It’s like the moment after sex, when your body tingles and you’re catching your breath. Like tiny needles are poking at your skin, like you stood up too fast and all the blood rushes to your brain.

What it’s like

It’s like going pee after holding it for hours. It’s like having an appendectomy. It’s like being a ghost, unable to touch or feel objects in the world. It’s like being a Jedi and sensing the mitochlorian in a small boy. Like anticipating the prick right before you get a shot. Like watching the rain come down your street, before it hits your house. Like the last sliver of moon during an eclipse. It’s like seeing your Dad for the first time in five years in a coma. It’s like waiting for the doctor to pull the plug. It’s like that, almost.
Hoodstina

One hood
Two blocks
Three deaths and no cops
Four fiends outside of the
Five-cent candy store
Six packs of bologna
Six busted cars parked in the front lawn
One clearance sale at Northland Mall
Five eviction notices
Two spoons,
Four bowls and
Three forks to eat with.
Three broke elevators
Six minutes late, “I'll catch the bus later”
Four dollar lotto tickets
One Christmas tree wit no lights in it.
Two bags of cereal with
Five essential nutrients, plus vitamins and minerals
Five food stamps
Three roaches chillin
Two ants crawling on da ceiling
Six o'clock at night gotta get home befo the street light comes on.
One minute too late.
Four yells of “BOY, NEXT TIME GET YO ASS HOME!!!”
Five minutes later dinner is on the stove.
One TV with
Three channels
Six in the morning watchin cartoons and political panels
Two raids the day befo
Two men wit braids handcuffed on the flo
Four assault rifles and
Six bricks of base all the evidence for the case.
Five minutes later
Three knocks at the door
One White man wit ah briefcase
Two envelopes and five assorted papers
Fourth of July, three years later
Sixth eviction notice, one day to move.

BRANDON SCARBER
The frequency of our sleepovers was independent of the season or day of the week. We spent most of our time in her white painted room: white walls, white dresser, white desk, white chair, white sheets. Her floor was a forest of clutter; I was thrilled whenever my bare feet hit the hardwood instead of a hanger or hairbrush. The jumbled piles of books were the only things that brought color to the room. At night we would slip into her twin bed and share a pillow. Her body was half of mine; yet her sprawl pushed me against the window frame. I would sneeze throughout the night as her cats crawled over me and the dust from the twittering shades sprinkled across my face. She could not sleep without the television but when I was over she settled on mute. As she stirred through the night her skinny elbows would jab into my sides. I would lie on my back listening to the mixture of her breath and the buzz of silence while the projected colors from the television screen filled the white space.
In our culture, women of all races and classes who step out on the edge, courageously resisting conventional norms for female behavior, are almost always portrayed as crazy, out of control, mad.
—bell hooks

I heard she was the muse of Rodin.
I heard she was his lover.
I heard she was pregnant with his child.
I heard she got rid of it.
I heard he left her.
I heard she destroyed herself over him.
I heard she was an artist.
I never heard that.

They whispered about her; she was always, she had always been followed by murmurs of scandal. She stopped listening years ago. They did not know her, they did not matter.

She slept; it was early in the morning, dark, gray, misty. A soft sigh left her lips and her eyes opened wide. She realized her entire life hinged on that single, still sound, an expelling of air that pushed the oppressive silence surrounding her, charging the air with invisible energy, filling the empty room with motion.

In the moments before it ended her mind cleared and she smiled.

She didn’t remember the last thirty years, the anger and wildness and panic and fear, the muffled screams, the eventual calm, the eventual emptiness, the loss of strength in her hands. She didn’t remember Montdevergues, with its high walls and sticky floors, or Ville-Evrard, of the large green lawns and the angry nurses. She didn’t remember how she got there.

She didn’t remember her time alone in Paris, struggling to create. She didn’t remember the death of her father, her only supporter, the hatred of her mother, the disappearance of her sister, the betrayal of her brother. She didn’t remember the pain of losing Auguste, the pain of losing his child, the pain of believing that it was her fault. She didn’t remember any of her cats.

She didn’t remember the panic, the fear that took over her entire life, her ranting and letter-writing, the fire on the back of her eyelids. She didn’t remember taking the sledgehammer to her sculptures, the sick joy she found in power and destruction, the beauty she saw in the fractured forms, the crumbling despair she felt running the bits of plaster through her fingers, watching them fade into dust.

continued
She didn’t remember loving Auguste, her teacher, her mentor, her friend. She didn’t remember how the thought of him occupied her life, how she believed he was secretly destroying her reputation, her art, how she feared losing herself to him, how she nearly did. She didn’t remember his warm, coughing laugh, the wrinkles, deep at the corners of his eyes and thin lining his lips, the feel of his rough artist’s hands on her smooth skin, the feel of hers on his.

She didn’t remember the sweetness of being twenty and making art in Paris. She didn’t remember the warm atelier she shared with her partner Jessie, the sweet smell of wet plaster and the allure of unfinished sculpture, dressing in fashionable skirts and crisp white artist’s robes, watching each others’ talent grow while sketching in the Louvre, sculpting late into the night, smoking and drinking tea in the sun. She didn’t remember the freckles on the backs of Jessie’s hands.

She didn’t remember learning to sculpt, pouring warm bronze, watching beauty, power, sex, emerge from a block of plaster and wax. She didn’t remember patting dust out of her skirts, watching the patterns it made in rays of sunlight, the intersections of cuts on her thumbs and palms from her chisel, the joy in creating, the pride in a finished work, the cold, hard finality of the darkened bronze beneath her hands.

No, she didn’t remember any of that.
This is what she remembered:

Villeneuve. Home. Bright sunlight filtering through tall green and white trees. Late summer, sticky warmth broken by a cool breeze that sent shivers down her spine and goose bumps up her bare arms. The sleeves of her dress were rolled up past her elbows, sticky, auburn curls clung to the back of her neck, mud stained the long skirts tucked around her knees.

Her hands, smooth with mud, were filled with deep red clay, buried treasure lovingly collected from beneath rocks and layers of soil and moss, rolled into balls and kept cool beneath the trees.

She kneaded the thick, wet earth, squeezing it through her fingers, feeling the pulsating energy, the personality, the life contained within the mass of clay. A young woman was trapped inside the clay, aching to raise her arms to the afternoon sky, yearning for a chance to live, to breathe, to find her own reasons to survive.

The clay elongated within her hands, stretching into a graceful form. She felt the young woman emerge with every motion she made; she shaped the curve of a hip, the arch of a back, the strong arms gesturing out, opening herself to the world.
Sewn Self-Portrait

BETH JOHNSON
The flickering of CNN on an empty chair
various bulges and caverns remain
where thighs, buttocks, and tailbone
once relieved the stress of three flights of stairs
and San Francisco hills painful when you weren’t
shuffling across moss carpet you achieved zen
stacking coins so neatly you valued each cent
because each coin promised liberty stating in God we trust
heavy words now tossed to blind men in alleys forced
into cheap trinket machines marked made in Japan
chopsticks and rice seemed reason enough to be associate
with the rising sun the setting of your feet grown cold
as you lay propped in pillows led me to ask why your teeth
were kept in a cup of water and you said “Don’t smoke”
I only four at the time gazed into your hazy eyes which
have seen a lot but you were no spy.
Western “God” knows you were born in California and
Buddha knows if I weren’t an Ise tourist
seeking the sun goddess who did not believe in me
that my incense burning might reach at least
the low-flying clouds of mountains
though you preferred to be buried at sea.
I am smiling for your poker face because I hear
You were different before time changed you;
That you made jokes and Grandma, American beauty queen
of the barracks, she fell in love with you this way,
a descendant of samurai and rice patty farmer.
in love you belonged
where you can still be found, young, resilient
in photographs smiling in the times
of black and white and topaz.
Your body and Fibonacci
must have kept secrets from each other,
carving them in stone for the other to find
in the morning.

There is a genius in believing
inspiration is a foreign source.
Like looking at a delta
watching the water keep flowing in.
Up From Wacker Drive
My son will die before nine o’clock tonight without ever having known his father or his grandfather. He will enjoy seeing monkeys play at the zoo. He will tear grass from the park, and try to use it to feed the birds across the street from where he used to play marbles. He will die before he ever gets to see the popcorn peddler on the corner where he is told his grandmother lives.

Simon’s grandmother will not visit his grave. Nor will I. He will be buried across town from his grandfather. He will be buried across the country from where his father is presumed to be. Simon wants to be a pilot when he grows up, though he has never been on a plane.

Simon tugs on my left sleeve. He wants to tell me about the monkeys that are swinging on the rope vines. Simon is five. The way the monkeys play in their oversized, rusting cage reminds him of playing on the playground back when he was going to school. The way he tugs on my left sleeve reminds me of my father grasping my forearm and wrist almost six years ago, back when he was struggling for each of his last, whispering breaths. He wanted to tell me how much he wished that I hadn’t driven away Simon’s father.

Simon points to a monkey that is high in the fake, plastic trees—screeching at the monkeys lower than him. His superiority as the monkey at the top of the cage must be known to all. I watch as an old monkey at the bottom of the cage limps toward the shallow waterhole that a zookeeper’s assistant is filling with water from a long, dirty hose.

I never told my mother my father’s last words. She knew enough. She knew that they were not words of love to his daughter. She knew that they were not fond memories of his life with me. She knew that Simon would not have a father. She knew that she was not speaking to me before my father got sick. She knew that she would not speak to me now that he was gone.

A mother and father push their three-year-old in a stroller through the crowd and to one side of the neglected plaque dedicating the monkey cage to a dead man who left in his will the money for the expedition that was led to capture the monkeys. I would carry Simon when he would get tired walking with me as I tried to find work. From one pawnshop to another. There was no work.

Simon likes the monkeys. I tell him that the zoo will be closing soon and that we have to go. Simon jumps onto the curb and tries to balance, but gives up after a few steps. The days are short. It is the time of day just before it starts to get dark. Simon tries to balance once more.

I used to rent a small apartment above the dry-cleaners. After the building was repossessed, Simon and I would find shelter in the warmth of the nooks and craneyes of the city’s alleyways and ghost-buildings. Simon would play marbles with his pretend friends. I would pretend that I wouldn’t have to steal another loaf of bread for us to eat.

I told Simon that we would see his grandmother today. Simon walks ahead of me, and I tell him where to turn and where to go straight. We come to a park where Simon excitedly rips up grass with his small hands. There is a

*continued*
Simon continued

fountain in the middle of the park. Four statues of generals surround a brick path that leads around the fountain, breaking off into four paths that lead away from the center, to the corners of the park.

Simon runs down the path I told him to take. His pockets are full of the grass that he has torn from the ground. Dirt stains his fingers, and is caught under his fingernails. Pigeons peck at the seeds scattered near a bench. The woman who was feeding them left twenty minutes ago. She will return again tomorrow. Simon tosses his grass to the birds. The pigeons fly away.

It is getting dark. Simon turns down an empty street. I follow. My mother’s house is at the end of this block, two houses to the right. We walk halfway down the block. There is a gunshot. I hear the squeaking wheels of the popcorn peddler, and the chattering of his little monkey. My son lies dead in the street. There is another gunshot. My left hand is reaching for his. My right hand holds a gun. His blood flows to a drain at the curb; mine flows toward the end of the block.

The popcorn peddler passes our street. In the second house to the right at the end of the street, a mantle clock strikes nine, and an old woman brushes the last of some birdseed from her wool skirt.
I am not ready to fix the faucet but the constant drip reminds us both that he is no longer there
to stop it. The water mark on the basin grows with each drop and the sound echoes in my chest.

I detach the metal parts from the enamel, pull the spigot from its mold and feel the years of moisture between my fingers.

The twisting handle has chewed through the rubber ring meant to stem the flow of water. Its scarred surface
now more a sieve than a stopgap.

At the hardware store, I compare the black circle to twenty different versions

and avoid the attention of the workers knowing that the answers I need go beyond locating the right part.

I screw the new ring up tight and assemble the faucet from memory, turn the handle and let the water run cold
over my fingers until needles shoot down my nerves.
I twist the water off and listen for the drip with eyes closed. It doesn’t come.

I bring my mother to the bathroom to show her what I did to fix it to show her I know how.

Behind her eyes I see the need she has to tear the pipes from the wall and let the water run till the house floods,

then rots, then falls. To take the hammer he left when he left and smash the foundation till it cracks

continued
and earth seeps in through the leak.
She will ask me to fix this too,
to rebuild from the ground up,

to lay the foundation on my back
and keep the frame straight with my hands.
Her eyes ask me to help, but I can’t

hear her pleas over the silence of the sink.
Marcie got pissed on by a lion when we were in the first grade. We were at the zoo, a small one where the cages were right up close and the only thing to separate a kid from a lion were a few rusty iron bars. Marcie was standing right up close because she wanted to see the lion as it flicked its tail at us and blinked its slow yellow eyes. We all saw it coming before she did. Not that she wasn’t smart, but she just really wanted to see that lion. The lion turned its back on her, showed us its dusty rump, lifted its tail. She kept standing there even as the rest of us backed up.

I don’t think any of us wanted to look, but it was like a car crash on the highway. Traffic slows for miles because everyone wants to see a body or a car on fire. With a similar fascination, we all wanted to see Marcie get pissed on by this lion.

She had to ride the bus home that day with wet stains marking the red apple on the front of her puffy blue coat, and none of the girls wanted to sit with her because the smell was too strong, but the boys thought it was funny to tell the story again and again, even though everyone had seen it happen, everyone knew that the stream of piss had been three feet long, not twenty, and had smelled like thirty litter boxes, not a thousand. They knew that the lion had wobbled unsteadily on arthritic hips, not bared its graying teeth in a terrifying roar. They still shrieked with laughter with every retelling, never seeming to notice when the amount of piss increased exponentially.

After a few years we stopped calling her things like “lion piss” and “litter box,” but every time a new kid moved to town it was the first thing they knew about Marcie. Every year we’d introduce her to someone new and they’d get this look on their face like they were pretending they hadn’t heard or trying not to laugh.
The old German lady, who watches me when my parents work, lives at the bottom of our village. When her husband was still alive, he used to pick apples from the neighbor’s trees. He would peel them in one long twisted coil with his pocketknife before handing one to me. I spent the night once and lay between Oma and Opa’s warm bodies, as the old woman sang to me in sweet, raspy words.

The milkman leaves two glass bottles at her door once a week; the bread truck pulls up every Saturday at nine. The pantry smells of stale smoke; I swallow herbal toothpaste kept above the pea green bathroom sink. She feeds me noodle soup with heart shaped waffles, each time I spill it down my shirt she comments, ‘Du hast dich schon wieder geklebert.’

Across the street, her youngest son lives alone; he used to be married, now divorced, a Roman Catholic through it all. The bottom of his house he’s rented to a loud American couple with kids. We’re sure they’re crazy. Oma and I walk to the soccer field behind his house; we tie wild flowers together in a circle. My perennial crown wilts.

At the back of her house there’s a garden, she shuffles around, pruning its flowers, and later holds her tender back. I pick up snail shells and pray they’re empty, place them in my pocket. At a nearby table, her daughter sits, a baby in her arm, cigarette in her hand, and talks of ‘quitting these things.’ The chair leaves metal squares imprinted in her skin.

continued
Cars speed past on the busy street behind us, each creating a trailing ‘zoooooom’ through our ears. She warns me of the road; a child was killed playing there decades ago. One of hers.

One day, Opa went to pick apples and was found lying cold at the base of the ladder. Now Oma sleeps alone upstairs and thinks about him every morning while she slowly dresses. In the afternoons, she turns on *The Price is Right* in the living room. We watch it in silence as she knits wool socks.
East is relative, a civilizing force in reference to the American frontier, an exoticizing one on the global level; nevertheless, east of here, on the southern border of Michigan, lies Blissfield. The fields of bliss, reminiscent of Elysium, I say. I tilt my head against the backseat so I can see the moon’s Cheshire smile, straight up through the rear window. We might be dead already, on our way to some long-mythological afterlife.

As a junior who didn’t go on study abroad, I could say Blissfield is as close as I’ll get, an attempt to reconcile tradition’s wisdom with my supposedly pitiable reality. Instead, I will ask, who are you that in your country you live as in an utterly homogenous village, your perspective daily unchallenged? Are you as a tidal wave on a distant shore, crushing cultural constructions, blind? Are you as a polished steel pillar, stalwartly perpendicular, impenetrable? The ability to observe and be observed, the ability to change and be changed are fundamental elements of life. To be the epitome of colonialism, of conservatism is to be inhuman, inanimate, only able to be translated as force of metaphor: a tidal wave, a steel pillar. For even if such villages ever did exist, generic *homo sapiens* defying Earth’s evolutionary breath, I am sure there are none here today. Instead, I will say, as an American, as a woman, as a student, as a friend, as myself, I live every day in a foreign country.

There are no pure travelers, no pure natives. It can be asked of all of us not only “Where are you from?” but, “Where are you between?” 1 Still, the Western world finds it difficult to rid itself of this phantom purity. We seek it in every breath; we are dynamic (and in our teleological view, progressive) travelers searching for a manifestation of purity in a static Other.

Our trio left Kalamazoo long after the sun had fallen from our time zone’s sky to illuminate parts unknown, on a trip we hadn’t even anticipated an hour beforehand. It is the weekend before finals, but spontaneity lends its own sense of accomplishment, one as a writer I much prefer. Commonplace routines and responsibilities are oft forgotten, but an adventure, a curious union of circumstance and mood, is a gift from experience to memory. Stories are born from deviation.

I twitch in my seat, exhilarated. I have been to Blissfield before, for a series of days over this past winter break that frightened me at how easily they slid from my present into the past, and continue to slide ever further from the reality of my life. I associate with Blissfield every intangible Good. It is the imagined home of a life unlived, provoking ephemeral memories of the Other I might have been. Scott, my host and “means of transport,” 2 once wrote of it, “This field of gold and silver. This Elysium of beer and underage sex and illegitimate children. This place where roses grow, even yet.” He is an “insider-outsider,” 3 skilled in oral translation, and in being apathetic and passionate in an upending combination. Even Scott is not a native in the way a place like Blissfield has natives, generations tangled in a lifelong commitment to a community; though his lineage is secured there, he lived in Florida for much of his childhood. Blissfield is a country town differing from others only in nuance, made otherworldly by our perception, made mundane in the perception of

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2 Clifford, 109
3 Clifford, 99
others. The concept *fetishization* comes to mind; that I find it blasphemous in reference to such a place only cements its probable truth.

Then again, it might just be Christina.

We’re driving to Blissfield tonight for an early celebration of her twenty-second birthday. Our dinner had been punctuated by the ring of Scott’s cell phone: *please Scott come home please please*. As a non-drinker, he is the traditional designated driver, and therefore any instance of drinking suggests his presence. He manages to hold off until a lull after we have finished eating, finally slapping his hand against the table and declaring, “We’re going to Blissfield!”

To his credit, she is hard to refuse. Christina is one of *those* girls, the planet or star around which revolves a thousand satellites, unexpectedly beautiful, and even more charismatic. She dominated Blissfield High School, leader of the Fearsome Foursome: Christina; Tracy, gorgeous like a *Vogue* photo shoot, married just last summer; Catherine, exuding a monk-like aura of tranquility; and the incongruous Stacey, plump, who had a nasty habit of dating men right out of jail. Blissfield High School was their playground, and I imagine them living teenage lives that could only be imaginary: every moment memorable, all the joys of small town living with none of the drawbacks.

I know that this is not true. I know that this is an illusion. My critical mind knows that the existence of God cannot be proven or disproven. But I still allow myself this small faith, this small comfort. I allow my journey to be teleological, to be to a destination more fulfilling than a graveyard, or, more metaphorically, a library shelf or the shaded recesses of another mind. It is a partially unconscious decision, but a shameful one, rooted in the kind of disconnection from reality that only cultural dominance can provoke. I lived my youth in white suburbia, resting atop a veiled heap of human miseries, exploitation, struggle, early death by murder or genocide. To the privileged mind, it only follows that those closest to the ground must accordingly be earthbound, in life as in death; but *we! Glorious we!* were meant for more than the most lavish mortal glories can accommodate. We find ourselves on a persistent search for something untainted by the squalor of civilized humanity.

To reconcile my critical mind with the goddess I just presented, Christina is a girl, a woman perhaps, within the realm of mortal possibility, built of the same biological systems as myself. There is the glamour I cast upon her, the intrigue, similar to that American men think they find in “women of the Orient.” It’s a game of idealization born of distance and difference. Given a sister’s familiarity, I might well detest her.

Which brings me to Ashley, my other companion on this journey. Ashley is a true native, not of Blissfield proper, but of the surrounding farmland. Her hometown, her Blissfield, is, as most, tarnished and ordinary from use. Heaven is often meaningless for those who’ve always existed there, and justly so. For example, the natives of New Guinea who lived amidst inland gold deposits sought only shells in payment from the Leahy brothers for mining it out. Gold was commonplace among the stones in their riverbeds; they instead valued...
something they experienced as rarer. Who’s to say which has more value: gold or shells, when the objects of fetish themselves are stripped of their cultural connotations? On Crusoe’s island, which would you rather salvage from civilization’s wreckage? When it is stripped down to practicality, perhaps the natives had the right idea, for a shell at least can be used to scrape at the Earth. Electrical conductivity aside, for the natives knew nothing of it, of what use is gold but to be idolized by those searching for false gods?

Ashley is searching for a job in Chicago, and speaks of the possibility of moving back to her hometown with a joking shudder. And what of me, the writer, the theorist, the makeshift anthropologist? As for my context, I was born in Mt. Clemens, Michigan, but am I not a Michigander. My family moved to Alexandria, Virginia, when I was three, and between then and my beginning of college, we visited, perhaps annually, my paternal grandparents in Pleasant Ridge, my maternal grandparents on a farm in Imlay City, and various other relations spread throughout Michigan’s thumb.

See, I retained some of the insider language. I remember that in the first grade, we were all asked to bring in a box of items we thought represented ourselves. Then our classmates were supposed to guess what significance that object had. I remember standing before the class, holding a mitten in hand. “I’m from this state,” I said.

A boy called out, “Alaska?”

“No,” I said, and the closest thing to silence in a first-grade classroom followed.

When we first moved to Virginia, my father told my mother that the displacement was only temporary. It’s been almost eighteen years. Still the hope that she’ll soon return home has poisoned her against finding familiarity, comfort in Virginia. As a child, I heard tales of Michigan, analogous to the Promised Land of the ancient Israelites, flowing with milk and honey. I understood the milk, as my grandparents owned a dairy farm, full of cows with lazy, terrifying eyes; but not the honey, as none of my relatives were known beekeepers. My siblings and I were kept perpetually waiting: each year brought a new story about a job my father was applying for in a random Michigan city (my freshman year of high school it was Kalamazoo); soon, she said, we’ll be moving soon. We were told that if we were only in Michigan, our lives would be better.

But the future we were waiting for never came, just as a tomorrow attained is often found as just uninhabitable by the mind as the last today was. Nevertheless, I built little lives for myself, lives where my tomorrows ended up the way I intended them. Fictional selves were ever the new girls at fictional schools, overcoming systemic plot points, such as a wacky best friend who always got herself into amusing trouble from which I would be obliged to save her. These fictional selves combined were all that I hoped for my nonfiction self, all that I sobbed over not being. I grew to despise the gulf between a person’s intentions and what actually happens, and that the only way to span it from the perspective of another is to construct the faulty bridge of interpretation. To shield myself against misinterpretation, I began to offer explanations of my actions to anyone who would listen; that editorializing, combined with my
already constant self-narrating, did (and continues to do) more to develop my writing skills than the sum of my formal training. To further shield myself from misinterpretation, I began to avoid being observed whenever possible. If the alone relinquish autonomy, hiding from the axolotl’s eyes, then they evoke no changes upon themselves or their environment: freedom from interpretation through being sensed as inanimate, or nonexistent.

Or dead.

The paradox is that I am here theorizing myself, interpreting or misinterpreting myself in such a way that explains the contingencies of the past that brought me to this present, riding in this car, composing this paper. We create theory and theory creates us.

My first choice for college was Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, most famous for having no grading system and being the pot-smoking-est school in America. But my mother refused to sign my loans unless I accepted the only offer of admission I had received from a Michigan school: that of Kalamazoo College. I acquiesced, too afraid of the alternative: living at home and getting a job, old familial miseries spilling over into my supposed newfound independence. I reconciled myself with Kalamazoo, finding solace in the exotic name. Kal-ah-mah-zoo, I'd say, stretching the syllables across my tongue. It was in Michigan. I would finally live there again. Like déjà vu, my imagined selves would finally be realized, dancing seamlessly from fiction into truth.

I came into Kalamazoo College undeclared, with a vague intention of majoring in physics. I was placed in Di Seuss’s freshman seminar. She pointed at me once and said I would be an English major. And so I am, though I still think longingly of equations, neat rows of symbols able to be deciphered by the cool application of logic. Physics might not have easy answers, but English has no answers at all.

Another set of contingencies, intertwined with the above, brought me to befriend Ashley, who is a grade ahead of me, and Scott, who does not go to Kalamazoo College but to Western. These contingencies are too convoluted to explain to my satisfaction here. That is the way of history. Life is confusion, the human players struggling to make meaning from a script that is impossible to preserve for posterity in perfect context. The only way to know it is to live it, and the success of even that method is questionable. Lost, we lunge towards anything pure, anything we can know as simple. We demarcate between the Other and ourselves, not willing to believe only more humanity lies where we are seeking true baseness or true glory.

Now I’m in Scott’s backseat, looking out the window at silvery, decrepit barns as we pass them, always passing, passing on. The roads we took here are many, converged at this moment. We are here for all the complicated reasons only life can provide, and this composition can but roughly sketch “all those places [we] had to go through and be in relation with just to get to” here.

Before us lies Blissfield.
In Italy, you
can die just as you would die
in America

In Ligonchio
you were so poor and hungry
you would eat sparrows

You survived on a
diet of old mayonnaise
and prayers to God

Prisoner of war
cannot speak any English
and they stole your books

The Virgin Mary
will hear you if you speak in
a little whisper

A nun wanted you
to purchase an expensive
rosary. No, no.

So we buried you
an old plastic rosary
in your dead stiff hand

*Ave Maria*
*Piena di grazia*
*Nonno è con te*
I’d have to say that the first thing that attracted me to China and the Chinese culture was its elegance. Reading about the gardens designed on precise principles of balance, harmony, and composition, and the buildings conceived as the realization of complex numerological ideas with roots in ancient philosophy astounded me. The finesse of the lacquerworker or the woodcarver, whose masterpieces take decades to complete, floored me. When I got there, to Beijing, to the city located and planned solely to maximize its positive feng shui, I was enthralled. Complete unity of design and execution. Certainly, the throngs of peasant conscript laborers who lost their lives in the process are tragic, but the skulls that are purportedly buried within the Great Wall only serve to increase its fascination, right? Looking at the ancient pictures of the scholars with their long, manicured fingernails, perfect goatees and Fu Manchu mustaches, how could the reality of this place be anything but full of that elegance that can, even in modern Chinese, be used interchangeably with excellence?

High on this heady blend of imagination and admiration, I stepped off the plane ready to float blissfully on a tide of style and class. Soak up all this elegance like a thirsty sponge, that’s what I’ll do. Then came the culture shock. Spitting. Cutting in line. Pushing. Surliness. ‘Are these even the same people I spent so long reading about in class?’ I wondered sheepishly.

I remained convinced for months—these Chinese people surrounding me were nothing more than the diluted byproduct of Chinese culture plus years of Maoism plus years of Global Capitalism, and completely uninteresting. Even the language they used was harsh, if colorful.

For instance, when you want to say something is really good in the Beijing dialect, like really good, the best, most heartfelt compliment you can give, you say that it is “niu bi,” cow vagina. That car is really cow vagina. My favorite brand is Prada. It’s not just good, it’s cow vagina.

I even found myself saying it right along with the boys after awhile:

Hey, Jesse! What’s the most cow vagina university in America? Hmm, I’d have to say that Harvard is the most cow vagina university in America. But different universities are good for different things, like, M.I.T. has the most cow vagina engineering program, but Duke probably has the most cow vagina medical school.

Months passed. After a while, I began to shout “cow vagina!” at the end of rock concerts. I began to say “this beef is really cow vagina!” I could even use it ironically—“Hey Jesse! How was your character dictation test today?” “Oh, cow vagina…Cow vagina.”

After my experiences with cow vagina—the cow vagina shoes, the cow vagina World Cup-winning Italian soccer team, the cow vagina house party, the particularly cow vagina karaoke room, and the not-cow-vagina-whatsoever plastic bag of Chinese liquor—I came to an important realization.

Yes, cow vagina is crass, cow vagina is rustic. If you go to cosmopolitan Shanghai and refer to a Cosmopolitan as cow vagina, you’ll be laughed out with hoots and catcalls like “Hey! You don’t look much like a
Northern Peasant!!!(trust me, it’s funny to them every time). Cow vagina is sexist, too. I mean, it’s problematic any time a bunch of men (nice girls never say cow vagina) start bandying around the word vagina. It is solidly on the male side of the line between male and female language, which is clearly delineated and rarely crossed in China. Cow penis means just that, a penis. You can tell just who is controlling the discourse if you hear people impregnating female words with idiomatic content.

Still, cow vagina is, once your ears and sensibilities have a chance to acclimate, straightforward, simple, and—let me explain!—almost, well, elegant. It is the apotheosis of the no-bullshit tell-it-like-it-is oomph that Chinese has. They (the Chinese) like to brag about how, in the United Nations charter, the Chinese version takes up the least space. This is true, and it’s because in Chinese, things are just obvious. A wide variety of things, from gates to doors to hatches to apertures to airlocks to bulkheads, are all “men’r” (gate). A “che” is anything with a wheel, from a bike to a trike to a train to a bus to a car to a tank.

This is radically different from us pathological taxonomizers in the West. Before we can conceptualize it, we just have to place it, put a name on it and find its analogues. Only then can it make sense. Maybe the Chinese tendency to call a thesaurus a “thousand words treasury” or a bicycle a “me-propelled wheel” is a result of their late inundation in a confusing flood of “electric brains” (computers) and “space-navigating boats,” which has proven overwhelming. Maybe, however, it represents a refreshing (to my Western eyes) ability to put down the slide rule and the calipers—to quit worrying so much about what something is, and be satisfied with what something does. Take this, extrapolate! This idea, this feeling, this relationship, it doesn’t matter a whit what it is. It matters what it does, or what it can do, if we let it. And that, well, I guess that’s pretty cow vagina.
Alif Bet
so similar
to alphabet
the origin of language
is formed from
the first covert curves
dots and dips
and the last lines
of letters representing
rare intonations
Hanadi, we’ll learn
the literacy of opposing
tongues and mothers
of every curve
dot
and dip
I’ll vocalize vocabulary
if you verify verbs
like to read, to write, to speak
to use hands, lips
and teeth
sink into cherry
red apples
to taste the tenderness
the sweet
of an eagerness
to know
every letter’s evolution
on tongue
and page.