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Left Behind in Telluride

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LEFT BEHIND IN TELLURIDE

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By

Michelle Lee Primeau

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by

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THESIS

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An Experiment in Storytelling

“I think anyone who spends his life working to become eligible for literary immortality is a fool.”

—Harold Brodkey

It’s the truth that hurts. That moment when a writer recognizes herself in another writer, all of her daydreams and ambitions of becoming known not for the sake of empathy, understanding and connecting with other human beings but to live beyond her death in print, in the literary canon. The daydreams wither and all that is left is the stark need, an almost urgency to get an individual truth out and hope that someone understands and likewise feels understood and a little less alone. The reason I started writing and will continue to write is that desire to communicate but knowing I may not always be heard.

I’m writing from Upper Michigan on the shores of Lake Superior and cannot move over one-hundred miles from where I am until my eldest son turns eighteen. I wouldn’t have been able to pursue creative writing without an online MFA program. I am grounded, but Lake Superior constantly shifts from glassy calm to crashing gale-sized waves to frozen cavernous and glacial blue peaks. The Lake centers me and I feel fortunate that I didn’t have to leave my children or Superior to pursue my passion. The first drafts of my preface were compilations of various fiction and poetry writer’s statements. Beginning with how the personal is political and the personal is universal. I think I was reaching to rip-off poets like Adrienne Rich, Yusef Komunyakaa, and Benjamin Saenz, and envying the talent of writing activists like Arundhati Roy.

I wanted to broach the topics of craft, technique, truth, memory, empathy, and the rhetoric of fear in the writing process of creative nonfiction in this preface. The difficulty remained trying to compartmentalize these topics and I found weaving storytelling throughout acted as a solvent into which the topics dissolved.

But if writing essays is as Scott Russell Sanders refers to it as “a politically subversive act” shouldn’t the preface to a collection of creative nonfiction be a precursor to what follows? I can write in a critical and authoritative voice, scholarly and divorced from my own, and drop names and influences, none of which I directly think of while writing. I can fall under the academic pedagogy of controlling voice, thoughts, and language or I can risk experimenting with *storytelling* in critical writing like Marianna Togovnick suggests in “Experimental Critical Writing” that: “When we encourage experimental critical writing, we don’t not always know what we will get, but we stimulate the profession to grow and to change. We don’t control the future of the profession only when we give grades or make hiring or tenure decisions; we control it at the level of the sentence” (413). Not that the reference of *we* applies to my individual self. I am not part of any academic camp or a faculty member at a university. I am part of the controlled sample, a student, where my voice is altered at the level of the sentence.

Storytelling: 9/11, Fear, and Truth

“Writers imagine that they cull stories from the world. I’m beginning to believe that vanity makes them think so. That it’s actually the other way around. Stories cull writers from the world. Stories reveal themselves to us. The public narrative, the private narrative - they colonize us. They commission us. They insist on being told. Fiction and nonfiction are only different techniques of

storytelling. For reasons that I don't fully understand, fiction dances out of me, and nonfiction is wrenched out by the aching, broken world I wake up to every morning."

—Arundhati Roy

I attended a family reunion this summer. It was one of the first moments when my dad didn't try to convince me to go back to studying chemistry, my first major, and find a cure for cancer. This year my calling in life was discovered by my eldest brother, Stacy. He told me how sometimes people's talents are most evident when they are children and how everyone used to call me the Little Banker when I was young. He said that I had a real knack and prowess for finances and should start researching investments and get into financing.

"Did you ever think that it might have been my character?" I asked. "I may have just been greedy."

Stacy looked a little surprised and then continued to tell me that it would be a great opportunity to work from home. I wouldn't have to present myself or deal with the social stresses of a workplace. My other brother, Jesse, walked by and imagined that Stacy muttered that Jesse was an asshole. Jesse didn't sleep for the entire week and left the reunion a day early. During his entire drive home the landscape looked like what he described as hell, he later told me on the phone, a place he now believes he's been residing in since he was eighteen.

A month after the reunion I turned the television remote to our quick guide channels. MSNBC is the middle button and I settled in to watch an hour of the Rachel Maddow Show. During a commercial break, there was an ad for a website which sounded intriguing but elusive enough that I had no idea what *NewAmerica.com* was going to be about.

The screen popped up as a Stansberry and Associates Investment Research Advisory. The video filled the entire screen and there was no pause button. I could watch it or close-it-out but I was fond of black text on a white backdrop and the narrator had a soothing voice. The narrator was drawing cartoon sketches the first of which depicted the fall of America and the ensuing devaluing of the dollar, martial law, and riots that would spread across the States. One hour and a headache later the narrator was asking for viewers to invest in his subscriber pamphlets so that they could potentially make quite a lot of money in this time of upheaval and save their families by making the right investments, four of which he claimed you do not have to report to the government.

After 9/11 the rhetoric of fear and trembling has become more common and lucrative beyond obvious beneficiaries like Haliburton. Stanberry and his soothing voice produced another video—The Fall of America. They made quite a bit of money with their insider email alerts, especially since their subscribers invested and dumped their stocks into what they were told was going to be a soaring market on May 22, 2008. The market plunged shortly thereafter and Porter Stansberry was convicted of SEC fraud by a California judge. Brian Deer, an investigative reporter in London, also found fraudulent practices during vaccine trials in Thailand among a company called GenVax. Stansberry was promoting GenVax as the next cash cow for investors, citing proof that the GenVax endorsed AIDS vaccine really worked. I remember coming across this bit of news online, the potential vaccine, and feeling overwhelming joy that so many lives would be saved. It didn't occur to me to invest. After watching the financial advisory, it hit me, that not only the energy industry but pharmaceuticals are big money, and not just for corporations but for the commonplace investors. Who would have a stake in a human guinea pig on multiple drugs? Everyone.

After 9/11, the demand for creative nonfiction increased in America. There was a sudden need for the truth of everyday lives. Within Foucault's essay, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," compelling interpretations of both truth and history are explored: "Truth is undoubtedly the sort of error that cannot be refuted because it was hardened into an unalterable form in the long baking process of history" (79). American citizens didn't seem to want to wait for history to be written before they could grasp the truth. They desired to see how history was being made and in turn to be part of that process, by reading the written accounts of individual truths. Patricia Hampl explains the political role of creative nonfiction writers: "If we refuse to do the work of creating this personal version of the past someone else will do it for us. That is a scary political fact." (312). Hampl also credits Milan Kundera's work of fiction, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, for a proper perspective on memory and its political implications: "He refers to willful political forgetting, the habit of nations and those in power (Question Authority!) to deny the truth of memory in order to disarm moral and ethical power. It's an efficient way of controlling masses of people. It doesn't even require much bloodshed, as long as people are entirely willing to give over their personal memories" (312). To deny a person her memories, is a political act of subterfuge.

Americans didn't want to be hoodwinked anymore, but there were new ways to prey on people's fears. Some of these fears I was familiar with in Telluride, Colorado where dialogue on the fall of Rome, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the inevitable fall of America were commonplace as I sat around campfires in the woods with other derelict youth living on the fringe of society. Some of the derelicts were trust fund babies (kids who inherited trust funds and tried to pretend they were homeless, pulling a Conover, or just bumming around doing drugs and going to concerts), others were runaways, and one kid who didn't speak anymore was mentally

ill. The whisperings and dialogue of transients gave rise to voices in the mainstream after 9/11. Everyone seemed like a conspiracy theorist and on the soapbox. And the youth were the most eager to listen. In 2007, during my undergraduate studies I took a course called the Philosophy of Technology. One of our required readings was Ted Kaczynski's manifesto—Industrial Society and its Future. Approximately thirty students were asked to divide into camps according to the philosophy they found most persuasive. I was in the Sustainable Technology camp with another eight students but surprised at an equal number of my peers in the Luddite camp and the most popular, with almost half the class in the Unabomber's camp. A gunman in Norway recently killed ninety-three people and wrote his own manifesto. Some claim that he plagiarized Kaczynski, as if this is more damning than taking innocent lives.

Fiction and Creative Nonfiction Techniques

*"I want to write an autobiography, but I just can't bring myself to.
You create masks."*

—Bharati Mukherjee

In a letter to A. S. Gruzinsky, Anton Chekhov advocated that every dramatic element in a plot should be necessary: "One must not put a loaded rifle on the stage if no one is thinking of firing it" (273). He's quoted as using the example of a pistol or rifle as that dramatic element in both an 1889 conversation with I. Ya. Gurlyand and in 1911 in S. Shchukin's *Memoirs* Chekhov is remembered as advising: "If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off. If it's not going to be fired, it shouldn't be hanging there." In general terms, there should be no unnecessary elements in a plot. The same narrative techniques that apply to fiction apply to creative nonfiction as well. The

crafting of creative nonfiction is still a process of selection, even if the events of real-life are the spine of the organism, how the writer makes meaning of and understands those events through her unique perspective will be the flesh and blood that gives rise to a shape recognized as having form but being wholly unique.

Guns are an easy dramatic element because they offer a quick resolution to conflict resulting in either death, severe injury, or even just being a very physical extension of a character's yearning or desire to take control and end life.

But when a gun enters a writer's real-life it is anything but easy to turn into a tidy narrative. Something that can seem so big in drama can become more than an agent of death. The person holding the gun, the gunman, needs to be understood. It presents a problem and the writer situates herself within that problem to try to solve it and understand the mechanisms at play, or at least work through pages of derivatives before getting stumped. The gun doesn't just stand as a means or symbol of conflict, but rather the entire situation needs to be examined and reflected upon. In his essay, "Writing Personal Essays: On the Necessity of Turning Oneself into a Character," Phillip Lopate advises how this conflict translates within the format of an essay: "What gives an essay dynamism is the need to work out some problem, especially a problem that is not easily resolved" (39-40).

Jo Ann Beard begins and ends her essay, "The Fourth State of Matter" with the frame story of caring for her dying dog and her husband leaving her. Grappling with more everyday matters of grief prepare her when writing to utilize a technique of fiction and shift point of view from her first person narrative to that of the gunman, an unstable graduate student in the physics department where she works. Beard writes with grace and makes a leap of experimentation in her

work to exercise a greater degree of empathy by trying to write her pen from his mind as she saw him though she couldn't possibly know his exact thoughts or circumstances. We trust the authority of her voice because she researched the event and she was almost one of his victims. She was close to the departed and maybe more importantly she seemed to recognize her inevitable death through the events she wrote.

I spent the majority of the online program at UTEP writing in fiction, donning masks and creating metaphors, mixing time and place with real events. I wanted to write about greater human truths but felt as if I was betraying myself with invention and artifice. I was anchored in real life experiences. Writing fiction struck me as formulaic and I gravitated to creative nonfiction like Mary Clearman Blew described in "The Art of Memoir": "The conventions of fiction, its masks and metaphors, came to seem more and more boring to me, like an unnecessary barricade between me and the material I was writing about" (283). But I felt drawn to keep writing from a perspective which I thought I understood, mainly confusion. In crafting creative nonfiction I could begin with what I thought I knew and events I experienced and work to uncover what I didn't know, a sense of clarity. In this genre it was more acceptable to admit confusion and awe, and essayist Rosellen Brown puts it succinctly: "The complex delight of the essayist's voice is that it can admit to bewilderment without losing its authority" (7). The anonymity of the online environment also helped me have the courage to write about themes in creative nonfiction, which I knew I could easily be judged upon. The comments I received from my peers in workshops were supportive and balanced, which provided a space for me to take bigger risks in my writing.

I felt I could get at greater human truths by simply writing about my personal truth while using techniques of fiction and what I've experienced in my life. I align myself with some of the

ethics of literary journalists and try not to create composite characters or scenes. While I'm not versed in extensive research habits, I can relate to Joseph Mitchell's philosophy stated in his interview with Norman Sims: "You want to take the reader to the last sentence. That's the whole point of the story. I don't want to take him there just by fact. I want to take the reader there by going through an experience that I had that was revealing." (11). Part of Mitchell's experience is to bear witness to the events as well as recording the observations of people he writes about. By becoming an active participant as a witness, he enriches his own experience of the events. I didn't read Ted Conover's *Rolling Nowhere* before I became homeless and spent a lot of my time with hobos. I mapped out a hotshot line from Minneapolis to the west coast and hid in bulk grain loaders preparing for a trip I never made. I think I was enticed by the homeless community like Conover was as a student, but I became homeless and I couldn't make a quick exit with a filled notebook one year later. My submersion into the subculture changed my identity. My father likes to say, "But you chose to be homeless. I mean you could've stayed with family." I think this makes him feel better. He omits that my mom was living in her car, my siblings were in college and he wasn't really considered a part of our family. He was no one I would've turned to in a time of crisis. But he's right in that I enjoyed myself and that I was young and had boundless opportunities before me. If I could've just stayed sane, any career would've been mine for the taking.

Creative nonfiction about the art of journalism and reporting reveals truth that is often unbelievable. I cannot suspend my disbelief at the twisted nature of reality. I would close my eyes if I was watching a film with perverted content, but I cannot deny the text of submersion reporting like Charles Bowden's "Torch Song." He goes beyond revulsion to empathy, but he doesn't come out as the same person going in. He was transformed and that is the power of

creative nonfiction, to describe and witness when barriers break down, outside of and within the self. Breaking down the barriers between the writer and the subject creates a greater degree of understanding for the subjects and of the differences that exist between seemingly different people or groups of people.

Striving towards Empathy

“That is the truth. Each side has legitimate aspirations – and that is what makes peace so hard. And the deadlock will only be broken when each side learns to stand in each other’s shoes. Each side can see the world through the other’s eyes. That’s what we should be encouraging.”

—Barack Obama

Empathy is a complex notion. It is unattainable to really know what it is like to walk inside of someone else’s shoes. A person can never truly trade places with another person because of differences in social position and histories. However, I know that I can be brought to an emotional response and be supportive of someone in her walk by reading an artistic rendering of her experiences and what it means to be her in certain circumstances. Even if I cannot possibly know as a reader what it means to be the writer at all times, just as a reader of my own work cannot possibly know what it means to be me at every point. Rather than attempting to reverse roles with people to understand or communicate with them, a healthy respect and acknowledgement for the differences and distance that exist between two individuals or two groups of people or between the reader and the writer should try to be attained.

When a writer uses the first-person “I”, the writer is still crafting a character. The “I” on the page cannot encompass the entire identity of the author. The writer carefully selects and

arranges what she wants the reader to see and how she wants to move the reader through personal disclosure and as Phillip Gerard says: “The best the nonfiction writer can do is to present the *illusion* of interior lives, giving the reader insight and private information about real people, but stopping short of claiming to *know* what cannot be known—without making it up” (116). The old advice for writing, write what you know, may be a starting point in creative nonfiction, but the ultimate exploration is in writing what you don’t know and what you discover in the process. Trying to chip away at the exterior reality of events and people becomes a writer’s excavation into unknown mechanisms at play in our choices and our fates. Some fiction may have autobiographical elements as a base for inspiration but the presentation differs from creative nonfiction and memoir. In “The Whole Truth,” Peter M. Ives, explains his interpretation of the different roles of illusion between the two genres in memoirist and fiction writer, William Maxwell’s explanation of the differences in his work as: “In this way of thinking, fiction is a play upon illusion, and memoir is the illusion itself. So, in the end, neither is real. Or, put another way, both are equally real” (328). I’m not an ace with arguments of logic and deduction but if A and B are both false and not real, then A and B are both equally true and real, although A and B are equally true or real in falsehood or illusion. Uncovering truth through writing appears to be more of an endeavor of peeling back layers of falsehood or illusion, but are we peeling an onion or an artichoke? Do we reveal a heart or cry through the whole process? This metaphor appears as too simplistic and the process exists more as a hybrid of emotions. A crude barometer for the quality of a work that I use as a reader is whether I cry and/or laugh. When a writer can make me do both in the same relatively short work, I feel an intimacy in the act of reading, even if my emotional strings are merely being pulled. I marvel at the art of the pulling, in both fiction and creative non-fiction, but find more comfort in reading creative nonfiction. When I read fiction

that moves me I'm still left wondering how much of the story is derived from autobiographical events, and how much really happened. In a compelling work of creative nonfiction I feel the author has earned my emotion through lived experience. In less successful readings I am left feeling flat or as if I am being told how an experience felt, rather than feeling along with the writer.

Reading creative nonfiction is an act of listening, and not necessarily to a person but a complex and highly organized persona created by the author. Scott Russell Sanders writes in "The Singular First Person" that "the first person singular is too narrow a gate for the whole writer to squeeze through. What we meet on the page is not the flesh-and-blood author, but a simulacrum, a character who wears the label *I*" (390). Memoirist Vivian Gornick writes about the strength her persona can embody in her book *The Situation and the Story*: "I have created a persona who can find the story riding the tide that I in my unmediated state, am otherwise going to drown in" (25). The reader listens to both the story and events of real life arranged through an artistic perspective, and to an authoritative voice created to impart knowledge, emotional experience, any human value or combination of values and ideals. The result of reading should be change or transformation. The reader takes a risk in the act of listening to the writer's worldview of having the reader's morals or ethics altered just as in the act of writing the writer makes risks in recreating and reliving emotionally charged moments. The act of remembering and writing has the power to make a writer question the validity of her own memory, the truth of her own memory, and can breathe life into the recapturing moment so that the work of mining the memory replaces the event in itself. The work becomes hardened and by replacing the memory, takes on the illusion of the truth.

Memory is the perception of an event. Two observers of the same event will frequently have conflicting perspectives about what really happened. How then can we get at a single or unified truth? Can we just accept that truth is a kaleidoscope imagining of intersecting perceptions? A creative nonfiction writer tries to preserve the truth of her own memory while at times still acknowledging its inconsistencies and the malleable way that her past comes to play into her own mind. Working through the validity and chronology of memory is a process and in pieces about memory itself or the loss of memory, picturing the scenes as they appear in my mind and writing them in the order as they are remembered rather than lived creates its own trajectory to understanding the emotional truth and resolving the question—What does it mean? In my real life I've relied heavily on techniques of fictional devices to make meaning of confusion. Why my mind has selected certain memories over others to stay in the forefront of the self-told narratives and meaning making of events in my life relies heavily on the emphasis of striking images, language, and stories I've used to make sense of patterns and symbols emergent in my environment. Mimi Schwartz writes in "Memoir? Fiction? Where's the Line?" of working with memoir and emotional truth: "It may be 'murky terrain,' you may cross the line into fiction and have to step back reluctantly into what really happened—the struggle creates the tension that makes memoir either powerfully true or hopelessly phony" (401). The reader will come to pass judgment on the "I" character and either want to hear the voice or be turned off by it. While writing, the author must create a complex enough character so that the reader will not reject a one-dimensional rendering of the writer, appearing too eager to please, always in the right, all-knowing, or even dismissive while grounded in sarcasm.

Motivation and Craft: Decisions, Admissions and Omissions

“I was delighted to find that nonfiction prose can also carry meaning in its structures and like poetry, can tolerate all sorts of figurative language, as well as alliteration and even rhyme. The range of rhythms in prose is larger and grander than it is in poetry, and it can handle discursive ideas and plain information as well as character and story. It can do everything. I felt as though I had switched from a single reed instrument to a full orchestra.”

—Annie Dillard

An open character and a narrator and author that bleed into one another demand a more liberating and open form to contain the presentation. Memory makes leaps and bounds in time and in the imagination. The form needs to match the content. Segmented essays do well to represent jumps in time and space or between perspectives. Robert L. Root writes a provocative argument for linking segments in his essay “Collage, Montage, Mosaic, Vignette, Episode, Segment,” he says: “It isn’t that collaging or segmenting abandons structure—it’s that it builds essay structure in ways that may be organic with the subject, ways that may not be immediately recognizable but which incrementally explain themselves as the reader progresses through the essay” (377). In a collection of creative nonfiction and essays on an episodic imagination it makes sense that the individual pieces would not always reflect neat closure but provide spaces for leaps to be made to understand the next piece. I imagine the leaps in a disjunctive essay to mirror the leaps that poet Wislawa Szymborska frequently makes or Anne Carson makes in “The Glass Essay,” turning the entire essay into a form of poetry. The genre of creative nonfiction is as welcoming and nondiscriminatory as a compassionate person. In “Memory and Imagination” Patricia Hampl writes about open form in memoir as: “Memoir is the intersection of narration and reflection, of story-telling and essay-writing. It can present its story and reflect and consider the meaning of the story. It is a peculiarly open form, inviting broken and incomplete images,

half recollected fragments, all the mass (and mess) of detail” (313). Memory seems to be best encapsulated in fractals.

At times, the crafting of creative nonfiction felt the same as my attempts at writing fiction. Writing an essay or a memoir piece devolved into something formulaic. I started with a strong opening paragraph that I hoped hooked the reader to want to continue reading. I was inspired by the opening lines in essays by Cheryl Strayed, Michael W. Cox, and Lucy Grealy. I carved out scenes, selected dialogue, portrayed character through action, built details of plot using economical yet interesting language and then revealed some deeper human emotion and ended on a memorable image. Like following a recipe for baking bread or determining an unknown compound, the baker or chemist succeeds in producing a loaf that does not flop or yielding the exact structure of an unknown compound.

Writing is almost like following a formula. Hurdles like too much emotional investment, lack of a narrative distance from the subject(s), lack of clarity, lack of a dramatic moment, switching tenses, adopting another person’s point of view, leaving the reader over a cliff, not balancing between the human element in a story and the artistic vision, and leaps and lapses in memory made the writing process less than formulaic and less than a neat success story. Starting to write at a point where I thought I knew what was going to happen, quickly diverged into a path of winding alleyways and digressions as well as different points in time. Writing the truth became a battle of writing my memory, which isn’t chronological, which isn’t always linear, and which is damaged. I began to imagine that I could write between memories of what hurt and what hurt the most, which might be considered to be writing from emotion. Writing makes me emotional but I hoped that the end result would be a reader who could feel along with me rather than watching me through a glass window and taking notes. I frequently felt like I was a drug-

trial human guinea pig being studied during breakdowns in my life. I tried to re-imagine that position for a reader.

Why do I mention the rhetoric of fear in my preface and what does it have to do with the creative nonfiction writing and revision process? I basically feel that the fear of exposing my memories and loved ones intimate moments and events that have shaped who we believe we are is a voyage into potential betrayal. For example I showed my mom the piece, “Mail-Order Bride” which describes my wedding in India. Our camera and all pictures of India were stolen so she took a copy of my writing home with her as a keepsake for the wedding which she could not afford to attend. I also showed my mom, “Mittens in July.” She had to wear her reading glasses and grabbed a pen to start editing. She said she was once quite drawn to diagramming sentences and loved placing commas appropriately, which surprised me. My mom had to complete her GED at night school when she was kicked out of high school for being pregnant and she didn’t attend college. In the piece I included some very personal and risky information about my aunt selling cocaine and my brother possibly selling drugs as well to provide potential motives for why someone held my family at gunpoint. Reading the first draft, she didn’t deny that my aunt sold cocaine but rather completely refuted my memory of her threatening to tip off authorities about where my aunt made her pick-ups. She completely denied it and said that I made it up. While I’m imaginative, I’m not that creative. So I changed it. Then she wanted me to delete any mention of family members selling drugs, so I deleted it. And then I sat on the revised version a few days and went back and included some of what I deleted, but not all, not the part that I clearly remember about her threatening to tip off the FBI because she refuted it so adamantly and I didn’t want her accusing me of lying. From this process I learned that I shouldn’t let my mom or anyone pre-read a piece that involves them. These are memories that are mine and if it is

important for others to have their own memories validated then I encourage everyone to write for themselves. Regardless of people feeling betrayed or that I'm not doing their truth justice, a dream of mine is that one day everyone will write their own memoirs and with technology similar to Facebook's Timeline and Amazon's Kindle, maybe that dream will come to fruition and people will learn to understand one another a little better through reading personal accounts, even if a majority of those accounts don't meet literary expectations.

Another thing that the rhetoric of fear does is to prevent people from pursuing their dreams. The rhetoric can be external or internal and frequently involves self-doubt and confusion. I didn't realize that I wanted to write beyond journaling until I'd already attended college for two years and had dropped out. When I was homeless in Telluride there was a community radio station that on Sundays broadcast a radio play by a community member. I wanted to write one and started brainstorming an idea for a play called Revelation Revolution. I pitched my idea to another kid, Nate, living in the woods. He was only in Telluride for the summer and was studying journalism at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. He wrote the introduction of the inciting incident for how my main characters would start the chain of events leading to a forced time of tribulation for the country. The incident was group of Afghani subversives bombing the pentagon and other federal buildings. He wasn't intuitive enough to predict that they would use commercial airliners and was in all likelihood just well informed of the political climate.

Nate went back to Madison and I drove to Washington where I planned to study writing at Evergreen College. I wrote an email introducing myself and also including a small statement about what writing meant to me and sent it to the Professor in charge of the writing workshop. I said that I was afraid to write and referenced hearsay that Kafka burned a portion of his work

before he died. I believed Kafka feared the impact and power that his written word could have. Not that someone would directly pick up *The Trial* and model the SS after it, but as an understanding that what we put in print cannot be taken back and can move through the collective unconscious of our species and communicate a reality that might already be pending. A writer can be privy to the zeitgeist as an artist is, or act as a tuning fork, or maybe just an observant listener. I identified with the fear Kafka may have felt or perhaps more with his dementia and delirium near the end of his life. I signed off on my email and went back to Sol Duc Hot Springs where I took a job cleaning the pools. Within a few days of my fearful email, 9/11 happened. I didn't have any contacts in New York and the only one at Sol Duc with a television was the manager, who was letting workers watch the disaster in shifts in his apartment. I chose not to watch. Like some of the other kids working there, I felt a small degree of excitement at a possible shift in world power and a new paradigm. But I also felt personally responsible because of the radio play Nate and I started writing, which I realize it was horrible to minimize tragedy and is disconnected and something of a delusion of grandeur guilt. But I couldn't help how I felt.

The following week, I showed up for class at Evergreen and was one of the last three to enroll in the writing program. The professor only had room for one student out of the three of us. He wore a black baseball cap that said, *China Wall*, in stark white letters and refused to listen to any negotiations or pleas. He could only commit his time to one student. As students we decided that it was only fair to toss a coin and leave our fate to chance. We gambled and I lost.

I got in my car and drove back to Telluride with two co-workers from Sol Duc. The next summer Nate came back to live in the woods on summer vacation. The first thing he asked me was whether I kept the introduction to the radio play and if I could give him a copy. He couldn't

believe that he'd written something so predictive, something that impacted him to great effect. I don't think he felt the guilt that I did but rather awe.

One of the pieces in my thesis, "My Personal Savior was David Foster Wallace," describes a point in my life where I used journaling to write my way out of confusion and the starting point of madness. That worked well for me and really makes me less inclined to think that therapeutic writing cannot be of value. It may not always turn into literature but the writing process had a bigger impact and consequences than any one piece of literature I've read. It was an empowering tool. I learned to use writing in group therapy and individual therapy in Pathways Treatment Centers to help gain a sense of control and clarity. But I remember on one later occasion in a hospital in Marquette, Michigan where I was given a yellow lined notebook and a pen. I tried to write, but I was so sick with fear at the impact of my words on me and on others that I drew half of one letter and froze. I eked out half of one letter of the alphabet, not one letter to a friend. I didn't get well enough during that stay to ever complete my one symbol or push past the fear to write one word.

What I see, beyond the self and to the whole culture of America are citizens who can easily be manipulated by fear. Manipulated to slowly give up their rights with new Homeland Security measures like the Patriot Act that infringe on their right to privacy, and manipulated by their own fears and insecurities to move towards the end of the spectrum that embodies hatred and racism. People give up their dreams and their capacity for compassion because of fear.

With my thesis, I aimed to write towards clarity after staying in and recreating the moment of fear and confusion with the pen for awhile. It was not easy to relive some of these

experiences. More than remembering a painful moment, to try to write it is something else entirely.

I made quite a few cuts and rearranging while assembling the body of work. I also wrote some additional pieces to fill in some of the gaps and provide more continuity with the place in the title, *Telluride*, by showing how I got there and offering more of an introduction to a friend who continues to reappear in the thesis.

I cut many of the statistics and the journalism tone that I alternated with the narrative in the piece, “Waiting in Eternity for a Spoon.” The essay was written for a Journalism class six years ago and had zero narrative. It even included a lengthy interview with a mental health nurse. Then I read Laura Slater’s essay, “Black Swans,” and was inspired to write about my experience with ECT. But I wanted to create a rhythm between reporting facts and my personal observations. My professor and thesis advisor, Lex Williford, revealed that the facts were jarring and suggested I let the story move the reader. It would ultimately be more powerful as a narrative. I saved a couple of small paragraphs I’d researched and included more facts from the hospital charts in my basement. Seeing this piece in the collection for the thesis, it fits right in, whereas it wouldn’t have before.

I also omitted long quotations on the veil of ignorance from John Rawl’s *Theory of Justice* in the piece, “Becky’s Ricky.” I was attached to the quotes but it didn’t match the tone of the rest of the essay. I thought the reader might make some connection between philosophy and another writer I write about, David Foster Wallace, and his pursuit of the discipline. I have more in common with writers who speak in plain language without any frills. I’m just not that eloquent.

I was attached to a piece of fiction I wrote titled, “Call Me Kathryn.” It was based on non-fiction but I took the point-of-view of a guy who raped me when I was fifteen and imagined first how he ever broke-the-ice and told his fiancé that he used to be a man and second how he would try to find me to ask for forgiveness and what I would look like in a parallel universe of sorts, where I also had a sex change. I thought that I could get by with this in a collection of creative nonfiction by the tag I included in the beginning under the title: *I’m going to imagine for a moment that I’m my perpetrator finding love*. I thought the cue word was *imagine* and that through reading an account by someone who has undergone a sex change (my rapist did have one but I did not), the reader would be confused but on a second reading would see it as a mask of fiction on many non-fictional events. I thought it was non-fiction, with the exception of the dialogue and his road-trip from San Francisco to Michigan. The guy from my past posted many details of his life on-line, which is where I retrieved much of my information. I also thought “Call Me Kathryn” tied in nicely with gender and identity issues highlighted in the “Becky’s Ricky” piece. It was a worthwhile exercise and in the process of writing it, I think I’ve truly forgiven him.

Why was I compelled to tell the stories in my thesis? Sure it’s personal. Fifty percent, three out of six members, of my immediate family has a mental illness. But according to a report put out by the World Health Organization in 2004, twenty-five percent of Americans reported having a mental illness and fifty percent will experience a mental illness at some point in their lives. The occurrence of mental illness is increasing and is being compared to an epidemic as more people are becoming disabled from mental illness than cancer and heart disease. Morbidity rates increase with mental illness and the cost of mental illness is estimated at \$300 billion annually in the United States (Reeves 1).

Social goals are needed in intervention, prevention and understanding. While fifty percent of my family has a mental illness, one-hundred percent of my family is affected by it. Because my specific diagnosis allows me to be quite high-functioning, I've had the unique opportunity while relatively healthy (not presently in a psychotic episode or having delusions) to see myself through the eyes of others. My brother was recently in a manic episode. Both my mom and sister were under so much stress and anxiety that at separate points both broke down crying and pacing. My sister doesn't have a mental illness, but was having a difficult time distancing herself to give professional advice for how our family should handle the situation. But when they weren't crying and concerned, I noticed that my sister was irritated, dismissive and eventually just plain tired of my brother's erratic, unpredictable behavior, and paranoid thoughts. We were all worried that this was going to be his permanent state, delusional and manic. I wasn't tired or frustrated so much as I just didn't know what to do anymore to help him. I'd tried to convince him to go into a dual diagnosis Pathways treatment center in nearby Ashland, Wisconsin that I thought was more caring and less negligent than the nearest Marquette, Michigan hospital with a psychiatric wing. But he was livid. He'd been put in a straight-jacket in a Detroit hospital and thought he was in hell in eternity, while in an isolation tank with a broken clock. But telling me these stories was singing to the choir. I continued trying to persuade him, but there was no talking to someone in an episode. I truly understood the dilemma family members faced when trying to help me. I had both an insider and an outsider's perspective and while neither is easy, I prefer to be on the outside of mental illness in a supportive role. No one wants this.

A key element to writing is being able to be a good listener. But I don't fit the stereotype of a quiet writer-type who is all ears. It's not who I am, but beyond that I've learned that there

are different types of listening. One is reflective listening. “I hear you telling me—It’s not who I am,” another is passive listening which involves a lot of head-nodding and striking the thinker’s pose with small variations like rubbing my chin or moving my pointer finger from my cheekbone to my eyebrow and back again. But I prefer to think of two individuals learning the most about each other when they are both active participants. I see listening as a give-give relationship, where each person gives a bit of disclosure without the intention of gaining anything in return. I am open with my secrets. I think I can get to the heart of another person’s character quicker through this methodology if the person gives back and hasn’t passed judgment too quickly. As if this is methodology. This is merely who I am.

I can essay or try to work through a problem but I cannot solve the world’s problems through essays nor make them fit perfectly together. I tried to solve or negotiate the world’s problems which I perceived as suffering. In actuality I think I was having a hard time dealing with myself alone and to feel less alone, invited the world to join in, in my mind. This happened when I was staying in a First Baptist Shelter with my mom after I had just been released from a Pathways treatment center in Montana. I cried hard, even beating my chest for three days straight because of a crushing physical weight. The manager of the shelter used to belong to the Rainbow Family and he put a huge nail like that used for railroad ties in my hand and asked me to put it on the cross behind his desk. I didn’t know what else to do. I broke the plate of food that I wasn’t eating anyways and dropped to my knees and crawled down the sidewalk to his office. That was my way of accepting help. I was ready to let someone carry my burdens even with the delusion that a man was going to time-travel back nineteen-hundred and ninety-nine years and role-play Jesus. A man was going to have to die on a cross for me, because I was too weak to carry my

own emotional baggage. It was a devastating admission of guilt, because I loved the man in the story of the New Testament viewing it as a great love story between man and God.

I want to give and transform the reader through my experience.

I wanted to explain myself and show that my experiences were as much about a crisis of faith as they were about mental illness. But I tried to avoid digressing into an overt argument. The benefits of including hurtful or difficult material outweighed the risks, so long as I was careful to avoid being mean-spirited or writing flat or stereotype characters. Writing “Drug Fat Bodies” was particularly hard because after my anger overtook me I was deeply ashamed of my behavior. It doesn’t even seem real or that I was capable of hurting someone who I cared for so deeply. My friend Sara never forgave me, or we never talked again after that. So why would I share that? I’m unsure, whether it was a purging need to be honest and to reflect a rounder “I” character or if I was risking being perceived as a despicable persona. I may have been experimenting with seeing if my reader could forgive me.

An experiment yields different results and percent yields. Which is why we experiment...the unknown. Which is why we write...finding the unknown.

I arranged my collection of creative nonfiction balancing between chronology and pieces that represented the way memories came to me because many pieces flashback to different points in my childhood. I felt this arrangement reflected a more accurate way to understand one of the running themes in my work, mental illness. But what does that mean to someone who has no history or background with my specific diagnosis? How can someone who does not have this specific label come to understand what it means? Does the reader know someone with a mental

illness or is his only exposure from the news and seeing a lawyer defend his client saying she is mentally ill and that's why she committed a heinous crime?

Storytelling: Thinking of Firing it.

A gunman awoke me in the middle of the night and now during breakdowns I fear the gunman could be a gunwoman, and she could be me. I oppose the possession of firearms, especially for those suffering from a mental illness. It's really hard to imagine, but I have to protect myself from all potentials. The metaphors take on solid shape and the truth is wrapped up and sleeping with the rhetoric of fear.

What does my label mean to me and about me to others? I have to straddle the representation of my self-perception and what others perceive of me. What does writing creative nonfiction mean if it comes from my hand? Is the reader in the hands of an unreliable author as well as an unreliable narrator or will I convince the reader by the end that the writer should be trusted? And if not, is that okay? Trust may not be the pinnacle of an intimate relationship between the reader and the writer. We can aim for a deeper human emotion like forgiveness, or remain in the mindset of coping mechanisms like humor and keeping a positive attitude. For example, thinking of mental illness as a gift and a doorway to understanding rather than as an illness worked well to help me cope for the two years after my first breakdown.

After our first breakdowns, my brother Jesse and I compared delusions and stories of our respective experiences in Detroit and California. We laughed a great deal at ourselves and were able to take all of the stress, trauma, and drama less seriously. After this year's family reunion and my dad's ill judgment regarding personal disclosure and just poor timing, Jesse had to

increase his Lithium dose. Jesse also took all of his money out of the banks as cash, but he couldn't get more than a few thousand at each bank.

“Could you just pull my money out of the vault?” he asked.

“There is no money kept in the vaults,” the teller said.

Our banking system is based on trust and shuffling balances. The banks only have the money that's been deposited that day. As soon as Jesse started messing with his money, his doctor said he was in “crisis mode.” He checked himself into the ER at the hospital after persistent vomiting and having diarrhea for extended periods. The hospital was where he just quit his job to start a new job where he would not be on-call anymore to assist in surgeries. His blood test results came back; he was Lithium-toxic and his heart rate was erratic. He was sent by ambulance to a town two hours away which has a cardio unit and a dialysis machine. He had to take three weeks off at his new job for health reasons, but of course we live in rural America. When he stopped in at work to talk to one of the doctors and a couple of the nurses, he was met at the exit door by a policeman and a nurse from human resources, who told him he was on administrative leave. Jesse thought he was just taking his PTO, paid-time-off. The policeman had his hand braced a few inches from his gun, ready to aim if Jesse acted aggressively in anyway. On behalf of the hospital which plans to dismiss Jesse because of hearsay, the police departments are cross-checking to see if Jesse purchased a gun recently. I think he did purchase a gun for partridge hunting. I recently warned him to stay away from guns and to never get his prints on one. Guns are too easy. It is easy to make the assumption that the reappearance of a gun within a narrative or within this preface will turn up in the hands of the mentally ill. I thought this supplementary story highlighted a surprising turn of events, where the gun is aimed at the

mentally ill person, in the present and in the past. Jesse was also held at gunpoint in Detroit before he had his breakdown. He left our family home the night a gunman broke in and held me at gunpoint as described in my creative nonfiction piece, “Mittens in July,” but another gunman found Jesse later during that same summer.

A Final Image

“Stay hungry. Stay foolish.”
—Steve Jobs

Through my explorations and exposure of my own mental illness, I write to transcend what critics, James Wolcott and Michiko Kakutani, deem of the creative nonfiction and memoir genre as merely a navel-gazing and confessional practice. My only rebuttal is that I’m quite interested in my navel. I had an outtie (a minority of the populace has a navel that juts out of their belly) until I was twelve years old and then it converted to an innie. It just sucked in one day and I was suddenly like everyone else. And who wouldn’t love to be in that confession box? If not for listening to stories then to purely understand the spectrum of human nature’s darkest corners and become more compassionate in the process. I examine my life and reflect upon it even within the selection process of what and how I choose to expose intimate details of my life. I’ve given myself fourteen years since the onset of my illness for a proper distance from the material, although I cannot gain total distance because I am not cured. There is no cure, only pharmaceuticals with dangerous side effects. I write about identity crisis, spiritual malaise, conflict, and relationships from within the lens of examining the damaging effects of mental illness.

I don't know how to write about writing without talking about my process and the content of my work. I don't want to explain myself or justify myself because I'd be guilty of the intentional fallacy, but it may help the reader envision how I understand cohesion and unity. I expect occasional leaps of logic between pieces that sometimes overlap and other times seem to stand apart like islands jutting off a peninsula into Lake Superior. The Apostle Islands in Northern Wisconsin remind me of remnants of a previous peninsula or a broken version of the neighboring Keweenaw Peninsula in Northern Michigan. They are mirror images of each other; only one peninsula is maneuvering space and water differently than the other. The land knows no distinctions between States and the water knows no borders between nations.

I still don't know whether I should call this collection a memoir or essays? Why did I get left behind in Telluride in terms of social connections and at the same time the internet and computer programs were blossoming? I was in the realm of homeless, transient, unable to vote without a physical address, disempowered and without a voice. I wrote to find out and this is how it came out—a cultural narrative of living in the first world below the poverty line. There's a trailer in almost every piece, and I don't mean movie trailers. The battle to overcome the cycle of poverty faces serious obstacles in conjunction with answering the question of why a family is poor in the first place. I had a father who followed his dream and passion for music. I had a paranoid mother who couldn't hold down a job and was unwilling to risk losing her healthcare for her children after her divorce. She did not take medication with the exception of Prozac for a few weeks when it first hit the market. In the seventies, she flushed her medicine down the toilet and it went into the public drinking supply of water. How can we separate environment from genetics to help intervene in mental illness when the parent is mentally ill? I even considered adoption with my first child to save him from myself, to save him from an environment tainted

by a mentally ill mom. What is this form? Memoir or a collection of essays or a public service announcement? I call it a hybrid, but I'll never own a Hybrid unless it's twenty years old and has a hole in the passenger side floor.

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First Solids

My finger, covered in rice cereal, trembles inside my son's mouth. He grabs fists of his own hair in pain from colic and raw gums. I want to hide from the need to survive.

What's in a Name?

I met Sara in a dorm room of fashion savvy girls from Murderapolis, a nickname for Minneapolis in the nineties coined on t-shirts when the city's homicide rates were higher than New York City. I told the girls how I lied to a staff member at the University and pretended that I had obsessive compulsive disorder and was unable to ride city buses without wiping down every surface with a piece of tissue paper. The staff member transferred me from the smaller Saint Paul campus to the Minneapolis campus superblock dorms. I thought I was pretty clever and got both what I wanted and deserved.

We started talking about books and Sara went to light up her smoke, a Basic. The suburbanites didn't like that and sent her packing back to her own room. I followed her and she loaned me Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*, Heller's *Catch-22*, and Lightman's *Einstein's Dreams*. All three were great fodder for kids of hippies to bullshit over while stuck in our cubicles. We were both transplants to Minneapolis and tired of taking tunnel systems to get to class in subzero temperatures. During my first winter I saw a squirrel frozen solid on an ashtray outside of the dorms and someone put an old butt in its paw. The cute and furry little animals of my youth turned into dumpster-diving rats on campus.

Sara and I didn't have enough money to study abroad but we both wanted to get out of the Twin Cities, where stars were cloaked in light pollution. Our freshman year we enrolled as National Exchange Students and planned on spending our sophomore year in Northern California at Humboldt State University, but our work study didn't transfer. We couldn't afford rent and jobs were scarce in Arcata, California. After fall semester we both lost our minds while living in a one bedroom apartment with three boys—Michael, Kenny, and Brian.

Michael crawled out of the Redwood forest where he lived in a burnt out stump after he was hospitalized in Massachusetts for a nervous breakdown. Kenny was a self-professed Wiccan, or white magic practitioner, who swore he saw leprechauns and bubbles in the woods. He was looking for a place to live at the same time as us and was waiting on the apartment steps to look at the same one-bedroom behind the Co-op, where there was always an *Earth First!* table set up to recruit young people into the Redwood Base Camps to sit and live in tree pods. At the time, an activist, Julia Butterfly, was living in the Redwood tree she named Luna.

Kenny said he was nineteen, but after revealing his visions to us we decided not to put him on the lease. Filling in the renter's occupation line with the title, magic maker, didn't make much sense for paying the bills. We found Brian living in an apartment with black walls and white pentagrams scrawled on them. Parts of baby doll heads were strung up to the ceiling along with an occasional doll hanging by her feet. He seemed like he needed some good Midwestern influences and we took him in.

After Sara and I were hunting for edible mushrooms with a wild field guide during the fall season, Kenny decided to eat the largest one hoping it was psilocybin. When we went to the grocery store we warned him not to eat any, especially not the big one. Sara brought him to the hospital to get his stomach pumped and in the process of filling out paper work, found out he was a sixteen-year old runaway from a boot camp style reform school in Yuma, Arizona.

Minneapolis was cold but it was a sane and rational place in the cynicism of its residents compared to all of the spinning and blissed out spiritual journey types in California. I returned to school for spring semester at the U, and Sara showed up shortly afterwards and started living

with her brother, Seth, and his girlfriend, Cody, a few neighborhoods from our friend Heidi's apartment where I was living behind a wall divider in a corner of her bedroom.

My idea of a fun and free way to get back to Humboldt County during summer break was to catch a hotshot train from Minneapolis to the west coast. I staked out the train yards and even crawled into a little compartment at the back of a grain bulk loader to see if I could fit my backpack and gear and curl up for a two day ride. The city yards were crowded and noisy with cars breaking up. I was intimidated by as little as a flashlight. Instead we found a small town called Staples where we hoped the hotshot train would slow down if not completely stop. I told Sara that she could leave her car on a side road in Staples and we could hop freights all the way to Seattle. But my family in Michigan was less than thrilled about my plans and Sara felt that it was her duty to protect me from myself and my half-baked ideas. She convinced me that we should take her car and drive west back to the Redwoods.

We drove for ten hours each day subsisting on gas station ice cream sandwiches and single dill pickles floating in bags of bright green preservatives. Outside of Devils Lake in North Dakota we picked up a hitchhiker, undeterred by the ominous name of the place. He asked us if we could drive him north to his home on Turtle Mountain Reservation.

"There are beautiful hills there," he said and rolled his hands out over an imaginary landscape next to the window.

Eighty miles later he pointed at the acclaimed hills, which were a couple of piles of landfill dirt, and he directed us to a drive-through liquor store where he picked up a bottle of vodka before he got out of the car.

I noticed Sara talking less and less the farther we drove.

“Why aren’t you saying anything?” I asked.

“I’m concentrating and I’m the one doing all of the driving,” she said. She gripped the steering wheel tight and then took a sip from the straw in her twenty-four ounce fountain soda.

“I’ll try driving again,” I said. Sara was driving a manual Escort. My first car was a ’63 Land Rover with a stick shift, but I failed to translate my skills to her Ford. She kept complaining that I was going to ruin her transmission. I couldn’t figure out what I was doing wrong. “This isn’t even fun when you just sit there all mute.”

“This is the reason you don’t have any friends,” she said. “I’m taking you on your trip because I’m your only friend.” Sara flicked her Basic cigarette out of the window onto the asphalt.

We’d both been chain-smoking since we left Minnesota. It was just like being back in the dorms only the car was an even smaller cloud-filled space which reeked of dirty crotches.

“Your sister wouldn’t even go with you,” she said.

“My sister has to work in the summers,” I said, “and she doesn’t have a car. Plus, I’m charging all of our gas, so I wouldn’t complain.”

I didn’t want to press Sara too hard or she could kick me out of the car, turn around and drive back to her home in South Dakota, or worse continue not to speak. My feelings were hurt, but we had places to go so I kept my mouth shut.

We hiked on the trails in Glacier National Park for a few days and then decided that we should drive through Canada until we reached the coast. We didn’t need passports but when we

tried to cross the border, the patrol asked to search her car, what our intentions were, and the final question of how much money we had on us.

“We don’t have any cash,” I said. “We’re using my credit card.”

“We’re going to have to ask you to speak with someone in our office,” the patrol officer said.

We sat down in a modest room with no windows and a man working behind a desk repeated all of the same questions that we were asked by the previous officer.

“You can’t come into our country without any money.”

The man swiveled his chair back and forth. He seemed genuinely happy to be turning us down or maybe he just liked talking to two girls barely over the age of eighteen, imagining us arching our legs over our heads and licking our knees.

“But it’s unsafe to travel with cash,” I said.

Sara shook her head. “Oh, just wait.” She pushed her finger onto his desk in front of his paperwork. “The next time you want to come to South Dakota, we’re not going to let you in. Oh no. No entry for you, buddy!”

The man was extremely happy now. Sara was playing hard to get.

“The answer is still no,” he said. “You can travel through the United States to the coast if you want and you’ll probably get there faster as well.”

We were trying to avoid doubling back through the park over the same road we used to get to the border crossing, but we had no other choice. We were too poor to get into Canada even with our clean criminal records to support us.

We picked up a couple of boys hitchhiking outside of Seattle and Sara made one of them drive her car the remaining two hours to Seattle and then north to a state park so that we could camp. We went on a nature walk after rolling out our sleeping bags and the boys tried to find some psilocybin mushrooms, but ended up with only banana colored slugs in the rain. We didn't pay for the site and when a ranger came by in the morning looking to collect the fee, one of the hitchhikers traded him a few special coins that he said would be of interest to a collector. The ranger looked us up and down and wished us luck in our travels, tipping his Smokey the Bear hat.

We dropped off the hitchhikers, turned around and continued down the coast to Arcata in Humboldt County to see if our old roommates, Kenny, Mike, and Brian were still living in the apartment or *the pit*. We found Michael, the one we both were interested in and had slept in a burned out stump in Redwood Park during the previous fall when we first moved there. I think he wanted us to have a hobbit style ménage à trios with a bag of marshmallows, but Sara and I were too good of friends. Mike was living in the basement of a house with his new harem and he still sewed velvet patches over the fly of his pants. He was listening to a Deep Forest CD on the stereo I left behind in our apartment when I returned home to Michigan for Christmas. But I never came back.

Sara was in the basement with him and I was tired of waiting for her. So I knocked on the door and demanded my stereo and told Sara through the crack of the door that I was catching a ride with some guy I met to the National Rainbow Gathering in Arizona. I started walking away down the street after a minute to give her time to get dressed.

“You are not going to Arizona with some strange guy you just met,” she said.

“But I want to go to the Gathering,” I said. “I’ve never been to one.” I also wanted her to get out from under Mike’s velvet fly. I figured now that she lost her virginity to a thirty-something bum who called himself World, nothing was stopping her from shacking up with Mike.

“Fine, I’ll drive you then.”

We drove past San Francisco down to Big Sur and through the Mojave Desert and into Arizona, our lungs turning to tar and ash in the process. The guy I met in Arcata told me that the Navajos had invited the Rainbow Family to have the gathering on the reservation at Big Mountain. Big Mountain was a site where political and hipster activists from Minneapolis traveled to help the Navajo people resist relocation and the raping of their resources by a coal company called Peabody. I went to a couple of meetings on the West Bank of the Mississippi for their cause and also met with activists in Arcata working on the Rez. I thought it was a great opportunity to finally put some of my beliefs into action. At least I thought I had environmental convictions that went beyond getting laid. But when I looked on the map, the Navajo Reservation covered a huge portion of Northern Arizona. Sara agreed to stop and fill up her gas tank while I asked for directions. The gas station attendant asked me why I was going there and I told him there was a group of people gathering. He wrote me a detailed map and we drove for

dozens of miles through construction and red rock gravel roads following his shaky lines and intersections, but noticed that there was little traffic moving in our direction. We expected to see vans and cars full of hippies going to celebrate the Fourth of July at the Gathering. When we reached the star on the map we came directly to Peabody Coal Mining Company, an ugly smoke stack machine pumping out toxins from behind a large fenced off area.

“You wanted to see the sacred Big Mountain,” Sara said. “I guess this is what they wanted for us.”

“I’ll drive for awhile,” I said.

I drove north and east past Ship Rock, New Mexico and into southwestern Colorado. I was still struggling with Sara’s stick shift and she took over. We decided to stop in the town of Telluride for the weekend. Approaching the town there were large fields of dandelions and the main street stretched into a box canyon surrounded on three sides by thirteen thousand foot mountain peaks. At the base of Ajax mountain on the west end of town a large waterfall called Bridal Veil gushed down into the San Miguel river that winded by the base of the ski mountain.

“This looks like a town stuck right into Glacier,” I said.

“Only there are celebrities instead of grizzlies,” Sara said.

The speed limit in the town was 15 mph and fairly pedestrian with young festival goers and kids hanging out on the streets and in the parks. We met a guy in his twenties named Daniel, who offered to show us a place to camp for free. He hiked with us on the Jud Webe Trail in the National Forest on what he called the sunny side of town, the south-facing and red-rock banded mountainside. He was wearing little sandals and nimbly crawled up a steep slope on the side of

another waterfall in Cornet Creek to a rock overhang. He called it the cave and we were grateful for the shelter and the eye-candy. Daniel was gorgeous to look at with long curly hair and green eyes that reminded me of the Emerald City from the *Wizard of Oz*. We could see and hear the entire town, a natural amphitheater, from up in the cave.

“I call this town Neverland,” he said, “for all the lost boys.”

“And the occasional lost girl,” I said and looked at Sara who was blowing smoke out of her mouth and glancing around at the sparse juniper shrubs and pines. I knew she was looking for a place to pee from the way she kept resituating and grabbing at her hair, what little stubble there was left of it.

We spent the Fourth of July in the town park and a group of kids from Boulder invited us to hang out with them on their blankets. It was almost like having friends for a moment. We left the next morning and when Sara was driving along a mountain pass with the twisting San Miguel below us she said, “Well, Daniel wins our best-looking-man-of-the-trip award.” She got about twenty miles north into a town called Ridgeway when I made her pull the car over at a gas station.

“Pop the trunk,” I said.

She opened the trunk and I grabbed my army backpack and sleeping bag I bought at a surplus outlet store and put them onto my back.

“I’m going back,” I said.

Sara didn't have to ask me how. She also didn't stay long or try to convince me not to do it. She waved good-bye and wished me luck. I didn't even consider how she would pay for gas the rest of the way home to South Dakota. My impulses clouded all good judgment.

When I got back to Telluride I didn't feel like I could sit still, so I went back out on the side of the road and started to hitchhike out of the town back north towards Ridgeway. Maybe I could catch up to Sara, I thought. A group of guys stopped and asked to bum a smoke from me. They said they were going in the other direction, south, to Durango, and said I could ride with them. I jumped in their car and when I got to Durango there was a lot of construction blocking the road and the shoulders. I didn't really know where to go then and a man pulled up to me outside of a gas station.

"If you've got gas money," he said, "I can take you to Cortez."

I just looked at him and was doing a quick intake on the likelihood of him leaving my body in the desert somewhere. "No, I'm not going in that direction."

"You don't even know where Cortez is," he said and unfolded a map on his lap, "do you?"

I started backing away from him because he was moving his hands quick, his face was pretty flushed, and he seemed irritated. "I'll wait," I said and turned around and started walking on a side street towards what looked like the downtown so that I could ditch him. I got to a phone booth. I couldn't call Sara because there was no way of reaching her. Cell phones weren't common property in 1998. I don't know who I was going to call, maybe family, when an older man with thinning gray hair dressed in khakis and a button-down shirt approached me.

“I saw you on the highway out there,” he said. “You looked confused. Here take this.” He handed me a ten and a five dollar bill. “I just want to help.”

I put the phone down and went to look for some change to make a call with when I passed by two guys who were drunk and spare changing for more alcohol. But they were pretty young and eager to talk. They seemed like good friends with one another or at least they had a good spanging routine complete with a deck of cards and dice for impromptu gambling. They told me that they sometimes slept in the large river rafts behind a local rafting company building. I didn't know anyone so I tagged along with them and we all ended up riding in the back of a pickup truck with a box of half-eaten pizza. We were going to a trailer home of what one of the guys described as a retard.

When we got there, all that I remember of the trailer was reading the Serenity Prayer on the wall. *God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.* I have this memorized and it's probably only one of two prayers which I can recite by heart, but it's pretty popular among drunks, fuck-ups, and retards. Although I really don't remember meeting the trailer owner or whether he was actually developmentally delayed or if that was just an insult by the guys I was riding with.

I went back to the downtown area with them and saw a cute boy about my age on the other side of the street. He walked over to us and introduced himself as Grasshopper, and started scat style talking and jiving about where he was going, Telluride, and where he'd been, Amarillo, Texas. This came after he described taking apart all of the light bulbs and electrical outlets in his house. He was looking for what he called *bugs* planted by the government.

“I was just in Telluride,” I said. “I spent the night in this awesome cave.”

“The cave,” he said. “No way! My best friend, Jonathan has been living in that cave for like a year.” Grasshopper twisted his face up and tugged at his earlobes, trying to dislodge perceived spiders burrowing in the canals he later told me.

“I didn’t meet Jonathan,” I said. “Just some kid named Daniel.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, “Jonathan’s always talking about that cat. Does he still have his goat?”

“I didn’t see one.”

“I’m hitching to Telluride tomorrow,” he said. “You want to come?”

We hitchhiked the two hours back to Telluride the next afternoon after he found us a place to crash on his friend’s floor where he’d been coach-surfing. I stopped at two shops, the Deli Downstairs and the Steaming Bean, and asked about working there, but both owners sent me off with a job application. I didn’t have anything to put down on the address line or for the phone number and lit the applications on fire with my lighter in protest. A couple years later, I ended up working at both shops when the owners recognized my face from main street.

Cody, Grasshopper’s real name, wanted to take a shower as soon as he got to Telluride, so I showed him the public showers by the town park and campground. While he was getting sudsy I decided to leave so that he could reunite with his friends and not have me in his hair. I went back to the same spot on the road where the three boys picked me up a few days prior and hitchhiked north.

In Grand Junction I had to stand on the side of the interstate, which was my least favorite style of hitchhiking. It required great Jedi mind tricks to lure a driver at speeds of 70 mph or more to suddenly stop and pick a girl with short hair up, so I tried to stick close to an on-ramp where I could make better eye-contact with my potential rides. A semi-truck pulled over and I got in, hoping for a longer ride. The trucker's name was Ray and he was from Georgia. I think he was wearing a wedding ring, which I took as a good sign. A few years later a trucker picked me up on another trip outside of Gunnison. I was amused when he said that he was looking for a wife to bring back to California and ride horses with and then he said he saw me on the side of the road. It would have made a good story for how two people met and then married, if it wasn't so creepy and he wasn't twice my age.

In Ray's truck, I immediately prattled off that I was a college student from Michigan and going back home to see my family. I took a risk in telling him a lot about myself, but I wanted to flesh myself out as a real person so he wouldn't try to twist a knife in my chest and leave me in a ditch. It started raining heavily and Ray said he could take me as far as Ohio. I didn't tell him that I lived about twelve hours north of the Ohio-Michigan border. Then Ray reached over while driving and patted my head. He motioned behind his seat to a sleeping compartment with a beat and stained mattress.

"So little Michelle," he said, "maybe you can sleep with me in the back there tonight. There's enough room for the two of us," he said and winked.

"Maybe," I said and smiled.

I had no intention of sleeping with a dirty old trucker but I was in his ride and was not about to break my wrists and run into the forest on foot from a moving truck. So I played it

sweet. One ride I took on the interstate in Oregon, south of Eugene while I was on Thanksgiving break at Humboldt State, told me about a girl who was hitchhiking in Alabama. When she sat down in the car, the driver had a block of wood between his thighs. That alone would have been enough for me to turn down that ride. A block of wood can only be used for one thing. Part way down the road the driver pulled out a large hunting knife and wedged it into the block. I imagine he was toothless and wearing a wife beater tank top when he smiled and told her, “My friends are really going to like you.” He dug out a chunk of the wood, wiped at the sweat on his face and started driving faster. She jumped out of the car while it was moving and broke both of her wrists before running off into the woods. But she was safe and alive and I had no idea how my ride thought this was a good story to tell his hitchhiker. Maybe he wanted to scare me into never raising my thumb again.

Ray started swearing and trying to downshift as we climbed one of the Rocky Mountain passes. He pulled over onto the shoulder and reached behind his seat to retrieve a computer. He put it on my lap and jumped out of the truck and went to the back of it for a few minutes. When he came back he was talking about some sort of pump blowing.

“Have to write the company,” he said. “You can type can’t you?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Just pretend you’re me,” he said. “Insurance policy says no one in the rig. I’ll tell you what to write.”

So I settled back to be his transcriptionist making sure to include common grammatical errors—*Your going to fix it when? But its a full load!* I probably should have gotten out of his ride, but I didn’t want to stand out in the rain. Ray drove a little slower during the remainder of

our trip to Denver and when he stopped at a truck stop, I grabbed my backpack. I wished Ray luck and he just looked bewildered.

“She’ll be fixed by morning,” he said. “I can bring you all the way.”

“Thanks for the ride, but I have to meet up with some friends,” I said. “I’ll make it there OK.”

I left Ray standing alone on the side of his big rig. He looked really short and small now that he wasn’t sitting in the driver’s seat. He thought he had a bedmate for the night and I felt bad that he was lonely. I went to the side of the building and used the payphone to call Todd, a guy who went to college in the town where I went to high school. He picked me up at the truck stop and brought me to his house where we had a few drinks.

The next day we stopped at a record store and I picked up a flyer for a CD release party and rave that would be at a location disclosed the night of the party. Todd had to work the next day, so I sat outside of the record store by myself with the map to the rave, which was two hours south in the desert outside of Colorado Springs. I asked *everyone* who came out of the store if they had room for me, but no one wanted to cart me along, not even with their mangy dog in the back of their shiny SUV. The glow-stick-toting-raver kids were not exactly like the hippies or outdoor adventure types who usually took me in. But one car-load finally agreed. First they wanted to stop at an apartment before we left. The apartment was cleaner and more orderly than the average college kid’s place. The guy who said I could ride with the group laid out a line of white with a hint of yellow powder on a glass table in front of me.

“What is this?” I asked.

“It’s glass,” he said.

I didn’t know if he was being a smart-ass and talking about the table or about the powder. I snorted a line after he snorted one with a rolled up dollar bill and we drove to the desert. The rave seemed hokey with a full-on stage and a Velcro wall where kids suited up and stuck to it. It may’ve also left a negative impression because it was so sunny at dawn versus the dusty warehouse raves I’d been to in Minneapolis. I lost the group that I came with and caught another ride back to Denver in the morning after being up all night. I was sick of hitchhiking and took a Greyhound bus back to Minneapolis so that I could visit Heidi.

When I was taking one of the city buses thorough the Uptown neighborhood of Minneapolis, a kid spotted me with my patch-laden backpack and invited me to hang out at the train tracks with him and some friends, a group of punk rock kids drinking a twelve pack of Black Label beer. I thought it would be a learning experience to squat illegally with them for the night in a construction trailer. The gypsum dust from the drywall and asbestos insulation created a hazy atmosphere that gave the air a dream-quality. The only other girl hanging out named Amy was pregnant and we all went to a church for a free meal in the day before going to a DIY punk show in a small basement on Hennepin Ave. In the wintertime, Amy said that squatters threw bowling balls through glass storefront windows so they could be arrested and spend the night in a warm jail. I told her that last winter I spent a night around Christmas time in a Salvation Army shelter on Glenwood Ave.

Sara and two of our Midwestern friends, Bridge and Crazy, dropped me off at the San

Francisco Airport in 1997. Sara and I were both going home for Christmas break from Humboldt State. A policeman found me on the interstate and after asking me a few questions and receiving the replies in song, he called an ambulance. One of the psychiatrists, either Dr. Brown or Dr. Short, both of whom matched their names in physical appearance, told my mom on the phone that I was wandering alone at night in heavy traffic both confused and naked. I don't recall being naked, only being strapped in an eagle spread four-point and left in an isolation room. My mom asked the doctors to send me back to the airport in a cab. My flight hadn't even left which means I was at the airport a day or two too early.

Two brothers, Eli and Chris, along with a friend picked me up at the Minneapolis airport and we celebrated at the Blue Nile, an Ethiopian restaurant. I was fond of the sponge-like dipping bread.

"It's called Injera," Eli said. "It's the yeast with the teff that makes it like a sponge," He scooped a healthy portion of a mutton sauce towards his poised lips. "Why don't you take that off now," Eli motioned towards my hospital wristband.

I cut it off with a dinner knife and sipped a glass of merlot. Three days ago, drinking was an unfathomable act. In mania, I often revert to a saintly mode. They took me back to their second-story apartment. Not much out of the ordinary bachelor pad. I took off all of my clothes and wrapped myself in a blanket. I wandered from room to room.

Eli told me, "It's OK. We once bordered a man who thought he was the archangel Michael. He got naked, too."

I peed myself. Wait maybe before he told me this. I can't recall.

"He also peed himself," Eli said.

Alright, I have something in common with this guy, I thought. Eli told me that they

needed to leave the apartment the next morning but would come back and bring me to Duluth.

"Stay where you are," Eli said. "We're locking the door."

Eli locked the outside of the door against intruders, while I lay in bed.

Gong Gong Gong.

It was three o'clock according to the bell sounding across the street and a fire coursed through my body. *I am alive*. It's just a thought I had with my right hand over my heart. I didn't realize how cold I was. I was still naked but sweat rippled from my heart in concentric circles. I dripped perspiration and felt like I was in a sauna. I opened my eyes from the red blood vessels just long enough to look for a cedar ladle to give the rocks sitting atop the fire some more steam. There was no ladle, and no rocks, only snowflakes licking the windows and beckoning me out of my perceived deathbed, a mattress in a strange apartment.

I put on my jeans, t-shirt and shoes and raced down the stairs and out of the building. A large church with rising twin towers and a dome was the source of the gonging. I crossed the street and bounded up the steps to the door, my vision obscured with tears. I was crying all the time and for no reason.

"I haven't seen you run that fast in a long time," a man said. He leaned casually against a white pillar with his arms crossed beneath his armpits. "Do you know that Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, God called on to bring his message to the Israelites and warn them that they made a contract with their father when he freed them from Egypt. Jeremiah complained that he was too young to bear the weight of messenger. He felt cursed wherever he went, but you, you run to God and not away, not unlike our Jeremiah."

I blanked out everything after the words *weeping prophet*, feeling the weight of revelation and epiphany. I felt like I was entering bliss and was probably euphoric in my manic

state. This man knows my heart, I thought and smiled through some residual tears and felt I'd come home, to this random church in Minneapolis.

I sat in a pew in the back row and listened to a sermon. The rest of the church was empty so I felt like it was spoken for my ears only, unless the women decorating the church for Christmas were paying attention. The sermon was from the book of Isaiah and there was a part about going to the mountains. That was all I retained.

The women decorating fed me a meal and I helped clean the kitchen. The janitor of the church, the man who I met on the steps, brought me to the basement and showed me the boiler. I was rewarded for cleaning with a pair of workman's gloves, ten dollars and a sweatshirt. He walked with me to the ground level and an elderly man opened a large book from a locked cabinet. I imagined it was the book of life, but I think it was just a visitor's registry.

"What is your name?" he asked.

So I told him, and he wrote it down and locked it up.

I left the church and wandered the street until I came to a Salvation Army mission house downtown on Glenwood Ave, close to the church. I didn't even have to ride a bus. A group of men were huddled outside of the mission smoking and bouncing around to stay warm.

"Can I have a smoke?" I asked.

Smoking was also unthinkable a few days before, when I was completely manic. The crowd backed up in unison as if I had approached them at gunpoint. The fear in their eyes suggested they were looking at an immaculate ghost. But I wasn't dead. I just wasn't wearing a jacket.

"Girl," one guy said and stepped towards me as I turned around, "didn't anyone ever tell you not to take candy from strangers?" They all laughed.

The mission had an open bed. I got to bunk with the women, since the men and women were segregated. They checked my pockets for weapons, but they must have missed my bunkmate's beads. When she saw me she started chanting, shaking, and rubbing her beads. I didn't know who I was to her other than *other*. I left her chanting and went to the smoking room. I listened to the women tell stories and I gave away my only money, the ten dollars from the janitor, to one of the ladies. We smoked Newports and Pall Mall menthols till dawn. It was like being with my grandma Marge minus the forties of malt liquor that she liked to drink. The mission didn't allow alcohol use.

In the summer after I said goodbye to the homeless punk rockers and Amy, Heidi and her friends Molly and Stein brought me from Minneapolis to Madison, Wisconsin where they were going to see Ozzy, Tool, and some smaller punk rock bands at an event called Vans Warp Tour. I didn't have the money to get in, but we scammed a free ticket by saying there was a mistake in the credit card order. Ozzy looked like he was propped up and mechanically sliding across the stage. He looked more like a corpse than a performer.

I needed to make some cash when I got to the U.P. of Michigan. My mom was renting her uncle Billy's trailer. It was a nasty little dive where my sister, Crystal, discovered humans can carry fleas just like dogs. She was scratching her whole body constantly when her and my brother Jesse weren't up on ladders painting houses for money.

I saw an ad in the local newspaper for volunteers to work with disabled adults at a place two hours away in Big Bay called Camp Independence. Volunteers received two hundred dollars plus room and board for two weeks of their service. I signed up.

I rolled my Camp Independence camper, Betty, across the lawn of the barbecue for the Hell's Angels. She had a crush on one of the guys who rode a chopper. Every year they took part in a ride-in and threw a little cash our way. The adult campers at Camp Independence drew smaller volunteer numbers and donations than the handicapped children. When you're a kid in a wheelchair you draw a lot of hugs and attention. When you're an adult you get a lot of people averting their gaze and excusing themselves around you. The hogs rumbled in, kicking up dust, and then they stood around in small circles eating barbecue chicken and making a game of throwing their corn cobs in the fire pit. A few stray cobs landed on the pedestrian path and I wheeled her around them. Betty's school forced her to wear a helmet when she was growing up before her wheelchair days. Her affinity towards headgear and wheels must've explained why she was fingering the chopper guy's leather chaps. I repressed the urge to tell him to stop leaning on her chair. One of the first things we learned as counselors at camp is that the wheelchair was an extension of the individual.

I left Betty with the chopper guy and headed back to her room where her roommate, Moe, was taking a nap. My training included giving catheters and digitals to my campers. A nurse explained the procedures to me and in my head I couldn't stop baby xylophone notes from tapping higher, then tapping lower, as I watched Moe sleeping. A little kid's voice sang, *It really hurts, Mommy. Am I going to die? Why do you want to see my spine, Mommy? Am I going to*

die? Ween's lyrics from the song, "Spinal Meningitis," informed me of Moe's...shit, it was spina bifida not spinal meningitis that put Moe in a chair. Keep the conditions straight. I wrenched her pelvic bone around and heaved the bulk of her, sliding from side to side. The mattress creaked. I wrapped my arms under her arms, around her back, and whisked her up from lying flat to sitting. I arranged her limp legs on the foot pedals, neat and tidy and rolled her to the commode chair perched over the toilet and lubed up my latex fingers with K-Y jelly. My two fingers hooked and swept down her bowel movement. Her BM smelled like shit. Moe's face turned red. I'm sure she didn't like an audience with the nurse picking her teeth at the sink. *Spinal meningitis.* The chorus stuck in my mind like the beef chunks I extracted.

Another camper, Mark, played the piano with his toes in the clubhouse. Actual songs replaced the tapping xylophone. He did a mean impression of Journey or Queen, one of those butt-rocker-eighties-hair-bands. With his arms and long hair spasming around him, he could win an air-guitar contest while eating lunch in the cafeteria. But a melody floated from cracked yellow toenails out to the fire pit. The hogs applauded and the chopper guy shouted for an encore. Mark had some sort of disorder that I can't now remember the name of. Once he spelled it out for me on his communication board with his big toes, while most campers used their fingers or held a straw between their lips if they were too fucked up to talk.

I rolled Moe next to the grill and excused Betty and brought her to the nurse's station for her medication. Bill rode past us on his bike and took his feet off the pedals, balancing while he did the splits. He almost hit us so I had to be quick in darting across the path. A *Keep on Truckin'* logo emblazoned a pair of mud flaps on the back two wheels cradling a basket. I suspected the hogs branded him like he was some sort of high-functioning mascot. He honked his ducky horn and the hogs all laughed and cheered. He hit a cob and splayed out on the

walkway, but the hogs were quick to help him up. Later, the Christians who ran the camp found him weaving between the trees from shoulder to shoulder, four miles out towards Big Bay, a gas pump and bar on the edge of town. Not a bad run for a blind man.

Betty reminded me of my promise to give Moe a back rub. I pulled up her shirt and traced my fingers along her vertebrae, working from the base of her spine up towards her neck. Betty rolled herself back over to the chopper guy, leaning over Annie's communication board. Annie kept tapping the *Yes* square with her straw. On Moe's back, I struck a crescent moon of flesh, bumped up with the strength of a beetle's shell. The chopper guy backed into Betty and she blushed all over when he touched her. I saw her hand rest on his thigh and she looked up at him. I tried to avoid directly massaging the mass on Moe's spine where a couple of hairs stood up out of a mole growing in a pocket sutured in around the growth. It was summer and I had no mittens, no riding gloves. I wasn't a Christian. I wasn't a hog. The bifida became tangible, not just part of a condition's name, spina bifida. Her label grew in my mind, transforming into something I could touch, but I was afraid to feel it.

Becky's Ricky

In the third grade my best friend, Becky Pearson, tackled me on her bed. She straddled me with her legs and pinned my arms down. I wasn't sure what she was going to do, but I started screaming for our sisters, Crystal and Jenny, in Becky and Jenny's basement hand-stitching little pieces of fabric shaped like hearts to stuff with cotton balls and nylon stockings.

"Get off me," I screamed. "Crys—" But Becky's hand slapped down over my mouth.

"You're not going to tell on me," she said in a loud whisper. The sound of footsteps coming up the basement steps thumped with my heartbeat.

I was not new to Becky's bullying. It had been the same thing in second grade.

"What's the matter?" Becky taunted. "Baby can't get home." She laughed and shuffled her feet to block my attempts to weave and dodge her shoves on my small shoulders. My brother, Jesse, and Crystal's nickname for me was *Twiggy*, like the 1960's mod model, because my head was about the biggest part of my body. The running joke was that setting a block of government cheese next to my dresser would draw out from my stomach, the tapeworm that was secretly eating all of my food.

My mom, a divorced single mother of four, cut her own hair into super short spikes and dyed them platinum blonde. Then she took up the scissors and cut Crystal's hair, and later, mine. I was six at the time. I slicked my hair back with water from the Houghton Elementary school's drinking fountain and within a week Becky joined me slicking back her new hair, blonde, but cut equally short. That year my mom also told our family that we were moving a few miles away to a new house, one that looked exactly like Becky's, separated by three other brick homes from

hers. The only difference was that when I stood up against the white brick homes, white chalk would come off onto the back of my shirt. Jesse's best friend lived in a white brick.

Becky greeted us to her neighborhood by smashing her face up against our patio door, sticking her tongue out, and shoving her fingers in her ears. She left a bunch of smudge marks and then dashed off running around our yard and disappeared into the little patch of woods behind our house. We later found evidence of someone squatting in the woods behind her home—a mattress, cigarette butts, and old milk jugs. It's amazing so little is needed for sustenance.

I was quick to forgive Becky when she blocked my path home threatening to kick my ass because I'd argued with her assertion on the bus that five times two was twelve. Becky was convinced of another truth. But the truth in math is not subjective.

We remained close even when we were assigned to different teachers and we still had the bus rides and time after school to play Kick the Can, pretend we were dogs, or burn newspapers in the college apartment parking lots. Becky started smoking her mom's Newports when she was about eight. I didn't see how she could do it and was quick to lecture her on the dangers of smoking and the correlation with cancer. Her mom had a hole in her neck where the smoke would drift out. A windshield wiper went through when she was sixteen and damaged her voice box. The result was that she sounded like a monster. I can still imitate her voice calling her daughters, "Becky, Jenny—you damn kids." The damn kids were smoking all of her cigarettes and drinking her diet Pepsi, while she was out working as a hairstylist or out after work drinking at the Monty Bar, which had recently burned and been renovated. It somehow still smelled like smoke long after Michigan law had banned smoking in public buildings.

I always blamed myself for Becky's cutting her hair and not growing it back out. I wasn't her only role model. Her mom's most steady relationship was with a woman named Valerie Vencato, who called herself Vincent. She looked and acted just like a guy. Vincent had a pool inside her house and was loaded. Her family owned a small chain of local grocery stores where I would shoplift bags of chips and half-gallons of mint chocolate chip ice cream. Becky loved swimming in Vincent's pool, always in shorts and a t-shirt.

I was never invited to Vincent's pool, but we would swim at Becky's grandma's cottage on a canal waterway. We dove for clam shells, purple and shiny on the inside. I took the shells home and painted the outsides white and placed earrings and necklaces in them on my dresser. In early spring we tanned ourselves on a nearby apartment building's garage roof. The black tarpaper sparkled and we usually came off more sunburned than tanned and would slather on juice from my mom's aloe vera plant. Next to the garage we took my brother's skateboard out and rode it down the driveway into the street on our butts rather than standing up. Becky spilled off the board. She screamed and cried while I ran back to my house. My mom took her to the hospital where the doctors put a hot pink cast on Becky's leg, broken in two places.

In the winter we played street hockey and had wrestling matches in our snowsuits in a packed-down ring, or square of snow we stomped with our moonboots. Our sisters and Becky and I built multi-room snow forts out of staggered ice cream buckets full of snow that we'd packed and iced. We spent hours each day working on the fort that we planned to serve ice-cream along with a large ice slide going into the driveway. We counted the admission money we would charge. Becky shoveled all the snow towards our work area with a big metal scoop since she was the strongest (but not the oldest). The next summer, Becky was running around her yard with me and stepped on a broken and rusted pipe jutting out of the grass. I could see into her

muscles where flesh flapped on her foot sole. My mom brought her to the hospital again, a couple of blocks south of the Monty.

For her twelfth birthday Becky decided to throw a party. She invited all of the popular girls from school that we considered our friends. No one came and Becky ended up drinking the twelve pack of Budweiser by herself as fast as she could, about eight cans. She started crying.

“I just want to die,” she said and took a drag of her smoke.

“You will if you keep smoking all of those,” I said and grabbed the pack of Camels from next to her thigh.

“Give those back,” Becky said. She lunged at me. “I worked hard for those. I had to fuck Chuck-the-ton.”

Chuck-the-ton was one of her sister’s friends. Stealing cigarettes would be a much easier way to get a hold of a pack than letting a two-hundred pound boy squiggle and worm his way into her on the bottom bunk bed.

Even if her friends’ parents would have let their daughters come to Becky’s house for a party, the girls wouldn’t have wanted to be Becky’s therapist, or drink her beer and pretend to like smoking. Her friends were dressed up like princesses in sequined leotards and ruffles and twirling on ice rinks to choreographed figure skating dances.

We learned how to steal together and we raided the local mall for thousands of dollars. I gift wrapped my stolen clothes and perfume and waited until my birthday and holidays to open the presents from my school friends. My mom believed my rich friends were quite generous. During those days of taking a cab to the mall and shoplifting everything we could, Becky started

meeting girls from other towns. The girls from Calumet, ten miles north, thought that we were boyfriend and girlfriend.

“We’re just friends now,” Becky said. She motioned to me with her head and posed her arm against the wall behind a Calumet skank with big bangs and jeans pinned at the bottom. The ten-mile gap between Houghton and Calumet also mirrored a delay in fashion trends between the towns.

It was easy for Becky to say that she dumped me and start dating the skanks. I don’t know what name she used to tell them who she was. Ricky comes to mind. But I knew enough not to open my mouth.

I once watched with Jesse and his best friend, Darin, a match between Becky and the toughest girl I knew, my older sister, Crystal.

“Get her in a headlock,” Jesse yelled. Crystal’s hair was soaked from the rain and kept getting in her eyes. She faked to brush it off of her forehead and then swung at Becky’s face just nicking the side of her cheekbone and Becky slammed her fist into Crystal’s stomach.

“Kick her,” Darin called out. But Becky grabbed Crystal, doubled over, and brought her knee into my sister’s chest. Crystal stood back up and danced and dodged a couple more of Becky’s punches.

“I think it’s a tie,” Jesse said.

He was one year older than Crystal and didn’t usually show her much mercy when he was pissed at her. I saw him throw her onto her back on our concrete basement floor when they were fighting over the remote control for our TV. Her feet lifted off the ground and her entire

body was in the air before her weight came down. The cycle of abuse trickled down to me, the baby of the family. We were playing outside and my sister didn't want me to go back into our house. She stood in front of the door striking a baseball bat in a rhythmic arc on the cement sidewalk. I ran for the door under her bat, hoping my timing was better than her aim. It wasn't.

And I wasn't even taking pleasure in seeing my brute sister humiliated and bruised.

"Yeah, looks like a tie," Darin said in response to Jesse's lie that the fight was a draw.

"Let's go home," I called. Crystal turned towards me, her face unrecognizable in the rain. "Tie," I said. She walked up the driveway and the four of us left Becky standing alone in front of her garage with her chest puffing in and out. I could almost see steam rising from her head.

In our previous low-income neighborhood of divorced single mothers called Waterworks, boys that just moved in typically had to fight Crystal and climb The Big Rock. But that was more shit-talking and pushing than anything else, another way to let the boys know who ran the neighborhood. Crystal's hair was growing long again and she seemed more like a girl and less an icon of strength.

Becky and I remained friends and ran scams together and collected cash from our neighbors by pretending that we were donating the money to St. Jude's Hospital. Becky let me do all of the talking. We returned home from the mall and emptied our pockets of all of our loot and St. Jude's money on Becky's floor. Becky panicked when her mom came home and told me I had to leave before she came in the house. I left some of the money behind, but Becky claimed I must have lost it at the mall or in the cab.

At night, we went knocking on doors, and then ran away. We collected cans from the elderly for their deposit money. I even forged a check from a woman I babysat for who was always too drunk after coming home from the bar to pay me. And if we wanted flowers for Mother's Day we always had the roses in someone else's garden.

I started playing basketball on the junior high school team, the Gremlins, and Becky diverged off into weight lifting. She wore multiple sports bras and baggy sweatshirts to hide her tits. I quit going to the mall and Becky still prowled there, looking for chicks and bottles of cologne she could stuff in her jeans.

Our last names, Primeau and Pearson, were also close and we had locker spaces next to each other all throughout Houghton high school. The popular girls decided to gang up on me and officially *dump* me. Tampons and bras appeared in my family's mailbox, along with bags of dog shit on our front doorstep. I had to explain to my mom that my friends had a different sense of humor.

"There she is, Miss America," classmates sang out in unison. I stopped in the doorway and then shuffled into the shop classroom with my head hanging down, trying to hide my braces and the flaking red skin on my face caused by an anti-acne cream called Retin-A. The boys stuffed advertisements for Teen Spirit deodorant into my locker and the girls spread rumors about me playing dirty and calling them bitches on to the basketball coach. The coach demoted me from junior varsity to the freshman team during tryouts. I'd like to think it was rumors but it was probably my lack of practice since I got a full-time summer job at my high school as a janitor through a state funded program for welfare families. Summers used to be reserved for open gyms and basketball camps, but now were filled with toilet bowls and spray bottles.

My mom wasn't about to move and I was too ashamed to tell Crystal and Jesse, who were getting beyond the age of beating up bullies for me. I dreamed of the days I wouldn't have to go to school anymore. Rather than skipping school, I studied harder, determined to graduate early. I hung out downtown with some of the skateboarders and met kids in my class from our homecoming rival school, Hancock, across the canal. I took advanced placement classes and made friends with girls one and two grades my senior. Soon, I was going to parties on the weekends. The frat boys liked getting me drunk and admitted me into bump and grind parties when I was fourteen and still had jewelry on my teeth. I ran into my freshman team basketball coach at a Sig Pi frat party, and he helped me hide my beer from the cops.

Becky remained by my side in the beginning, like during yelling matches with the popular girls in our civics and history class. She and one other guy in the class, Ryan, became friends and had fun checking out girls together, talking about tit fucking and pussy-fingering. Listening to them, I vowed to never date anyone in high school.

A couple of cute new girls bused in to our school from an outlying rural area. Becky latched onto one of them and so did the popular girls. I think Becky had a big crush on one, who started having sex with older boys when she was eleven. Even Becky deserted me in the end for their company. I took solace in studying in the school library during lunch hours to avoid being called a *welfare bitch* by the daughters of prominent figures in our community—school psychologists, lawyers, doctors, teachers and university professors. Becky would've pulverized them for that particular insult, had I still been her side-kick. Late at night when I couldn't sleep, I

plotted how to exact revenge hoping that the girls would invite me over for one last slumber party, *Jonestown Kool-Aid anyone?*

The moment I had been waiting for finally came: graduation from high school, a class of one hundred and twenty-three. I aimed to become the class valedictorian or even the salutatorian but instead found myself ranking as the number three, unrecognized, and hailed as nothing more than a failure who tried too hard. I received one B along the way in Biology class for missing a test, because I attended a protest against our school's policy of having closed campus during lunch periods. I wanted my freedom and was taught an early lesson in the consequences of civil disobedience and the politics of my mom's hippy generation.

Somehow despite my stellar grades, teacher's lounge gossip focused on little things like character and reputation. What does your single mother do for a living? What is your annual household income?

Small school gossip spread about our basketball team. One of the popular girls and ringleader, Jessica, was crying while taking off her high tops in the locker room two weeks after her dad, a basketball referee, died of a heart attack at a game. I thought I could cheer her up, but I'd never taken grief counseling and the only funeral I'd attended was Michael's, my nine-year old cousin, who shot himself with a shotgun. His hockey picture sat on top of his closed casket.

"At least you had a father," I told Jessica. "My parents are divorced. My dad isn't even dead."

The other girls turned to hurried whispers. “Did you hear what she just said about Jessica’s dad?”

I wasn’t elected to the National Honor Society. I smoked cigarettes and joints on a small circle of pavement next to the cable company down the road from the high school. I wanted to smoke during lunch hours with Crystal and not just after school, but we had a closed campus. If Becky only knew I smoked her rival brand, Marlboros, after all of my lecturing, but I wasn’t speaking with her.

I moved out and rented my own apartment the summer when I was sixteen and worked two jobs at the Teddy and Me Daycare at our school and at Kentucky Fried Chicken totaling seventy-five hours per week. Sleep consisted of two to three hour long naps around dawn. Before work, I awoke from a nap and a man’s voice in my head was loud, clear, and familiar telling me, “You’re nothing. You’re a piece of shit.” I turned on the television as fast as I could to drown out the voice. A commercial was on describing depression and there was an image of an egg, although I couldn’t quite make the connection. I usually associated eggs with the War on Drugs commercials. “This is your brain. This is your brain on drugs. Any questions?”

I was one of the first dual enrolled students at our high school. I walked a couple of miles to and from Michigan Tech University to take Organic Chemistry with Dr. Logue, infamous on campus for teaching the tough weeder course, a means of weeding the capable from the incapable, the successful engineers versus failures. I consistently ranked in the top three to five students on the posted test scores and even confessed to a couple of study mates that I was only sixteen.

At a house party I was introduced to some of the campus hipsters. A girl named Divina asked if she could kiss me. I asked my new boyfriend Andy, a college sophomore, if he would consider that cheating. He didn't mind, but he didn't watch with everyone else. Her tongue and mouth were so soft, almost too soft. I felt like I was melting into her. I felt cool but I couldn't shake the image of Becky. I decided I liked contrast and chemistry.

I was going to become a chemist and fight for Native American governments to gain more jurisdictions over their natural resources and set up their own environmental protection agency so that corporations would stop using their lands as dumping grounds. Obtaining water and soil samples and running nuclear magnetic resonance and infrared specs on unknowns after vacuum distilling them, all seemed glamorous to me.

But when it came time to gather my recommendation letters from Bio Bob, my AP Chem teacher, my Pre-Calc teacher, and the Anatomy teacher no one wanted to recommend me to Northwestern University. Stunned and bewildered, I questioned what all of those As and passing college placement exams meant? I turned to my English teacher, Mrs. Gerhardt. I didn't take AP English but instead was sticking it out with the rest of my peers, who were less hell bent on the future. I didn't need to speak when I was learning the language of Cis-Trans boat configurations and the nomenclature of molecular compounds. The 189,819 letter word chemical name for Titin, the longest known protein, far surpassed the longest 183 letter word found in literature.

Mrs. Gerhardt was teaching her first year at our high school. A veteran teacher but new to our school, she said, "I'd love to write you a recommendation." And her words stuck with me. Northwestern wasn't convinced of her faith in me that I was *one in thousands* she taught, but she really left me blushing with her praise. She said, "You can write," when no one was willing to

say that I could understand anything that I was learning to excel in. And her words came into my throat later when I was sitting around a campfire with my then-boyfriend, Jonathan.

“Everything’s lost,” Jonathan said. “Just look at the Indians all drinking Pepsi and wearing Levis. There’s no respect left.” Jonathan held back his long dreadlocks with his hand while he leaned in and lit his rollie cigarette on a stick burning near the outside of the fire.

“You can still try,” I said. “You can try to do something.”

“What are you going to do, huh?” Jonathan asked. He pulled the wine bag he stripped from a box and squeezed the remainder from the spigot straight into his mouth. A trick I’d seen Becky perform once as well.

“I can write,” I said.

I was twenty-two, homeless, and living for my fourth year in tents and shacks in the Rocky Mountains in Telluride, Colorado. Somehow Native Americans stood as the pinnacle of the state of nature and everything good about living free and in harmony with the land in the opinions of many of the kids living in the woods. Some of the kids, like Jonathan, were runaways that joined the Rainbow Family, a group of transients, new-agers, and hippies who traveled the country, renamed themselves, and tried to live as far off-the-grid as possible. Or at least have the appearance of being self-sufficient.

I was sitting between a girlfriend, Meredith, and Jonathan on my stool at the Roma Bar on the main street in Telluride, also called *T-Ride* and *Tohelluride*. Meredith told me about a car, an Audi, she thought I could buy for a couple of grand and turn around and make a profit on. She

made a joke about me driving a stick and stripping the clutch. I laughed and Jonathan grabbed my shoulder and turned me back to face him.

“You told me you needed to get some head space and then I find out you were snuggling with Brian in his van!” Jonathan said.

“It wasn’t his van,” I said. “It was in the raft company van he works for and I needed a place to stay.” I turned back to Meredith. “I could take a cash advance on my credit card and drive the car back to Michigan and sell it when I get there. Cars without rust are considered—”

“Why do you have to be such a two-faced bitch?” Jonathan yelled. “You’re sitting there giggling with Meredith and I’m freaking out over here.”

“You’re being insecure,” I said. “It’s not like I slept with him.” I looked straight ahead at my own reflection in the long mirror behind three rows of liquor bottles. Jonathan reached over and I saw his hands grip my throat. He wrenched my neck around to look at him while he continued squeezing. I felt like a cat in the hands of a deranged child and like a third-grader on Becky’s bed.

“Hey,” the bartender rushed over with a white towel over his shoulder. The bar was a mix of tourists and locals, not completely upscale but not the Irish Pub, O’Bannon’s, either. “You need to leave.” He pointed at Jonathan who’d already grabbed his fanny pack off the bar and pried his sticky thighs from the seat.

I watched myself break down for the next few minutes in front of the mirror. Meredith rubbed my back. When I returned to my Subaru, where I kept all my stuff, Jonathan was standing in front of the open hatch. He smashed my headlamp on the street so that I couldn’t make my

way on the trail to my tent in the dark that night. But I could see fine enough in the dark. The dark didn't scare me. Violent boys didn't scare me.

I spent the next couple of weeks buying Jonathan extra beer. He passed out most nights and didn't bother me for sex. One morning when we were at a friend's trailer in Sawpit, I told him that I was driving to Michigan for a wedding and I hoped he could sneak into the Blues and Brews festival without me.

I returned to my hometown, Houghton. I needed money and started working at Richie's Market, a liquor store which also sold milk and candy cigarettes. I took up a second job ringing the Salvation Army bell in front of Wal-Mart around the Christmas holidays. Bio Bob saw me and asked me, a bit incredulous, "What are you doing?" He looked back and forth from the red bucket to the bell in my hand.

"I'm ringing the bell," I said. I didn't tell him what I was thinking though. How that B he gave me ruined my life. How I could have had a ticket to Northwestern and not befriended Sara, the schizophrenic a few doors down from my room in my dorm hall at the University of Minnesota. She was diagnosed as having only obsessive compulsive disorder and panic attacks at the time. I still don't believe Sara's schizophrenic diagnosis. How I wouldn't have fallen prey to bipolar disorder only one year after graduating high school.

It was a small town. I managed to put my head together enough to return to Michigan Technological University after attending the University of Minnesota and Humboldt State University. I was substitute teaching at my old high school while in the English Education program. Mrs. Gerhardt became the principal. She saw me but she didn't say a word. Small town rumors, teacher's lounge gossip, a promising student who returned home after going crazy.

A couple of years after high school, I met up with one of the popular girls, Lisa, who became a coach for the University of Michigan figure skating team. She thought it was pretty entertaining to watch old video recordings of dances she used to make up that I would try to follow along with. There was a two-to-three-second delay between every one of her moves and my attempted moves, struggling as the lackey. She stopped the tape midway through our trip down memory lane. She couldn't wait to tell me about her piece of gossip.

“Guess who I saw on the *Jerry Springer Show*?” she said.

I thought it was brave of Lisa to make such an admission of guilt, watching *Springer*. The featured show was about gay and lesbian couples who wanted to adopt children. Lisa was hysterical with laughter that she'd seen Becky on an episode. I was just happy that Becky had found someone who knew and accepted that she was a girl. But with Becky's past scams in my mind, I couldn't be assured that the relationship was legitimate or that she just wanted to get a thirty-minute spot on the boob. I'd also heard Becky was still running scams as an adult with one of her girlfriends. I wanted to be better than the gossip and not believe it until I confirmed the truth. At the Nutini's Supper Club, Lisa told me that she heard I joined a cult in California. All I needed was a baby to sacrifice on an altar or start following a man who thought he was Jesus, and I was in. I guess bipolar and small mind-controlled communities weren't that different to my graduated peers.

I'd tried to tutor Becky in academics many times over the years. That was the point that I realized not everyone is created equal in the intelligence department. She tried and tried hard to succeed on her tests and marks, but she just couldn't. Effort did not equal As.

It reminds me of a premise called the Veil of Ignorance from John Rawl's *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls develops principles of justice from what he calls the Original Position, or a place from behind a veil of ignorance. The veil hides the facts about themselves that might bias a person's notion of justice.

A person behind the veil doesn't know what her fate will be. Whether she will be poor, rich, weak, strong, disabled, healthy, a genius, or have the IQ of potato chips.

If you don't know that you might be blind with one leg, drooling, slow, and piss broke you are more apt to keep entitlement programs in place and create spaces of opportunity for the down-trodden. Because it might be you. From behind the veil, everything is a crap shoot.

When I was a kid, I held onto my intelligence like it was my lottery ticket out of poverty. I understood Becky's poverty but I didn't understand Becky's need to use brawn over brains, the unfairness of being blessed with physical strength instead of intelligence. I could only feel pity until I went crazy and became homeless. Then I spent all of my time with high school dropouts and runaways. I started to understand fairness, equality, and fate as more than stock words.

Becky continued pumping iron and sucking down Joe Weider's Weight Gainer milkshakes. When she turned sixteen, her locker stood empty.

Fifteen years later, Becky friend-requested me on Facebook. In her profile picture, her arm drapes around a guy's shoulder. For a second, I imagined that maybe Becky had found someone who loved her for who she is. Maybe Becky was attracted to him. I've never fully

accepted Becky as a boy or bought into her transgender sexual identity crisis. I've shed my veil and am not blind to her upbringing. She will always possess something tender, vulnerable, strong, and determined to me. The way I imagine women ought to be. I understand her attraction to women. Women are amazing.

I haven't searched on Facebook for a profile with her last name and the first name *Ricky*.

Becky works at an army base and as a personal trainer in downstate Michigan. She proudly shows off her six-pack abdominal muscles in her photo albums. I see comments from old high school classmates, both jealous and congratulatory. Comments like, *Becky, you're the woman*. Hell, I may have even been the one who wrote it. Lifting weights became her success and her defense in places like Calumet, Michigan, places like Lincoln, Nebraska.

Mittens in July

In our backyard, my mom punched my aunt Julie in the face. My aunt Julie was a late baby and the same age as my oldest brother, Stacy. Despite my mom's being old enough to be Julie's mother, my brother, Jesse, sister, Crystal, and I were more scared for my mom than worried for Julie. But Julie didn't hit my mom.

Instead, after she left the house, Julie hit a jogger with her Bronco. She leaned her head and raised fist out of her window and yelled at him for getting in her way. Her blonde hair and blue eyes, once almost pretty, contorted with rage. She and her husband, Brian, had just bought a trailer on forty acres. They flew a large American flag in front and a five-foot tall star strung from Christmas lights stayed up all year. My aunt bagged a bigger buck than her husband each deer-hunting season but he had bragging rights on the trophy of their trailer—a white weasel he shot under their bed, stuffed and hung on the wood paneling. Jesse and Crystal still call their place *The Compound*.

The compound, not exactly a dream home, was still an improvement on my mom's HUD home stuck in the center of Houghton, Michigan. My mom coveted my aunt's horses and farm life, something she always wanted for herself, but instead she became pregnant. Julie sold enough cocaine with her husband even to buy ostriches.

My mom thought she might find some rich rancher out west and settle down. She started cleaning houses and having garage sales, saving money in my junior and senior years in high school so that she could move after I graduated.

*

In the summer, when I was fifteen, my mom had a garage sale. She caught a man trying to stuff some of her Pink Floyd and Tangerine Dream music CD's into his jacket without paying for them.

“Hey, *Dark Side of the Moon* is missing,” my mom said. She watched the man readjust his jean jacket. “Give me back my CDs.”

I looked up from the masking tape labeled prices I was sticking to my old Casio keyboard and Nintendo games. The man reached into his jacket and slammed down a few CDs, cracking one of the covers, a beach filled with hospital cots. “They're not worth five bucks each.”

“They're not free, either,” my mom said. “Get out of here.”

“Stupid bitch,” he said and walked down our driveway fast. My mom pressed her lips together and opened the coffee can lid on the wadded dollar bills and pile of change covering the bottom of the can. She licked her fingers and started separating ones and fives, tens and twenties.

Jesse was visiting our home in Upper Michigan from Detroit where he went to work in an Italian restaurant as a cook for the summer. The restaurant business was lucrative and he copped an attitude I hadn't seen in him before, now that he had a car without Bondo covering all of its rust spots. My sister, Crystal, was out of town with a friend of hers so I invited my friend Erica to sleep over in her bedroom. Our family didn't have a long mirror so I would frequently use the reflection of our patio door to try on swimsuits or new outfits. Erica and I tried on a couple of outfits and settled on showing just enough skin to pique a guy's interest but not enough to look like total sluts. We headed off to the downtown area parking decks to hang out. After arching our

backs and licking ice cream cones seductively against a brick wall while we watched a group of boys skateboarding fail to slide park benches and land their varial kickflips, we returned home early.

Erica, my mom, and I went to bed. I heard Jesse's car engine start up and then pull away as he left his room in the basement to take his high school sweetheart, Jessica, home. He may have had a stash of money in the basement, his college savings from working in Detroit and from side-jobs that involved Ziploc baggies. He never said as much, but I suspect he would've felt too guilty or too pressed to explain its source.

"Twiggy," Erica whispered. "You have to get up."

"Get the fuck up," a man's voice shouted.

Erica used my nickname as a last resort to try to wake me. I sleep deeply and snore, which is why I wasn't waking up. I blinked my eyes and saw three figures standing over my bed. I felt a hand grip around my bicep and pull me out of bed.

A man holding a gun pressed it into the back of my nightgown and pushed me down the hall of my house past the bathroom—maybe that's where the blue light flashed reminding me of the show, *Unsolved Mysteries*. I reeled through my sister's room onto her bed, next to Erica, the first one who he awoke with a gun pointed at her face. After me, a woman sat down at the foot of the bed. She looked a lot like my coworker from the daycare I worked at. What was her name? Shelia? I was too groggy with sleep to see that Sheila was my mom. And the man looked a lot like he was a perpetrator from *Unsolved Mysteries*. Maybe that's where he got his getup idea

from. He wore a ski mask and eyeglasses over the mask and fingered the hammer or the safety on the gun, something that kept clicking. He did this over and over, managing with his finger beneath a pair of mittens as he asked the same question.

“Where’s the money?” he said. He did a little pacing number with his feet and the woman at the foot of the bed wringed her hands.

“I just had a garage sale,” she said. “I’ve got twenty bucks. What do you expect coming to a welfare house?”

Our house was a Cracker Jack box where we were the prize inside.

“Is there anybody else in the house?” the gunman asked. Click, click.

“My son’s coming right back,” she said. “He’ll be here any minute.”

More sniffing and clicking came from the man in the acid-wash jeans. The door slammed behind him as he tromped back down the hall.

“Pray, pray,” she said.

Sheila was definitely not Sheila, I realized.

“Holy Mary, mother of something,” Erica said. Erica knew as much about prayer as I did. I had no idea how to pray aloud if it wasn’t asking for something I wanted. Fear settled in as I woke up from my half-dreaming state. The footsteps were coming back. Three little pigs all huddled on a pulled-apart bunk bed. He opened the door and while he stood in the doorway, a halo of light around his head, I heard his zipper go down.

“Jesus Christ, please help protect us,” I muttered. I didn’t want to lose my virginity to a masked man wearing mittens. A skateboarder who could only land an ollie would’ve been better than that.

“Where’s the money?” he asked.

“I told you already I just have twenty dollars,” my mom said.

He slammed the bedroom door shut.

My mom stood up on the bed and popped out the screen window with her elbow. She perched in the window ready to jump but heard him thrashing through the wild rose bushes in the backyard, past three days’ worth of cigarette butts stamped down with a nice view to our patio door, where he entered.

My mom grabbed the cordless telephone and called the police. I stayed in the hallway where I wouldn’t be in front of any windows in case he decided to shoot back into the house.

“Why didn’t you give him your savings?” I asked my mom.

“Do you know how long it took me to save twelve hundred bucks?” my mom said. “Like I’m just going to give it to a man with a gun. I heard him crinkling something in the bathroom. He just walked right in like he knew the place.”

“Maybe he grew up in a brick house,” I said. “All of these have the same floor plan.”

“Maybe someone gave him the floor plan,” my mom said.

I could see the gears turning in my mom’s paranoid head. Her quiet tallying of every person she knew who might possibly be out to get her—neighbors, family, friends, acquaintances

from the Uphill 41 Bar where she went dancing, even her ex-husband, my dad. When Jesse got home the cops already pulled Erica, my mom, and me out of our house and were radioing for search dogs to track the intruder. The closest trained German Shepherds were two hours south of us in a town called Negaunee. The cops dusted the house down for fingerprints.

“Didn’t you tell them that he was wearing mittens,” I said.

“They’re not going to find anything in our house,” my mom said. “They need to be patrolling a radius of a few blocks from us, not waiting for dogs.”

“Why are the cops searching the basement?” Jesse asked. A light was shining through the basement window where my brother had painted the walls, threw down a carpet, and slept in a waterbed.

“He left us in Crystal’s room and was rummaging around in the house for awhile,” I said. “Maybe he went down into your room.”

“I told him you were coming home,” my mom said to Jesse. “I think that scared him off.”

The cops came to the street and asked us to wait somewhere in town and away from the house while they finished their search of the premises for evidence. We went to a local grocery store, Econo Foods, which was open late and sat in chairs at their deli swapping our different versions of what we heard and saw that night. Erica called her mom and told her what happened. I thought she wouldn’t be allowed to hang out with me anymore, but her mom let her stay the next night at my house again. We went back downtown and made our experience into a funny story that we told in tandem, playing off each other’s observations. When we came home that night, my mom wedged sticks in all of the windows that wouldn’t lock and we curled up in the

living room in blankets, knowing our fears of the dark world outside were foolish. What were the chances that he would come back the next night?

Erica and I went back to Houghton High School on Monday morning where her mom was a teacher. By afternoon lunch, Erica told me that her stepsister, Dominique, was telling everyone that our family was a bunch of druggies and the guy must've known us. I thought it was some rivalry between her and Crystal who were both seniors but had different circles of friends. I never imagined occasionally smoking pot to qualify me as a druggie, or that our family was somehow getting what we deserved.

Erica and I graduated and went to different colleges out-of-state in Minnesota. She started seeing a therapist and went over the guy with the gun story many times, citing it for some of her future fears and anxiety. Erica had chronic back pain, couldn't commit to any long-term relationship with a man, she travelled non-stop—China, London, Paris, Brazil, Alaska, New York and never stayed anywhere longer than six months. She was an artist and had an opening at the Smithsonian and even put her naked body on display at another gallery in New York. She became something of a legend among our peers, having traveled more and tasted success beyond the rest of us still struggling through med school or dropping out to party. I never saw that night as a point of trauma, but just as a funny moment, another story to laugh about.

I've been in a couple of Pathways Treatment centers, which handle mental illness and substance abuse as a dual diagnosis. I landed in one in Montana, one in San Francisco, and one in Colorado. I had to participate in groups that espoused AA, alcoholics anonymous, and NA, narcotics anonymous, rhetoric if I ever wanted to leave lock-down. We also had group therapy and role-playing where we discussed family roles and birth order and how that could help us

understand what makes us act the way we do. The counselors are always digging around in our personal pasts for something traumatic, something that can make sense of why we are so broken, why we are such fuck-ups.

In the Pathways Treatment Center in Montana we had to role-play in one of our groups. The counselor gave me a little slip of folded white paper. In black ink it said, *You're a thirteen year old who was raped.* I was pissed and felt ashamed. Like it had really happened to me. Did the counselor want me to believe I was repressing something? Was this what filling out five hundred questions for their entrance paperwork led to? I crumpled up the note.

“I don't like playing games,” I said as I walked out of the door and threw the wad of paper on the floor.

“That's okay,” she said. “You don't have to play. People with bipolar frequently don't like playing games.”

How do you role-play a thirteen year-old who was raped? I didn't stay in the circle long enough to see if one of the little notes said, *You're a rapist. Your victim is thirteen.* Would that have been the main attraction? Was the main drama finding forgiveness or reenacting the violence? Or were the roles unrelated, one a B&E suspect, another a heroin junkie, just a mash-up of derelicts. I would like to see how that game plays out now that I'm older.

Prayer and Longing from the Midwest

In the beginning, I remember praying as a seven-year old to look pretty like a cover girl in the magazines. I also prayed to have money. I would talk to God at night by my bedside with my Precious Moments Bible, illustrated with cartoon images of angelic children with moon faces and doe eyes. My prayer habit wasn't regimented like my French-Canadian grandmother on my dad's side of the family. Her knees were filled with water and made squishy from long hours kneeling before God next to her nightstand. In the top drawer was a revolver. She was married and had three children but through multiple monetary donations to the Catholic church, she managed to get her marriage annulled rather than applying for a divorce.

My mom studied with the Jehovah Witnesses on some weekends. Now she says the Witnesses will only be friends with you if you study with them and that she suspected a couple of Witnesses stole the cross off of her Bible at our house. She started to caravan our family to different churches—Lutheran, Episcopalian, First Baptist and Pentecostal—and we would randomly show up on the doorstep to sample that establishment's brand of religion. But we never went to a Catholic church. My dad was Catholic.

I always felt uncomfortable in clothes that weren't as nice as the other parishioners' clothing and by the way everyone would turn around in their seats and look at us, newcomers who were poor. Occasionally, on a Sunday my mom would drop my siblings and me off at a local Lutheran church and come back to pick us up a couple of hours later. She wasn't always on time and we had to walk an hour to get back home. Church and Sunday school were punishment to me and required homework and study when I would rather be at home enjoying my freedom from the school week, playing the Legend of Zelda game on Nintendo.

I really started to pray when my heart was first broken. I dated a college student, Andy, for over a year starting in my senior year of high school. He was a devout Catholic and straight-edge, meaning he listened to punk rock and followed the pact: Don't smoke. Don't drink. Don't fuck. He would draw big black X's with sharpie markers on his fists to identify himself as straight-edge. He convinced me through being a good role model to become sober, and at sixteen I already needed a savior in that department. I had psychedelic mushrooms wrapped in foil in my mom's freezer, labeled as a chemistry experiment not to be disturbed. I'm sure she opened it one night looking for a spare pound of beef for spaghetti or stroganoff and found the bluish-purple colored long stems. Andy and I did eventually have sex, when I was sixteen, but it was supposed to be a sacred act (I was studying tantric love) and he made a promise to God that I would be the one he married.

I graduated high school and enrolled in college at the University of Minnesota, seven hours away in Minneapolis. Andy and I began our long-distance relationship with the intention of reuniting when he graduated and we'd move to Oregon together so he could pursue a doctorate degree in chemistry and I could continue my undergraduate studies in chemistry as a transfer student in a beautiful place, close to the Pacific. Andy also became absorbed in a martial arts discipline called Shitoryu. That's where he met Shannon, a friend that he started talking about and even dreaming of. He's a 2nd Dan in Shitoryu now and a molecular toxicology researcher at a children's hospital in Seattle, where he moved after Oregon.

I visited him during a winter carnival event, six months into our long-distance relationship, and I noticed a pastel drawing he did on a piece of cardboard, just like the ones he used to give me when we first started dating. But he didn't give it to me. I picked it up and turned it over in my hands.

“I think we should see other people,” he said.

He spoke in the perfectly detached manner I had heard repeated so often on television.

It was over. I returned to my friend’s house and we went out with some of her friends to a house party. We did a few beer bong and I returned to Andy’s house with a collection of poetry he had written for me over the past couple of years.

I threw the poems in his face, the folder of notebook sheets fanning out at his feet. *Smoke curls, / she curls in the bay / window*. I would take note of clumsy line breaks and grammatical errors much later. I was only interested in his soulful outpouring and that he would no longer pore over lines for me. He went into a defensive Shitoryu stance, with his hands lined up one behind the other in a karate chop between his face and mine.

“Recycle this for Shannon,” I said and stumbled out of his house.

Down the street at another party an acid-jazz band named Psilocubic had a crowd hypnotized and throwing their limbs around as only unabashed college kids will move. I pursed my lips and made mocking sexy faces to the singer who I met smoking pot in an attic before Andy and me met. The singer was distracted so I made my way through the crowd and found one of Andy’s friends, Joe Wakefield, whose girlfriend, Amy, was in India. I started kissing him and a couple of minutes later I threw up in the bathroom.

I traveled back to Minneapolis with my friend, Sara, and listened to Motown music on the radio. Each song was about losing love and spoke directly to me. *All that’s left of the dreams I hold. Is a band of gold and the memories...* I climbed the four flights of stairs back to my dorm room. I lived on an all-girls’ floor, coined the *virgin vault*. For the first week after Andy dumped

me, I could not eat, sleep, or study. I curled up on the bed with the quilt he had found for me in a second-hand store. My friends and roommate made me homemade cards with sunshine and rainbows and flowers to cheer me up. The cards reminded me of something a bald child with terminal cancer might receive. Which made me feel ashamed since Sara's roommate, the other Sara, was separated from her parents, both of whom were battling cancer, and I never made her a card. That says something about my character and character plus yearning equals fate.

When I started coming out of my slump the first thing that I picked up to read was the Bible. I started reading the New Testament and the copy that I was reading had all of Jesus' words highlighted in red. In one of the books, Jesus emphasized the search for love, truth, and understanding. For the first time I noticed the hefty weight of these three words and that they might be hiding secrets underneath each one, entire worlds to be discovered. I thought I knew what love was with Andy. But there must be something more, something real, something that didn't break.

I prayed on those three words every night that I might be guided to them for the rest of my freshman year of college, until I moved to Alaska to spend the summer with my sister and mother. That's where I met my next boyfriend, Rich Felon, a Korean man who was gay, a male prostitute for men, and a heroin junkie in Seattle. He burned all of his worldly possessions before his friends put him on a boat to Homer, Alaska. There he started a soup kitchen in a tepee for the spit rats, people living on the spit, a jetty that pushed into the ocean, surrounded by glaciers. Rich had a strong lisp and was about ten years older than me. I was the first woman he had dated, in eight years. He would flirt with young guys, even blushing, and I felt no jealousy. I felt free for once from that monster of jealousy. He was also a marijuana grower, well known for his Matanuska Thunderfuck strain. Even his black lab's name was Sensimilla.

Rich wanted me to quit my two summer jobs, at a seafood restaurant and an RV park, and become his partner. But I turned down the opportunity and continued to hitchhike from the west end of town at five in the morning to get to work by six a.m. I didn't have a car, and hitchhiking became my mode of transportation since it was common for cannery workers to be out on the side of the road. People were used to seeing hitchhikers and I was even told that it was illegal to *not* pick up someone with their thumb out in the winter time because they could easily die in the harsh Alaskan winters. The first car that would pass me always stopped on that winding dirt road where moose sometimes hung out on the side munching fireweed. The driver would sometimes stop at the drive-through coffeehouse before we passed the multitude of seaplanes docked.

Rich and I visited the Kilcher homestead and the local singer Jewel's grandfather sat playing chess with one of his adult children by the window. He moved his knight and then stroked his long white beard. We said hello and passed down the trail with our towels. Naked and spinning in circles, we kissed the sweat from one another's cheeks in a mud pit of cold water after a sauna. The grandfather emerged from the cabin.

"There are kids in there!" he shouted and pointed back at the homestead.

The kids were older than me.

On our sauna tour, Rich, a self-professed pagan, brought me to the Earth church, a house in the woods where some hippy friends of his lived. I didn't know what paganism meant exactly, other than that Rich probably had a deep respect for the Earth and that my mom would find disapproval with that more than his lie that he worked in construction to support himself. He fed me some ganja brownies and we took another sauna in a huge dome, which isn't the best

shape for a sauna because you can't build a higher level of benches to get a greater degree of heat by sitting closer to the ceiling. But the sauna did fit more than eight naked bodies at one time. There was a small kiddie pool of freezing cold water sitting outside of the sauna. After I overheated myself in the steam I laid in the pool for a minute. When I emerged I felt it necessary while on my hands and knees to pray and a light enveloped every inch of me as well as seeming to spring forth from within. I cried tears of joy and understood them to be real for the first time in my life. Rich sat near the edge of the forest watching me.

“You're very special,” he said.

I believed him. Rich's mother was a nun who left the convent in order to adopt him. She told him that when she received a picture of his father in the mail, it was a picture of Jesus Christ. He also remembered his injured leg healing during a missionary's visit to his village before he was adopted by his mom. He never mentioned his birth mother and father to me. He wasn't adopted until he was eight and I think with some deep longing he believed Jesus was his father. And with my mother naming the experience I had, as a spiritual baptism and Finnish nirvana, the seed was planted for me to believe with some deep longing that Jesus was my husband.

That longing must be genetic. When I was seventeen my father called me in my dorm room and told me that my grandmother passed away. I lit two candles in front of an oil painting of a nun that I bought in an antiques store in downtown Duluth and wrote a letter to my grandma that I'd been meaning to get around to doing but kept getting distracted by school work. I described the trip that Andy and I made to the cathedral in neighboring St. Paul and how

impressed we were with the architecture and space of worship. The letter was a couple of notebook sheets long.

My dad sent me a plane ticket for the funeral in Detroit. It was the first time I traveled on a plane where I was old enough to remember. Most of my trips to Detroit involved sitting in the backseat of my mom's Malibu for twelve hours. But after a few two-week long summer visits with my dad and grandma, our relationship changed to phone calls and birthday cards.

At the wake, my dad urged me to walk up to the casket.

"Go ahead," he said, "say good-bye to your grandma."

I looked at the open-casket from my seat against the wall. The last time I talked to my grandma on the phone was my sixteenth birthday. She told me how my grandfather was her second husband.

"I married my first husband when I was in my early twenties," she said. "He fought in World War II and died in battle."

"I didn't know you were married more than once," I said.

"I loved my first husband more than anything," she said. "I still love him."

"How did you get over him?" I asked.

"I went into such a deep depression after his death," she said, "the doctors had to shock me just to bring me back to life."

“If you’d gone up to her casket like everyone else,” my dad said, “you would’ve seen granny in her habit.”

Last summer, my dad was visiting his kids and grandkids in Michigan for a family reunion. My sister drove him back from the airport because he was her guest and because he didn’t have a driver’s license. He racked up six DUI infractions over two decades, most of which ended with him crashing his car. He was waiting to go to court for his third DUI in seven years, considered a felony in Michigan, when his mom died. He left Detroit and selling used cars and moved to Vegas and began selling flooring.

“Habit?” I asked, “Like a nun?”

“She was a third-order lay nun before she died,” he said and laughed. “I don’t know what that makes me.”

I didn’t want to repeat the names my mom called him when she would hand the phone to me—Your worm is on the phone. Your asshole is calling. Odd choice of insults, I realize. Before their divorce, they had four kids together and were married for twelve years. She knew what that made him.

Waterworks in the 1980's

My husband, Kiran, wanted to buy the birthday girl a cheap and flashy ball from Wal-Mart since we're both graduate students on a small income, but when he told me that Nicole's party was on Waterworks drive, I put the ball back and found a gift. My son, Aditya, says Nicole, from his preschool class at the Ryan School, smells because she keeps having accidents outside of the potty. On the shelf, I saw a flashy purple pony with rainbow-colored hair and large glittering wings. I always beheaded My Little Ponies and stuffed marbles into their body cavities. But this pony was intact and even talked. It was the immaculate pony in my mind, capable of flight and fantasy. Maybe it would help Nicole make it to the potty.

We drove onto Waterworks Drive past the Big Rock, which each new kid to our neighborhood had to climb and it seemed less formidable than my child's mind rendered it. I held the pony wrapped in tissue paper in a Tinker Bell gift bag on my lap. Aditya thought Nicole would want little construction workers for her birthday, but agreed to go along with my gift idea. He secretly liked ponies and brushing my hair before bedtime. The houses were painted a pale blue, an upgrade from the dark brown of my youth. My family moved in when Waterworks was a newly built neighborhood of cookie-cutter low-income HUD homes with a fresh coat of cream colored paint on the walls and dark brown tiled kitchen floors. The road to our neighborhood was a small cul-de-sac and each home had the same A-frame sloping roofs that almost touched the ground and did touch the top of the snowbanks in the winter time. We lived at the end of the cul-de-sac (a pretty word for a dead-end circle) across from a small hill. On top of the hill was a group home, that the neighborhood kids called the retard house. It had a wooden swinging bench on the front lawn and we would rock on it with some of the clients who lived inside. One night near Halloween, one of the retards escaped from the home. My mom woke us up screaming

because a man was standing in our living room in his whitey tighties. But he seemed harmless holding our pumpkin by the stem and rubbing his hands down the ridged and fleshy grooves.

On Sundays my mom and the other neighbor women, most divorced and all single-moms would take out brooms and sweep the street which I ran and rode my bicycle on. In a small ravine behind our house I used to practice building a fall-out shelter with logs and mud to protect myself in the event of a nuclear war. I'd watched the TV movie, *The Day After*, about the Commies bombing America during the Cold War and it made an impression on me as a five-year old. The small ravine fed into a larger ravine that me and my sister, Crystal, and brother, Jesse, and the neighbor kids built sledding tracks by sliding down the steep sides on our butts in our snowsuits.

I coveted the sandbox that my neighbors, the Twins, erected next door to us. Sometimes the Twins would let me play in the sandbox with their toys, but they didn't always share with me and when they wouldn't let me use the sifter and the funnel, I picked up a handful of sand and threw it into one twin's left eye and the other's right eye at the same time. They both ran into their house crying and I jumped on my pink and white checkered bike and rode down the street to the General Store with a plastic bag on the handlebar filled with pop cans I'd collected in the woods. Each beer and pop can was worth ten cents and I only needed five to buy a pack of candy cigarettes and a three pack pouch of Lik-M-Aid which was basically a chalky candy stick I licked and dipped into multicolored bags of sugar. When the sugar was gone I ate the stick. I bragged to my classmates at Houghton Elementary that I had twenty-one cavities by the time I was nearing the end of first grade. That was more cavities than teeth in my head.

I rarely went into any of the other kids' houses. I remember going to the Heikela's house with a little girl, Jody, who I played with. Her mom was lying on the couch smoking and had all of the curtains drawn. She said she had a headache and made us go back outside to play.

My brother, Jesse, and his best friend, Darin, the McKelich boys, the Johnson boys and the Heikela boy rode BMX bikes up and down the street which never got any through-traffic. They built jumps for their bikes on the mental hill, the hill going up to the retard home. And I made sandcastles and mud pies and fitted them with dandelions in little foil pans next to their matchbox car tracks in the circle of sand and dirt in the middle of the road which was a communal playing area and less structured than the small playground next to the community mailbox. On a dare I ran through a swarm of bees next to the mailboxes and another day I found one box open. I ripped open all of the mail in the woods and found a pack of puffy stickers. I couldn't believe my luck and didn't know about federal crimes. A couple of days later my mom was complaining on the phone to my oldest brother who went to live in Detroit with my dad that she never got his letter or the stickers he sent for me and my sister. I robbed my own family. Once in a while the boys would have a competition to see who could ride the fastest and get the biggest air on the jumps. The culminating achievement was to hit one of the small sandcastles at the bottom of the jump that the Jody, the other Crystal, and I built. The moms would come out of their houses and watch the competition and cheer for the boys. My brother was the last boy to come down the hill at full speed he was getting a couple of feet off the ground on the jumps and none of the boys before him had the precision to hit the sandcastle I made. But Jesse was right on target. He hit the castle dead on and then flew over his handlebars and limped off whimpering. I'd built the castle with a large rock in the middle.

A group of the moms would get together on weekends and go out, which was code for dancing and drinking at the local bars, The Uphill and The Lodge. Sometimes my mom would check back in during the night and make sure that the boys were taking good care of us. I remember watching a dirty movie called *The Porkies* with the neighbor boys, when my mom came home. My brother and his friends saw her headlights shining in the driveway and they shut the curtains, jumped back from their spots glued to the TV and changed the channel back to the *Dukes of Hazards*. Actually I think it was something less interesting, because if the *Dukes* were really on at the same time then they would have been watching Daisy.

On nights my mom and her friend and neighbor Vicky wanted to stay out until the bars closed, they would get one babysitter and my siblings and I would go to their house. Vicky had a son, Ryan, and a younger daughter, the other Crystal. Ryan complained of bad smells for many months before his mom brought him to the doctor's office. The doctor removed a moldy piece of sponge from Ryan's nose. We were playing outside in the snow with the babysitter inside and Ryan started chasing me around the perimeter of his house with a switchblade. He was older than me and I was scared as hell when he pinned me on my back and straddled me holding the knife over my head. But I didn't die that night and just felt a rush of adrenaline.

The boys couldn't be blamed for running around with knives, stealing, and cursing. Most could name their fathers, but their dads weren't around. They stashed away hammers and nails and collected plywood and two-by-four planks of wood and built a shelter in the woods past the group home on a trail. They called it *the shack* and I think it was filled with dirty magazines and cigarettes. Anything they weren't supposed to be doing was done there. I wasn't allowed to enter and instead played in tree holes, sunken depressions in the snow around the pine trees.

Sometimes I brushed against the branches and dumped a load of snow down the back of my

snowsuit and the snow melted into icy trails, which coursed down to the plastic bread bags used as makeshift liners for my moonboots. On good days my feet smelled like cinnamon raisin bread but more often than not a hint of sourdough. A few miles into the woods, where the pines thinned out, was a trail that led to a place called Doikie's Farm, which sounded like the name for a master of all retards to me.

The Johnson boys lived across the street from us and their dad would come to visit their house. They would hide from him upstairs and when he found them, all of the neighbor kids would draw to their house like spectators to hear the screaming and the walls and doors being hit. My brother and Darin called those events, The Johnson Beatings. I didn't understand why the Johnson boys didn't just bite their dad. For some reason the Johnson boys had three rows of teeth in their mouths and Jesse and Darin would joke that they were made to eat steak. But they ate government blocks of cheese and puffed rice cereal with powdered milk just like we were eating at our house.

When I was riding my bike home from the General Store with a perpetual pink spot lit at the end of a smooth white stick dangling from my lips, I spotted a man pacing around outside on the street between my house and the Twins house in front of the sandbox. I ditched my bike at the bottom of the mental hill and ran into the woods behind the group home. I could hear him tracking me and I weaved between the pine trees and the birch and poplars. I thought I was pretty fast, but he was a grown-up. He caught me and threw me down onto the ground and got right into my face. He grabbed my cheeks in his fists and started squeezing them. His breath was hot.

“How would you like it if I threw sand in your eyes?”

“I only hit one eye.” I said.

“Smart-ass little shit,” he said.

He looked around the woods and let me go. I found out he was not the twin’s dad. No one knew where he was. The man was the twin’s uncle.

I had a lot of freedom in Waterworks. My mom always told me to go and play outside unless it was time to eat. So I did. I traipsed through the forest picking periwinkle colored little flowers called Forget-Me-Nots and looking for four leaf clovers and pots of gold. In the winter I labored and built tunnels in the snowbanks left behind by the snowplows.

My mom called me a couple of winters ago and told me to turn on the local news, TV6. There was Vicky’s kid, Ryan, all grown up and in an orange jumpsuit and shackles being led by the arm from his arraignment. He entered a plea agreement and was found guilty of possessing firearms as a felon, but he was up on charges of first-degree home invasion and felonious assault charges. His bond was a half-million dollars, since the FBI and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms were investigating him in connection to other crimes. I looked hard at Ryan on the screen. He looked like he’d lost his puppy dog. A look he practiced on his mom for ages every time he was caught lying—I swear I never stuffed a sponge up my nose. I don’t even own a knife.

Ryan’s ex-girlfriend of two weeks claimed that he went into a jealous rage after she said a business owner flirted with her and Ryan said he was going to kill the guy. He left her apartment and the day after came back and told her that he killed the guy and buried him out

front. This was one day after Quik Cash & Guns business owner, Robert Dusseau's, body was found buried in a snowbank in front of the store. But Ryan's defense attorney said his ex-girlfriend could have gathered the information about the body from the news release and that her character was questionable as she drank and used prescription drugs. I tend to believe her though, because she also said Ryan abused her and then assaulted her with a knife, see-sawing it in front of her neck and then jamming it near her mid-section. Ryan loved his knife.

After watching the news I noticed that Ryan must've friend-requested me on Facebook when I was new to the network and receiving multiple requests each day in my email and blindly accepting them all. But he was still making posts about some money pyramid schemes after he was put in jail. I don't know how he got access to a computer while awaiting his trial. I didn't want to de-friend him immediately until a few weeks had passed when I hoped my disappearance would be more discrete.

Last month, my brother Jesse, was coming down from a bout of mania he sustained for two months. I went golfing with him and Crystal's husband, Phil. The greens were fast and covered with leaves accounting for each of us adding four or more strokes while putting. We should've gone to a miniature golf putt-putt course but Jesse wanted to stop at Shute's Bar afterwards for one drink. He paid for his Blatz and I ordered a Two-Hearted Bell's and waved to a guy at the end of the bar who looked familiar. I was about to sit down.

"Hey I have something to tell you which might help you," Jesse said. "In Waterworks when I was a kid I caught the Johnson boys messing around with you in the woods and you were naked. I don't think they molested you, but they were fondling you, that sort of stuff."

I watched his fluttering hands and wondered at how much he was minimizing what he saw to protect me.

“I chased them down and beat them up.” Jesse took a swig.

I felt my eyebrows rise up and watched myself nodding. The bartender was playing scrabble with a patron, another bartender from the Michigan House a couple of stools down the bar. I’d just apologized to the patron for stiffing him on a tip earlier in the summer. I’d looked for patterns in their matrix of words. But they were cheating and playing with disregard for the rules—Seoul was on the board. I wondered if he could hear Jesse—no wonder she stiffed me.

“Crystal thought that I may’ve been molested at some point,” I said. “That would explain my promiscuous self.”

“Let’s go out and have a smoke,” Phil said.

“I just thought you should know.” Jesse said as we walked outside.

“I was like your dad,” he said. “I was ten but I had to look out for you.”

Jesse started preaching about the benefits of euphoria and mania to me as if I were an outsider.

“When I’m manic it’s like being shot with a truth serum. I can’t lie. And people like when you can tell them some small, nice, and true detail about them like just telling someone—you have a nice smile. It brightens their whole day.”

Jesse exhaled the Winston that Phil gave him. I didn't like seeing him smoke because he was a non-smoker and I worried he would become addicted. But he says cigarettes have no claim on him.

Jesse was talking with Darin, formerly a cop promoted to detective in downstate Michigan, about writing down stories of their youth in Waterworks. I told him he should write and write whatever he wanted. He could write about me. Nothing was sacred. The whole scenario with the Johnson boys remains something of a fiction to me. I don't think my brother would ever lie and make up something like that, but I simply don't remember it happening, which makes it hard to feel anything. I've blocked it out.

"Didn't the Heikela's mom off herself with a shotgun," I said thinking about Waterworks.

"I was with her kids when they found her," Jesse said and brought his finger to his temple. "Right in the head. I've seen lots of dead bodies. I've got lots of stories."

Darin told Jesse that he should title his book on Waterworks, *When Boys Were Men*. But it also reminds me of the only Robert Frost poem, "The Road Not Taken," that I had to memorize in junior high school. I'll let you recite it in your mind. And not only the obvious reference to some of the boys making the right choices and making it out of the Waterworks mindset, basically not ending up on the local news, but because the community demolished all of the woods behind Waterworks and built Houghton's only community of suburban homes, that I collectively call Shopkerville (the closest store and a more posh version of Wal-Mart). Jesse lives in a nice home with his two kids and high school sweetheart in a remaining patch of woods. It

was his wife's idea. But they don't drive through Waterworks. A neat and permanent metal roadblock was erected separating Waterworks from Shopkerville.

The birthday party balloons were tied to the outside of Jody Heikela's old house. A planter hanging in front of the entrance was overflowing with cigarette butts. But inside the house was clean and all the toys were hidden upstairs. Nicole's mom told me that it was a birthday party for Nicole's sister as well, who was in kindergarten, but that we didn't need two presents. She went into the pantry and brought the cake out and set it next to some cheese and crackers. Kraft cheese equals upward mobility. The kitchen tile was new and white, almost sterile but at least not as dark and the house was packed with little girls all wearing glittery party dresses and fairy wings. Aditya was clinging to my legs and tried to approach other little kids by waving a pack of stickers we bought him at Wal-Mart in their faces and saying, "stickers" over and over. I made my husband eventually confiscate the pack, hoping that Aditya would find a different way to connect with the kids. One of the Waterworks neighbor girls dressed in pink and black checkered leggings and a hipster hat came marching in from the sidewalk without any parents and sat down for the Hot-Potato Toss game. Aditya refused to play and was sitting on my lap while Nicole's mom pressed the music button on the stereo. The Waterworks girl tried harder than the playful fairies to win and get the prize, and not to get caught with the potato when the music stopped.

Scrubbing the Pooper

I scrubbed toilets for a living. It's not what you might think, that I cleaned the expensive homes of rich people and tackled the job of cleaning the shitter first thing to get it out of the way. It wasn't even like my first job, as a janitor in my high school with a small bathroom. No, I was a facilities maintenance crewmember in charge of the industrial cleaning of toilets in Intrawest's premier ski resort at Copper Mountain. My swing shift crew consisted primarily of men. I communicated with the Mexican workers and Brian, deaf and mute, using improvised sign language. The bathrooms in the seventeen buildings we cleaned nightly numbered close to fifty when their female and male counterparts were put together. I grimaced when I tried to tell a potential date what I did for a living. I told him, "It's not what you think. It's not just swirling a brush around a white porcelain rim and seeing the poop streaks disappear. It's really Zen."

This philosophy may have made it easier to date Brian who I could get high in silence with, and not have to explain my profession of choice to. He understood the value of having the daytime hours free without work to ride in powder. Snowboarding could be done with focus, in silence, and reverence for the elements if not a creator. I saw Brian and his roommates tearing up the thirteen-foot tall half-pipe before I started working with him. I was impressed with his abilities and not too surprised to see him on my crew, working a coveted night job with perks and free days.

Cleaning toilets was Zen in the sense of kneeling on a long marble floor and opening one maroon door after another to meet the same enemy, and I was always the victor. I stood tall with my weapon, the weapon of housewives, the toilet bowl brush, which kept me a safe distance from any rogue splashes of residual poop water. It wasn't Zen, in the sense of ego or a nice feeling of accomplishment seeing splatters of imperfection turn to shine. I knew that Brian understood about Zen and poop water without the use of notes.

I was not an image of perfection with my limp ankle and my bad back, twisted from riding the half-pipe and hucking myself off of the terrain park jumps. But cleaning toilets enabled me to wrack my body on the slopes each day and create snow-white shine each crappy night. Toilet stalls were an austere place for anyone, no matter how posh the ski company, Intrawest, tried to make its bathrooms seem with only an absent attendant as a tip-off that it was still substandard.

For me, cleaning the 585th toilet of the night was a little like enlightenment. It must've been in the poop. The urinals didn't evoke this same feeling. They were sullied with the rank smell of urine and frequently had gum and foil wrappers at the base. It might be that I had to make personal contact with the rubber mats with my fingers covered nicely with latex. The urinals didn't have their own identity. They were reliant on the wall, dependent on it, smashed up with a little lip to their defiance, a little bulge where the pipe lets the pee drain down to the sewer, and so naked.

Brian looked naked when we went riding and he had to wear mittens over his hands which he used to speak. His hands became talking hands in my mind and the chairlift was filled

with silence when he covered them with mittens. When we got off the chairlift he led me to a roped off and out of bounds section of the ski run. We ducked under the orange rope and carved out fresh tracks in virgin powder around pine trees. I hit a stump and face-planted in the snow, then went over in a cartwheel with my snowboard flipping over the rest of my body. Brain tried to laugh but all that I heard was a small peep that reminded me of a chipmunk squeaking.

The urinals lacked the protection, the sacred holy fluid of all life, water. Sure, water could make its way down in a waterfall fashion down the backside, but only with force, and what was there to marvel at in the way of the eyes behind the hand, behind the flusher? Nothing, no astonishment, no naming of great feats. In Europe, a urinal was designed that eliminates backsplash, but wasn't used in America because it looked too much like a vagina. Urinals were also designed for the pure enjoyment of only one sex.

Brian shared a room with two deaf and mute roommates. This didn't mean they were blind, yet he wanted to have sex on the floor of his bedroom in their apartment. The next morning, the three of them communicated fast with their hands. I had no idea what they were saying and just hoped it wasn't derogatory. I assumed his roommates would sleep through us having sex since they couldn't hear us. I don't think cell phones with video cameras were available yet.

No, this was not Zen, the urinals, nor the feminine product boxes. I didn't realize that the female species was such a vile creature. And only a thin layer of latex separated me from this bloody mess! And such a foul smell came from these tidy boxes even when skiers placed pads in the bag properly. I held the bag at an arm's length. This was why the cleaning of the boxes was done entirely separate from the rather divine cleaning of the bowls. I never imagined that a week-old maxi pad turned black. I usually dumped the pads before they turned black and full tampons even! Tampons in the box! No tampon should've ever found its way into the box instead of down the toilet. But yes, I had an injury to my left ankle, a sprain that wouldn't heal and I was out of commission for a week and some other mongrel took over my duties and not being as diligent to these finer details left little surprises for me. He emptied the bags all right, he knew there would be hell to pay if I came back to find the bags had not been disposed of properly, but he didn't track down the strays. The pads and tampons stuck outside of the bag and on the bottom of the metal box.

Brian listened to techno music in his van that was so loud and garbled he could feel the vibrations. I hoped that no tourists outside of the van could hear the thumping bass as we went through the A&W drive-through on our first date. I let a lot of things slide, like bringing me to a fast-food joint, since he was deaf and mute. I assumed the deaf and mute community was a whole other culture with different expectations and norms. Brian was ten years older than me and divorced. So I guess being deaf and mute wasn't all sunshine and rainbows. Who would think that except for me?

It was Zen in the way of having no mind.

Yes, zero mind.

It took no thought, only a smooth rotation around the rim, under the lip, and a gentle dip into the water and back up. It was good to get the water flowing in a circle. All of this happened in stages for me. I entered each stall first equipped with the sprayer, filled with a noxious chemical pumped directly from tubes connected to industrial vats of green liquid in our closets. I found it most efficient (efficiency is part of Zen) to avoid the least thought in a disruption of routine, to spray all of the demigods, in the building we were cleaning one at a time, in order. Opening of the stall doors created a slight disturbance but I witnessed progress and floated high above the toilets.

Brian showed his love by stealing a cherry red Solomon snowboard for me that was left behind in the ski chalet one night. We thought it belonged to a tourist. He decided to keep the snowboard at his place in case anyone came looking for it at my apartment. It was a women's model and 155 cm. No one would suspect him.

I was not the only one in bliss. My coworker, Greg, whistled and sang old Elvis songs while cleaning the mirrors and the sinks. Mirrors require someone experienced with streaking, water spots, and the ability to avoid looking at his own reflection in vain. It was hard not to condemn or give praise to my image. Especially in action. I never saw my reflection in one of my sparkling toilets. I believed that was a myth.

Brian became pissed off when I started talking again with our coworkers. He wrote me another note. *You need to learn sign language.* He sulked with his vacuum backpack and ran over the same spot of cranberry juice on the carpet multiple times in one night. He threw his empty bottle of cleaning solution into the mop bucket in one of our maintenance closets rather than refilling it. At the end of our shift we sat at a bar and Greg hopped over the counter and poured cocktail drinks for the crew. A keg was usually tapped in the kitchen for one function or another and there was always the bar taps. Brian dipped his finger from the grease in the crease of his nose and spun it around on the head of his wheat beer. He motor mouthed his lips and looked out at the darkened ski hill, while Greg and our co-worker, Brandon, told each other stories about long bike trips and skiing in Vermont.

It was another myth, when someone said you shouldn't waste your time cleaning something that was already clean. That was not protocol. Appearances were deceiving and I know that there was the element of the invisible at work in one of the innocent toilets. Intrawest has so outdone itself, that it appeared some of the toilets, during the slow season, had not even been used, of course this was pure speculation, but after a while I'd learned to get a feel for presence in a stall, whether someone had been there since I was last there. This wasn't whether the seat was warm, or whether the box was empty, in the women's bathroom, nothing that superficial. It was more whether my thoughts had kept the toilet company through the noisy barrage of passers-by who chose not to select it, one of many, over the others. Tenderness came

between us when I brought my brush. And I always brushed. It was a token of respect for the toilet bowl's curves and strength.

Our boss confronted Brian and me about the Solomon board. It belonged to a ski school instructor. We both denied taking it with as few words as possible. Our co-workers, Greg and Brandon, covered for us as well and started making me laugh again. It felt good to talk.

Yet, sometimes this strength fails a toilet and I found it in despair, one that was recklessly flushed and was brimming with toilet paper, long soaked in its holy water. It was nothing a plunger couldn't fix, most times, but even the plunger failed on one toilet. Being a woman of my word and pay, I set out to investigate. Lifting the toilet tank's lid, something I swore I would never do, I found the chain broken in two, swaying helpless, the small metal balls looked magnified and calling for urgent repair. My foreman was home smoking pot, waiting for us to finish cleaning, so he could clock us all out at the end of our shifts. He couldn't be bothered with such trivial affairs; he was doing us all a big favor. My latex gloves only came to the wrist. My arms were bare and exposed when I plunged my arm into the tank water. I fished a twist tie from my pocket of trash I'd picked up while vacuuming the main dining hall and neatly tied the chain between two links with the twist tie.

Brian left our crew, but not because of any one thing, not because of muted laughter vibrating in our work van. I thought his silence was heroic and meditative. I was content to be

with him in silence but he was irritated and felt ignored I assume, though he didn't tell me that. We couldn't communicate except by writing on paper, little notes back and forth. I didn't mind. I exalted our relationship to something deeper that transcended communication. Maybe he viewed it as empty sex and wanted to get to know me better.

My Personal Savior was David Foster Wallace

Missy, a Columbia University drop-out I met while working at Sol Duc Hot Springs in Washington's Olympic National Forest, and I took turns driving a U-Haul truck and reading stories from David Foster Wallace's book of shorts, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. That was how Missy introduced me to his work, on highways stretching from Colorado to Pennsylvania. David Foster Wallace and his mother took turns reading a Dean R. Koontz novel while driving a U-Haul truck sixteen-hundred-miles home to Urbana, Illinois after David had thoughts of harming himself.

Within and between the lines of Missy's reading the short stories, a crack formed, a fissure of insight into the male psyche. I'm sifting through the book now and cannot find the exact words, the exact lines that did it. I don't even know how I ended up trying to sleep in the back of the U-Haul , but I did and that's where I found the private space to finally forgive God and my father for abandoning our family when I was two years old in Hawaii, where I was born. My mom tells it like this: that Pope John Paul II was shot and my father got up and left the house to go on a jog. He didn't come back until three weeks later when my mom was having a moving sale.

"What's this?" he asked. "You're selling my stereo?"

There were other stories. My mom told her psychiatrist, Dr. X, at the time how my dad fixed the brakes on the family car and shortly after, the brakes failed while she was driving my three siblings and me home from the grocery store. It could have been a coincidence but then she showed the psychiatrist the prescription medicine my father was giving her.

“This medicine is very old,” Dr. X said. “You’re not being paranoid. Tell me. How is your marriage?”

Dr. X promised to look into things further. The next day, Dr. X, was riding his bike and was hit by a car. He broke his neck and died instantly. This is the way my mom tells it.

My mom couldn’t pay the rent and her grandma offered to buy plane tickets for our family on the condition that my mom would return home to the U.P. of Michigan. She left my dad after twelve years of marriage. My oldest brother Stacy moved to Detroit after jumping out of my mom’s Malibu while she was driving and went to live with my dad and his mom.

Since we’ve grown up and started having children of our own, we try to get together for a week-long family reunion in the summer. This summer my brother Jesse was not sleeping during the reunion at a log cabin on the shores of Lake Superior. My dad always wanted to be a rock star and was the lead vocalist in a band called the Animal Facts of Life when he and my mom began dating and during the early years of their marriage. He slid his wedding ring off during performances for the sake of the band’s image. The Animals did a lot of Beatles covers. He told Jesse on the porch of the reunion log cabin that a man gave him a demo tape to put lyrics to. The music on the demo was running backwards and my dad went into the basement of his and my mom’s farm house in Oshkosh, Wisconsin and recorded his lyrics to the tape called, A Season in Hell. My mom was upstairs, listening to him and hiding behind the couch with her infant, Stacy. I don’t think my dad realized that Rimbaud already had claims to his original title and even the farmhouse motif. My dad told Jesse that he was offered a contract, but turned it down when his music mentor listened to the tape and told him that he would end up all dressed in black and worshipped by fans as the devil.

Jesse started thinking that this was the source of all our family's problems and the beginning of his next break from reality. But really its bananas and I imagine the music was reminiscent of the Beatles White Album.

I have a decent relationship with my father, as much as one could expect, but I think in the process of reading David Foster Wallace's short stories, something opened up for me, the realization that I had only paid lip service to the idea of forgiveness for what I viewed as abandonment. That I could say the words, "I forgive you," but I didn't really know what that meant. I cleared away a circle of moving boxes and decided to pray in a traditional manner. I got on my knees and put my elbows on a box labeled *dishes* and asked for forgiveness to enter my heart. It worked and almost seemed too easy, like a girl attaining zero mind on her first attempt at meditation.

I felt renewed for another long day of driving in the morning when Missy opened the large sliding door. She said she got a slight crick in her neck, sleeping in the cab. Missy gave me a pair of her orange yogi pants and I was wearing an orange shirt from a trance festival with a large triangle with circles at the apexes and numerous patches on the sleeves. I felt I was a walking advertisement for divinity and the trinity and possibly Crush soda.

We continued driving and reading into the next day. Missy bought a tape recorder and decided in the U-Haul to record our conversations from reading DFW's work. She pulled out the map and told me that the author worked as a professor at Illinois State University and we could get there by a slight detour. I'm looking at the book of short stories on my couch, dubbed couch UTEP since I complete all of my online studies for the University of Texas at El Paso

from my laptop on the loveseat, and it doesn't say anywhere on the front or back cover about which university he worked at. This must have been previous knowledge on Missy's part. I wonder how long and how obsessed she was with David. I agreed to everything and noticed when she played back the tape of our conversation, how little I actually spoke. At least Missy didn't play the tape backwards.

That night we pulled over in another parking lot and both of us tried to sleep in the cab sitting with our heads leaning against the windows. Missy went to sleep right away and I sat thinking and then started rocking, crying, and laughing by myself. Something was going on in my head. Truth and lies divided my mind against itself. I felt trapped between enlightenment and being hunted, between beauty and ugliness. My rocking became fiercer. I pulled out a notebook I carried everywhere with me and started to journal every thought that crossed my mind, no matter how confusing or nonsensical the thoughts seemed. That notebook sits in my basement somewhere and was barely decipherable the last time I read it. But it stands as proof that I was able to write my way out of madness for one night. Missy awoke in the morning and took one look at me. My eyes were red and puffy and I was still laughing and crying at the same time in a state of mixed emotion. She started to drive east again. I don't know if it was her or my suggestion, but Missy began to sing old church choir songs. She hit all of the notes with pristine clarity and to my untrained ear had an angelic voice and it rewired something in my head. I began to calm down and ease out of the dark confusion that I was drowning in.

Missy pulled into a parking lot on campus. We wandered around the campus for a little while. I don't remember why we didn't go to his office, if we couldn't find it, or if we did find it and he just wasn't there. I only remember that we settled on transcribing our tape recording into one long email that Missy sent to him from my Yahoo account and at the end she described one

of us as being dressed entirely in orange. *Who do you think she is?* She wrote. I pretended to understand the significance of this question. Missy was beautiful. Beautiful and crazy.

Stalking DFW was her idea and somehow I became the lackey and went along with everything. Was she trying to say that I looked like an escaped convict or a swami? It didn't really matter. I only knew that my name was all over a convoluted email that was multiple pages long which he probably never read and threw in a spam folder.

We continued our trip to Missy's home in the suburbs of Philadelphia. Missy visited in the kitchen with her parents while I tried to teach her six-year old sister, Ann, some yoga poses in the front room. Strewn doll bodies in grotesque positions littered the bathtub in the downstairs bathroom, and I thought that it was a type of therapy reenactment. I finally popped an antipsychotic pill called Risperdal into my mouth, which in those days I used to carry in case of an emergency. I don't know why I didn't take one earlier? I guess I wanted to make it on my own.

In the kitchen Missy's parents were arguing. Her dad was saying, "She's sick and needs to get help." I walked into the kitchen and sat down at the dining room table. Missy's mom sat down next to me and started holding delicate and thin tree leaves up to the kitchen light. On each were images of saints burned into the leaves. I have no idea where these came from.

Missy's dad worked for Amtrak and the family had rail passes. Missy gave me a pass that identified me as her older sister and she brought me to the 30th Street Station so that I could ride the train back out west and meet up with a few friends driving my Subaru to Albuquerque and then going to the San Francisco Hot Springs in the Gila Wilderness. I was still delusional and pondering which angel depicted in the bronze statue by the windows was holding and bringing

the dead young soldier's body out of the flames of war? I heard the loudspeakers call me by my nickname over the PA system in a cheap imitation of John Wayne's voice, *Howdy Twiggy! Get ready to saddle up.* I sat with my notebook and described the architecture and floors of the station in detail.

I was searching for David Foster Wallace online last year. A little bit of the stalker left in me and a deep appreciation for a few of his other works which I've been reading over the years and passing along to friends—*Oblivion*, *The Girl With Curious Hair*, and *Infinite Jest*. So I'm going to tell the truth about the hype of *Infinite Jest*. I started the book on three separate occasions and kept rereading about the first one hundred of the one thousand coffee-stained pages. In the Notes and Errata section I traced my fingers over the entry: "*The Man Who Began to Suspect He Was Made of Glass...* A man undergoing intensive psychotherapy discovers that he is brittle, hollow, and transparent to others, and becomes either transcendently enlightened or schizophrenic."

I came across a fan page on Facebook, a RIP page for the author. There he was smiling with his burn-out long hair and bandana. A bunch of crazy kids were referring to him like they knew him, DFW this and that. I checked other web pages and there was the truth. He'd hanged himself six months earlier and no one had told me.

For the first time I understood grieving for an icon, a stranger, a man who forced me on my knees to pray in the most unlikely of ways, by just writing the truth. Part of me swung from the rafters along with him. My hair drenched from the Pacific Ocean in November, my skin salty and stinging, having never dried from my suicide attempt when I was eighteen. Even though I never considered flailing far out in the frigid water as trying to commit suicide, I just wanted to

overcome my fears of death and meet Jesus by drowning at the Lost Coast in Northern California.

I scrolled down the Wikipedia website dedicated to his memory. It said he suffered from depression... no surprise there. It said the anti-depressant medications helped him to live longer than he maybe would have... questionable. It said he received electroconvulsive shock therapy... shocking.

I could have saved him. I could have loved him alive. We, those that love a suicide, all think. Every part of me that fights to hold onto my life and my sanity mourned him and mourned myself, all the pieces of my character that slipped away with the seaweed.

I ended the first draft of this piece on the above image. I read an article about Wallace in *The New Yorker* by D.T. Max after I drafted this and the following involves a fair amount of cherry-picking. The article describes a character, Lane Dean, from Wallace's final and incomplete novel, *The Pale King*. In the novel a group of employees struggle with boredom and in its description strikes me as reminiscent of the tediousness and boredom of Kafka's *The Trial* and *The Castle*. Lane Dean, an IRS employee tries to envision a sunny beach but instead it becomes a gray expanse covered with "dead kelp like the hair of the drowned." I felt an immediate connection again like I am more like the main character Lenore Beadsman from his first novel, *The Broom of the System*, but also like a janitor trying to clean the mess of his impact on me, and a little like a linguistic construct.

Wallace had a solid background in Math and Philosophy, even studying Philosophy as a grad student at Harvard. He hid anxiety attacks in high school by carrying a tennis racket and a towel to wipe away his perspiration. In high school, I got a hall pass during every class to dry my

armpits of nervous sweat with the blow dryer meant for wet hands in the bathroom. Max writes that after Wallace's mid-life crisis when he was about twenty and decided to switch into writing from Philosophy, he became a school-bus driver. I don't know if he was still smoking pot and drinking at this time. He tried to commit suicide with pills and then had ECT at a psych ward in Urbana and "emerged like a child" according to his mom. He was prescribed the antidepressant Nardil and took three pills a day for twenty-two years. The warning for users of Nardil on Nardil's website states that thoughts of suicide and suicide attempts may increase anytime the dose is increased or decreased. Alcohol can make the suicidal tendencies worse.

In the spring of 2007, Wallace stopped taking Nardil, a dirty old drug by new pharmacological standards. He hoped that he would be able to write with more clarity as a changed man. The Pale King became a synonym for his depression according to Max and Wallace again tried to overdose with pills. Another twelve sessions of ECT in the fall didn't work. Wallace wrote a metafictional preface (although he'd probably hate having anything of his referred to that titty-pinching genre) to *The Pale King* writing that IRS agent David Foster Wallace was given a new Social Security Number to go along with his fiction rebirth, Wallace. On 9/12 in 2008, maybe the construct Wallace was the one who swayed over the patio and was captured by the Pynchon-like named institution, the University of Texas's Harry Ransom Center, and DFW is safe and writing works that he hoped would make "readers see what it's like to slowly die on the page and what it means to be fucking human."

As much as I've idolized DFW over the years as a genius working with fiction, I've also grown apart from his cynicism. I moved past having only the responsibility of owning a dog, which many dog lovers swear is the same as having kids, and had two children. Listening to the 2005 commencement addresses of Steve Jobs at Stanford University and David Foster Wallace

at Kenyon College I realized they both took risks in exposing their lives, one with personal stories and one with his lonely thoughts. I was moved by both, but I think more so by Job's speech, which did exactly what DFW didn't want to do, give cliché advice as an old wise fish. I grieved for Steve Jobs as a parent and as a child. I'm learning how to be human.

Garden of Time

I'm on my hands and knees clutching a hand rake and bawling in the garden of a trophy home, an expensive second home that the owner only visits two weeks out of the year. My landscaping co-worker, Maria, has a gold front tooth which catches the sunlight. She tries to ask me, *What is wrong?* She speaks Spanish. I speak English. I drop my rake and look around me at the hungry smoke licking the edges of the aspens and pines. The mountain village peaks are all shrouded in smoke. We need to leave this box canyon. The Colorado drought turns the grasses into tinder. It's about to start burning. I balance on my right foot and stretch my left one back at a ninety degree angle and line my spine up with that leg on the same plane. I stretch out over the garden with both arms straight out at my side, like wings of a plane. I look at my shadow. There is no way she will mistake what I am saying. But she does. I don't know how to run or speak. I'm reverting to body language, my synapses misfiring. She keeps raking the dead and decayed plants in the bed; she pulls a weed every now and then. I transition into a tree position. My shadow makes the shape of one half of a bell. *I love you, I love you, I love you. I think you know by now. I'll get to you somehow.*

Left Behind in Telluride

When I was homeless and before I knocked one of my front teeth into a purple shaded hue, I fell for a male model named Michelangelo. It was his real name, unlike so many of my friends that came from the Rainbow Family and had renamed themselves with alibi names like Grasshopper, Windspirit, and Justice. He had two brothers named Romeo and Leonardo and a mom, Emily, who though lovely in appearance would huddle her grown children around her and watch apocalyptic revelations propaganda films like, *Left Behind*. She was living in the basement apartment of the local Rainbow and Pentecostal church in Telluride, Colorado called the Bread of Life where I also think Leonardo would crash at night with her and his stepfather. Michelangelo would become really passionate after watching that film, distraught that so many people would be left behind and have to live through times of tribulation. I tried to tell him that I didn't believe in the Rapture anymore, that my own mom had brainwashed me with Jehovah Witness teachings and magazines like *The Watchtower* and *The Plain Truth* when I was a child. I believed so earnestly in the second coming of Jesus and the antichrist that I would go to school and warn my peers not to take the mark of the beast. I interpreted it to be a tattoo of some kind that would allow people to buy food and goods but would also show their allegiance. In junior high, I preached about how he would appear as a peace-maker but then would force people to take his mark, and be loyal to him or they would perish. My belief system became a poison when I believed too hard in waiting for the second coming of Christ, waiting for the end of suffering.

Michelangelo was half Native American and his father was in prison in Arizona. He and his siblings all had different fathers and he seemed to hang onto the belief that his mother had loved his father the best of them all. Michelangelo had just returned from a relationship with a blonde pothead in Israel which went south. She'd dumped him.

On the plus side of their affair, we listened to Israeli trance music on a little cassette tape which he brought back with him and played each night before bed in our shack, one in a system of shacks called woodsies, built illegally in the National Forest surrounding Telluride. Ours, about a forty minute hike into the Bear Creek Preserve, was one of the older shacks, nicknamed the Swiss Family Robinson woodsy. I moved into the woodsy after my tent was tagged by the national forest rangers for camping illegally in the Preserve, which was a bit of a relief from sleeping with my utility knife under my stuff sack of clothes each night. I kept the blade readied for protection from another man named Shannon, a.k.a. Eagle, living in a woodsy close to my tent. Shannon was an older man with a temper and his speech sometimes slipped off into nonsense.

Michelangelo worked for a moving company and I worked for a landscaping company in the daytime. I finished work each day and took refuge behind the beaver pond and went through my hour-long yoga routine. I read from a little book I'd picked up at the library called *Yoga Gems*. A couple of entries per day during lunch breaks at work focused my mind. After doing head stands against birch trees, I sauntered into town and found Michelangelo and our group of friends hanging out or having break dance competitions at Elks Park, The Steaming Bean, or La Cocina.

Norman, a gay man from Canada who favored long flowing hippy skirts, lived alone in the Ghost Shack, on the shady side of town tucked into the pines off a ski run leading to chairlift seven. Ishti, a young Hungarian with a hunger for any kind of joint lived with Shannon in a shack on the way to ours called the Condo. It had two beds, one up in a loft. I also lived in the Condo with a boy named Jonathan when I first moved to town. On the wall was a Widespread Panic poster of a chicken and a snake cuddled up together. I saw myself as the chicken. Norman,

Ishti, Shannon, Michelangelo, Leonardo, and I would get together and cook rice, beans and veggies at one of the shacks many nights, play the drums, smoke a joint, and relax in the box canyon listening to the drifting noises of the merry makers in the distant town below that somehow always sounded like a baseball game. It was rare for us even to drink wine and we were all in agreement on trying to live a pure and natural life.

Michelangelo was training for a long bicycle trip from Colorado to Maine in the summer, so that he could arrive in time for the blueberry picking season in August. I wanted to go with him. I was used to sharing a bed each night and was feeling addicted to his pheromones. We didn't have sex, not once. He felt that we would be cheating on our future husband and wife if we were to have premarital sex. This was a new revelation of his and sprung from his heartbreak over Tricia, the girl in Israel. In *The Watchtower* magazine left behind by a Jehovah witness couple who have found my home once again, it quotes Proverbs 5:8, urging young men to shun fornication, "that you may not give to others your dignity," and that the magazine interprets it as, "those who engage in premarital sex sacrifice a degree of their character, integrity, and self-respect." Michelangelo said that he didn't think I should join him on his trip.

"I'm afraid we'll start dating," Michelangelo said.

"You're so vain," I said. "You can't handle the thought of being with someone who isn't model material." I fingered the zipper on my sleeping bag.

He moved one of those cheap candles with a picture of St. Jude on it that you can buy at grocery stores away from his face and in front of mine. In the dark of the shack with only a candle for light, I talked with bitterness into dark space and he had only the hurt of my face to look at.

“It’s not as if I want to bike all the way to Maine so that I can hump you,” I said. “I wanted to go on a long bike trip before I even met you and I should be the one afraid of dating someone so shallow that he’s actually banking on his dark hair and chiseled nose.”

He said nothing. I was reminded of my sister and her boyfriend at the time, how they always talked about, “dating someone in your own league,” and how they felt that they were in the same category in terms of looks. I didn’t think that love boiled down to a point system of physical attributes. They never met Michelangelo.

The next day as a consolation for the mean things I had projected onto him, I tried to give him a small hand pump for his bicycle trip. It was a pump I had bought for myself. I also couldn’t hide a little pleasure that it would pump a lot of hot air into his tires.

“You think you can just give me a gift and everything will be all right,” he said.

I held it out towards him with an outstretched arm on the sidewalk in front of the Sheridan Bar and the tofu dog stand. Our crew of friends was around us and looking to score a dime bag.

“Hug and make-up,” Norman said.

“It’s not that simple,” Michelangelo said.

“Accept the gift and forgive her,” Norman said.

Michelangelo took the pump and I never mentioned riding with him again. We resumed bumming around together every evening, weekends and sleeping together every night. Michelangelo misplaced his glasses and I showed him how I frequently turned off my headlamp and walked the trail in the dark by touch and shadows. When we met, I even walked into the

Bread of Life church and took a seat not long after we smoked a joint with our friend, Sean, in his attic surrounded by short-wave ham radios. Michelangelo sat down next to me in church and when the orchestrators raised a large screen with words for all of us to sing along to the guitar with, I tried to sing and I have a loud and distinctive voice. The singing devolved into crying. It was either the crying or that I wasn't wearing a bra and had a thin shirt on that drew him to me in the first place.

I went to the church every Sunday while I was living in the Swiss Family Robinson woodsy and so did the rest of our gang except Norman. He always waited in one of his bohemian skirts for the rest of us to get out of church on Sundays. He would stand on the sidewalk next to the freebox, a box overflowing with charitable give-away items sometimes as nice as Gore-Tex ski pants or legend had it the keys to a free car. The woodsy population hovered around it hoping to make a nice score and on rainy nights I sometimes found a person curled up in one of the boxes labeled *books*, hidden underneath a pile of crumpled clothes. Norman gave the best hugs, long and hard. I always felt safe in his arms. I don't know how Michelangelo and Leonardo truly felt about him though. A gay man who would be left behind at the time of the Rapture? Did they feign to their mom that they were trying to save all of us? Was Norman in love with Michelangelo's beauty as well?

One Sunday, Michelangelo was not in church so I hiked upstream Bear Creek to our shack. I don't remember where I was the night before that I didn't wake up with him. I was on another celibacy stint so I know I wasn't knocking boots with anyone. I opened the door to our dank one room existence and there he was sprawled atop the blanket on the mattress completely naked. I came in just letting the door open enough to allow me to enter. He asked me to lie down and take off my shirt. The moment I had been waiting for. He rubbed his hands together with oil

and kneaded into my back with firm pressure. Then he started in on my calves and moved up to my thighs. I was wearing a freebox skirt, something I started doing on Sundays only. Otherwise I lived in my Carhartt workpants. I sat up after the oil he spread on my back started to dry and his eyes were watering,

“I just want to fuck you right now,” he said.

I hugged him instead, happy for his desire and disappointed in his value system.

In the newspaper there was an aerial shot of the numerous fires burning in Colorado in the summer of 2002. The configuration of the fires made a perfect circle. Telluride was within that ring and not immune to the drought plaguing the region. Smoke clouds hedged in on the box canyon and I kept imagining there would be nowhere to run if a forest fire started near our home. I imagined burning in the Swiss Family bed with Michelangelo.

I all but ran to work in the morning and on the side of the more heavily trafficked trail of the Bear Creek Preserve a group of red rocks were piled in a rising pinnacle. Atop the final stone rested a silver ring with an opal in it and two silver hearts etched in either side. A necklace, carefully woven thick and entirely with dandelions from the valley floor, was draped around the rocks. I stopped in my tracks and slid the ring on my finger. My heart picked up faster than it was already beating. I held my palm to my chest and then imagined someone with an early morning routine of jogging up the same path, jogging past an empty rock pinnacle, her beloved asking at their apartment or home, “Did you find something along the side of the trail?” I placed the ring back on the rock and let the clouds of smoke lick closer to the treetops surrounding Bear Creek in the box canyon.

There was a ban on fires in the entire state. When I came up the path to the Swiss Family to go to bed for another night I saw a patch of smoke curling up from between the large rocks in front of the cabin and heard drumming. I stopped. Michelangelo, Leonardo and their mom were all sitting around a fire and their mom was throwing books into it. I noticed the cover of one had a pentagram on it. Many of the kids who lived in the woods had a strong religious persuasion one way or another. Little statues of Ganesh, Buddha and Shiva littered old campsites and one girl my age, also named Emily, professed openly that her mom was a witch as well as herself. Emily frequently lied. She said she knew my previous roommates, Kenny and Michael, who crawled out of the Redwoods in California to live with me in my one bedroom apartment. While I noticed some of the darker literature on the bookshelf of the cabin, I chose not to read it, but not to start burning it either. I felt that Michelangelo's mom was doing more than breaking the fire ban, that she was waging a war with dark forces, a strong undercurrent in the pagan-loving celebrity ski town. I had lived among the woodsy kids for four years and this family was relatively new to the town.

Was I a beacon of temptation and wickedness to this family? I hoped I was more than that.

I couldn't let Michelangelo just leave on his bicycle. Ishti and Shannon were traveling on a Greyhound bus to the Rainbow Gathering for the Fourth of July celebration. The Rainbow Gathering is in a different national forest each year. That year it was taking place in Upper Michigan, three hours south of the hometown where I grew up and where my mom still lived. Ishti and Shannon said that I could live in the woodsy called the Condo, much closer and more convenient to the town and work. Michelangelo was planning to meet them at the Gathering on his journey to Maine.

I packed up my backpack. The cosmopolitans, columbines, bleeding hearts and pansies were wilting in the trophy home gardens. I had a black thumb.

Michelangelo and Leonardo drove us an hour to the bus station in Montrose, along with another hobo who went by the name Bilbo Baggins from the Lord of the Rings series. Baggins brought us to a large tunnel that he turned into a home with a door, windows, and carpeting under a bridge outside of Glenwood Springs.

When we arrived in Glenwood Springs, Shannon started sweating profusely and disappeared to some local caves that he said he knew about. Ishti and I went to the local and free hot springs down by the river and smoked a joint. The next day I picked up a newspaper. There was a murder in the Wal-Mart parking lot the previous night when we arrived. I showed the paper to Ishti. "Do you think he did it?" I asked.

"He could have," Ishti said. "You know Shannon. We have to watch him."

We vowed together to not let Shannon out of our sight for the rest of the trip. We would protect the general populace from him by surrounding him with love and friendship. Hippy dippy sort of shit.

On Father's Day, the three of us were walking from the hostel we were still staying in to a park for a transient's picnic. Shannon started to yell at me.

"Michelangelo and Leonardo thought you were a bitch, too," Shannon said.

He pushed me down on the sidewalk. That's when Ishti spotted a Good Shepherd Church across the street. One good thing about Shannon is that he was pretty willing to go to church, but I never fully understood his motives. We listened briefly to the sermon, much more formal than

the Bread of Life's relaxed atmosphere and then we got in line for the wafer and grape juice. It was the first time I ever took the body of Christ onto my tongue and when the preacher said, "His body broken for you," I broke down bawling.

Then I bought a brand-new road bike with the money I had saved working as a landscaper. I guess when Christ is pumping through your veins the first thought is to jump on a bike? I chained it up outside of the hostel and we took the bus to Madison, Wisconsin.

On the bus we met a couple of guys also headed for the Gathering. I only remember one's name, Bee. They helped us find places to stay in Madison and when we got to the actual gathering and I set my tent up near the Bread of Life camp, Bee asked if he could share my tent. I couldn't deny him shelter and he was nice enough and in no way seemed to be hitting on me. I was such a saint.

I traveled home and brought my mom back with me to the Church's tent, but knowing she wouldn't stay too long without functioning toilets.

On the third of July, Michelangelo showed up at the Bread of Life tent. He looked skinnier and a little road worn, less the usual icon of strength and beauty. He rode as fast as he could, an average of one hundred miles a day, and napped during high noon hours. He blew a tire about one hundred miles south of the gathering and a van of kids picked him up. They tied his bike to the roof and the wind blew it off on their journey. He said the wheels were all warped but it was still in one piece. He gave a side glance at Bee when he saw him crawling out of my tent.

"He needed a place to stay," I said.

I was so excited for Michelangelo to meet my mom, since I knew his entire family.

“Hi,” he said. He barely raised his hand.

“Michelangelo is a nice name,” my mom said. “Michelle’s told me a lot about you.”

His eyes wandered over the camp and the tents. I imagined he was looking for the girl with the long red hair who sang at the campfire the night before and traveled abroad as a missionary. He wasn’t interested in talking to my mom. She’d lost her youthful beauty to a crown of white hair. She wanted me to come home with her to Upper Michigan and stay where she could keep tabs on me but I told her that I wanted to return to Colorado and try to get my job back in the gardens.

I spent the morning at the Muddy Waters tent with Michelangelo having coffee. He sat on a log in silence stirring his coffee with honey and glanced at my filled backpack next to me. I heaved the fifty-two hundred cubic inches of camping gear onto my shoulders and walked away with a cardboard sign on my back written in black sharpie marker—west.

I decided Michelangelo wasn’t going to leave me. It wasn’t the Rapture, but I was going to be the one to disappear.

I left the forty thousand people that made the forest into a city behind me. The last camp was A-camp, an abbreviation for the alcohol camp in the parking lot where the cars and punk-rockers who liked to drink stayed. At the edge of A-camp where the dirt road started, I ran into an old white man with a guitar, wearing a sombrero with a sign around his neck that read, *Will sing for cookies*. I recognized him from the streets of Olympia, Washington where I started taking classes at Evergreen State College the previous fall. He saw the sign on my back.

“I’m going home to Washington through the north,” he said. “Where are you headed?”

“Telluride, Colorado,” I said.

From Michigan to Montana I remember little more than eating bags of cherries and spitting the seeds out the window of his small yellow car. The make reminded me of one of my first cars, a Chevette that had a hole in the passenger side floor and couldn’t go above forty without smoking. By the time we reached Montana, he offered to buy me a bus ticket to get back to Colorado, so that I wouldn’t have to stand on the side of the road for the rest of the way. I let him buy me the ticket.

On the bus I met a man who was living on the Navajo Reservation north of Flagstaff, Arizona in the Big Mountain Area where the Dineh and Hopi people were fighting Peabody Coal Mining Company for their land.

“There’s spiritual warfare going on down there, man,” the man said. “I don’t know who is worse—the Peabody people or the Hopi.”

“I always wanted to volunteer as an activist there,” I said. “I even went with my friend Sara on a long road trip to the Rez but the Indians there sent us to the Peabody plant when we asked to see Big Mountain.”

“You don’t want to go to Big Mountain,” he said. “Look, all I can eat now are salads and veggies. I can’t even eat meat anymore.”

I didn’t understand how his diet was affected by a spiritual war. Or why anyone would want to force him to eat his greens, which seemed like a good thing to me. We talked until the next stop and then I changed seats after a smoke break.

In Idaho the bus broke down. I was sitting on the sidewalk and a man wearing some type of snakeskin shit-kickers came up to me.

“You know why we’re here don’t you?” he said.

“No,” I said, “I think the bus is broken.”

“It’s this,” he said and pushed his finger into my chest.

“It’s an M.C. Escher picture,” I said.

I couldn’t remember the name of the large black and white picture of an eye where the pupil turned into a skull, but I remembered the artist. The man looked from the print up to the sky and back at me. He seemed pissed and not able to have a complete conversation, everything was devolving into symbols and ciphers to him, a state I recognized. But I had been there and it was best to just listen and make my own amusements in such circumstances.

“Have you read Zecharia Sitchin?” he asked.

“Yeah the twelfth planet,” I said. “But why does everyone on the road keep referring me to the Earth Chronicle series.”

“Then you know what this is,” he said and pointed up to the sky again.

I could only imagine that he was somehow connecting our bus stopping to the image on my shirt to satellite-tracking systems and Anunnaki people from the planet Nibiru who orbit into our solar system every few thousand years. Sitchin said that Anunnaki life forms enslaved the first humans in Africa to work in the gold mines. The book was an elaborate mash-up of sci-fi and hack anthropology with a splash of cosmology and astronomy thrown in.

The man walked away and left me to my own ponderings about why the Annunaki would stop the greyhound for my t-shirt. I plucked my G-harp out of my backpack and sat down to play next to a family with two small children. The baby girl gave me a smooth stone which I kept with me for the next few hundred miles. A Good Samaritan woman passed by the broken down bus and came back from the nearest town an hour later with popsicles to cool the passengers down. We stayed there for about four hours before a new bus arrived to take us to Salt Lake City.

After roaming Salt Lake and its genealogy centers for a day I hopped on another bus to Ridgeway Colorado and had to hitchhike the remaining thirty miles to Telluride. A girl picked me up with a large red birth mark that ran up the entire length of her neck. She told me she was a Buddhist which I dismissed as just another trendy thing for a girl in her late twenties driving an SUV to be into. But then again she did pick up a hitchhiker.

When I got back into Telluride, I dropped my backpack off in the basement of the Bread of Life church and took the gondola up the mountainside to Mountain Village where the company I worked for landscaping had its offices. I tried to get my job back but the manager of my crew said that the owners, Michelle and Paul, already hired my replacement.

I took the gondola back to Telluride and decided to hike out to the Swiss Family woodsy on a trail I'd hiked hundreds of times as well as in the dark by feel alone. I knew the trail, but when I walked out onto it, there were multiple paths which I'd never seen and I couldn't make my way simply along the creek as I'd always done in the past. I was instantly and completely confused. This little thing set me off, like when you get the first sensation that you're going to throw up or start sweating from a fever. I knew from past experience that confusion was not good. I could hear people playing baseball in the town park, since the box canyon acts like an

amphitheatre. Someone hit a homerun. I turned back towards the town and ran as fast as I could down the Bear Creek trail.

I was pumped up with adrenaline and didn't know what to do with myself. I ran into another woodsy, an old friend named Jay, whose dog Lilly I always liked. She had one blue eye and one brown eye and seemed really wild. Jay asked me to watch Lilly as I had in the past. But this time Lilly ran away from me and I couldn't get her back. Even animals knew I was fucked. Other young woodsys who weren't good friends, Chris and Ryan, could tell I was gone and they started messing with me. At this point I was spontaneously laughing at nothing and battling bouts of artificial enlightenment. Chris ran through Elks Park with his hands clutching his neck like he was choking. He looked at me and smiled and I felt an invisible pair of hands choking my neck. I was afraid and then I laughed, feeling I was under attack and it was the best way, the only way I could cope.

“This isn't the last level,” Ryan said. “This is just starting.”

I laughed and laughed because we weren't anywhere close to the last level. These were just some kids messing around with magic. I was a kid too.

A guy in town named David approached me in an alley and said he knew my name was Michelle. I had no recollection of ever meeting this man. He and his friend treated me to lunch at Smuggler's Brewery. But by then the thought of eating was impossible. I left a veggie burger and a pint of Porter in front of me and continued prowling the alleys and streets. I went back to the Bread of Life church and a man tried to help me by talking circles with me, but I was upset that he was married. I thought he was infused with Michelangelo's spirit and he should be my husband. I was full-on delusional at this point. His wedding band caused me physical pain. I

stumbled down to the Roma Bar, where the bartender wouldn't serve me despite that I hadn't drunk anything, so I started doing yoga on the dance floor in front of a classic rock band. I knocked over the tip jar and a woman with the band whispered to me that I had done enough and should get out of there. I was making a scene and everyone in the place was laughing at me.

At some point earlier in the day I'd unloaded all of my money and a cross made from wood and small chains I used to wear around my neck on the side of a road in Mountain Village. I placed a hula hoop, which I found from a game at an expo put on by the ski shops, around my possessions on the sidewalk. All that I saved was a small red address book of mine which had phone numbers of all my family members scattered across the country. After dark, I walked a few miles on the bike path out of town and then started walking up a mountain pass towards Durango. I was planning on walking from Colorado to Vegas to see my dad, but someone saw me a few miles from Telluride and called the police using their cell phone.

A policeman came and put me in handcuffs and brought me to his station. Another officer took my address book from me and he started fingering through the pages. The first officer made me blow into a glass tube and looked surprised at the zero blood alcohol content reading on his breathalyzer.

"I'll fucking kill you if you touch my family." I said. I was fiercely loyal to the family I barely had a chance to visit.

"Bring her to the holding cell," a policeman said from behind a desk, "while we try to reach someone."

Two officers held me on each side and walked me past a large blood stain on the floor into an isolated booth surrounded by thick glass. I watched them talk on the phone. My friend

Megan told me later that they called her mom in Oregon and asked if she knew a young woman with dementia. I had no I.D. and wouldn't tell anyone what my name was. I don't know why the cops didn't first call the numbers next to the names Mom and Dad in the address book. They did reach my mom. An officer told her that they found me walking down the center-line of the road and she told the officer that I was bipolar and stopped taking my mood-stabilizing medication, Depakote, when I joined a church in Telluride. I thought God could heal me.

I waited in the booth all night for a mental health professional to come in and assess my mental state. Although at the time, I didn't know what I was waiting for. A man arrived after I spent hours ruminating about what trap I'd fallen into. He wore a silver ring with a large red stone on it, almost like a class ring, but I interpreted it as his pact with the devil. I didn't want him to take me anywhere, and he didn't. Three police officers came back after the man with the red ring asked me some of the usual questions. What's your name? Where do you live? What are you doing here? Who is the president? What year is it?

I never could answer these questions correctly. They seem easy enough now, but can be some of the most difficult when in the throes of a delusion. My name is Rapture. I live on the Earth. I don't know why I'm here. The president of what? I think forty years has been stolen from me.

The officers placed additional cuffs on my ankles and ran a chain from my feet to my wrists. I believe these are called shackles. Then I was hoisted into the back of a container that reminded me of something animals are carried in. It wasn't a normal cop car. There was a small window in the back that I could see the long train of cars behind us. I believed the drivers of those cars were following me and had been spying on my life with short-wave ham radios. There

was also a lot of white noise coming from somewhere in the vehicle. I imagined large speakers were broadcasting snippets from my life along with sordid images flashing in the sky of me in private moments. I also thought I was being framed for some heinous crime. I'd never seen anyone in shackles except for prisoners and people on death row in the news and in films. I felt a loss of all privacy and decency in the same sweep and like I knew what it was like to be facing the electric chair and being innocent as well as being a celebrity stuck under the eye of the Paparazzi and that maybe the community of celebrities from Telluride orchestrated the whole affair to get revenge for all of the public trash-talking I did about having to cater to the Hollywood crowd and tourists as a gardener, a waitress, a barista, a skiing lift-op. The animal container ride ended an hour away in Montrose, Colorado at an inpatient treatment center. I reached the front desk and the officers removed the shackles.

My wrists were a little raw from twisting them in the cuffs. A woman led me by my elbow to a bed and asked me to lie down. A man followed her and he asked me more probing and intimate questions than merely situating me in space and time. He finally gave me a diagram of a naked human body, one view of the back side and one view of the front side. And he asked me to point out on the paper—Where did *he* hurt you?

I didn't point to the heart of the human body like you might expect from a flaky hippy and *he* wasn't Michelangelo.

Feliz Nada

My family just wanted to spend another Christmas together after all of us kids graduated from high school and my mom, evicted by HUD, started living in her car. After the trip, my only memory resurfaces—of chugging a bottle of prune juice in a parking lot late at night in Reno, then running through an unfamiliar neighborhood looking for a bathroom. A stairwell down to a hallway of apartments looked inviting. Squatting between a sedan and an SUV in a used car lot was another possibility. Finally I made it to a gas station, but I had to throw my underwear in the garbage.

My sister remembers smoking cigarettes with me in the back of the U-Haul truck among all of our mom's worldly possessions—boxes of knick-knacks, an Electrolux vacuum, downhill skis, a gaudy poster we gave her one Christmas, still in the cellophane and warped with a little bend like the pictured wolf was going to leap out of the blizzard at us. She also remembers sliding the metal backdoor up and unloading our mom's keepsakes to the Mexican workers at the Western Motel in Reno on Christmas Eve, parceling out everything that we worked so hard to move, all that our mom had left to cling to.

My brother remembers everything, maybe because he was driving the U-Haul truck and he almost hit a semi head-on after spinning a three-sixty on an icy Michigan freeway on the way to the airport. The worst of the trip being over, he thought. Until he went to make some flapjacks and heuvos rancheros on the hotel's grill in the morning after he arrived.

“What the fuck are you doing in my kitchen?” the hotel owner said.

The hotel was where my mom was working for room and board. She told us that we could all come and stay for the holidays at the base of Taos Ski Mountain in New Mexico.

“Would you like some breakfast?” My brother let the batter drip off the serving spoon into the pan. He explains this all very naturally to us as if his temper did not flare, as if his cheeks did not flame red, as if he wouldn’t dare to think of reacting. Unless he was planning on throwing a hot frying pan at the guy’s face, I can see no other reason for him remaining calm in the face of conflict.

This Thanksgiving, my brother told us that he wants to write a novel about our mishap trip that Christmas. A novel seems like a stretch. I mean it was only two miserable weeks. He also says he has one great thought every minute and plans on creating nuclear reactors filled with viruses. He wants to harvest the energy they release as they propagate themselves. He even called his brother-in-law who works in the patent department at the local university. Viruses have to be good for something, my brother says. He’s in the medical profession. He also started playing intramural basketball with old chums who toured professionally in Europe, which seems like good exercise unless the player boxes out other players for rebounds like he’s going to the NBA. It’s been over two months now that he’s been cycling faster, drinking more whisky, yelling at his kids, his father-in-law, his now ex-boss. He said, “Would you like some breakfast?” I can see his eyes get beady and him turn a nonexistent baseball cap backwards.

My sister and I are going over to his house tonight to try to intervene for his own sake. The meds he takes when he starts getting manic are losing their umph. His body or mind somehow is becoming resistant to the chemicals. Serotonin reuptake inhibitors must either not be inhibiting or uptaking, or both.

My brother took the brunt of the financial responsibility. He was in college the longest and acquired the largest limit on his credit cards. He rented the U-Haul and we agreed to all fly out of Reno at the end of our holiday stay. He also rented a tow-dolly and hooked my mom's Pontiac Sunbird behind the U-Haul. Going down a hill on the interstate, smoke seeping out of the back from my sister and me huddled in blankets catching our nicotine fix, the Sunbird cruised by the driver's side window, unhitched and moving with a phantom driver.

We love to ski, my family. It's always been a dream of ours to ski together out west. We took hotels every night, flipping quarters to see who had to sleep with my mom. She's lactose-intolerant as well as having a hard time keeping down a job. The Western Village Motel was only a couple of mountain passes away from skiing at Lake Tahoe and we could move a lot quicker now that we unloaded the U-Haul. Blizzards are great for skiing once you're already snug and cozy at the resort, not so much when it causes pass closures on the way to the mountains.

We returned to the hotel and Ted Turner's obsession with airing the film, *A Christmas Story*, on a twenty-four-seven loop around the holidays. Two days later we had to leave our mom watching Ralphie think he shot his own eye out with a B-B gun. She waved good-bye and behind her slot machines dinged and their lights flashed as we stepped into a cab going to the Greyhound station for our cross country journey back to our three separate colleges—Michigan State, Grand Valley State, and the University of Minnesota. The airport had closed due to flooding from sixty inches of rain and a bus was our only way out.

Our mom impressed the idea upon us early in our childhood that college was the only way out of poverty. That if we didn't want to struggle and live on welfare our whole lives that

we would do well academically. We couldn't drop out of college and hold her hand through anymore shitty bosses, broken-down cars, blizzards, and floods. Christmas vacation was over and only three days of highways and riding on the back of the bus separated us from our futures.

We were burning with ambition and a solid start, all of us navigating the ropes of university expectations. We thought we could leave my mom behind along with her crazy bad luck. We could make a fresh start and break the cycle of poverty.

My brother and sister became good at managing crises. She works at Michigan Tech University as a clinical psychologist and she goes to the hospital when on call, when a student doesn't know who she is or where she is. My brother started out in oncology as a physician's assistant and moved up into assisting in the neurology department in another hospital in brain surgery. Exploding aneurisms, blood flying into his face, and being responsible for someone living or dying sent him to the bathroom to vomit from nerves multiple times per day during his first job in his new field. He was green and everyone knew it. It was suggested that he should have pursued a career in something less trying, like urology. But he stayed in neurology with two more surgeons, for seven more years. He switched into orthopedic surgery, so that he could move home to Houghton, where there are no brain surgeons.

My mom continued living in her car and moving around the western half of the country. I caught up to her in Alaska, where she curled up in the hatchback of her new car, an old Escort. She used her army duffel bag full of clothes as a pad to sleep on. My sister slept in the reclined driver's seat. She drove with her from Idaho to Washington, back to Idaho and then onto Alaska on a diet of Saltine crackers and cans of tuna fish. My mom doesn't get left behind. She just drives too fast to keep up with, even when she's going the speed-limit.

Barren Highway

Saying I never had orgasms always got a man excited to try to be the one to come out victorious. Justin was no exception.

For two months straight we pumped and grinded down the bedsprings to the annoyance of the other boarders in the Water Street house and neither of us came, his lack of show by design and mine by inability. I didn't make it to Cancun for spring break. That wasn't my style. Justin was a rabbit intent on the carrot, just the same. During a visit to Marquette Hospital's psych ward in the spring to bring me clothes, he even climbed into my sterile bed in another attempt until I pointed out the camera boring into his back. The nurses winked at us from behind their station when we came out of my room. Justin couldn't join our next group, controlling anger, or was it grooming group? The groups become muddled in my mind. I only know you must attend them all if you want to have any chance of leaving the hospital.

When I was healthy enough to leave, he picked me up and we drove straight to an A-frame cabin on Lake Michigan, the kind of place my family and I would have picnics at when I was a kid. When we thought the owners were away.

"This was my grandfather's place, but now all of the kids share it," Justin said.

"It's nice. I like the décor." I turned a large plastic green ball, I had picked up from the corner under the mounted buck's head on the wall, over and over in my hands. We were alone and when Justin put on his glasses I couldn't help but think this might be another one of the doctors' tests. When was the last time a child had been here?

“He was my favorite grandpa,” Justin said. “Died one floor below yours at the hospital, of cancer.”

“I’m sorry.” I didn’t know how to console him and pulled my paisley scarf farther up my forehead. Maybe my shaved head was bringing back bad memories for him. I turned the ball again, losing myself in memories of the mentally disabled clients I used to supervise at Vocational Strategies Inc., all sitting in a circle and catatonic until the big plastic ball was passed to them and then voila they would awaken with their reflexes. Sometimes they would even laugh or smile. “It’s kind of chilly in here, don’t you think?” I hugged my shoulders and looked up to the loft.

“We just need to get moving.” Justin hopped up and rubbed his hands together, then blew into them. “Come on. Let me show you.” He led me to the garage where two immaculate seventeen-foot sea kayaks hung from the rafters. “Grab the other end. They’re fiberglass so don’t let them touch the ground.” I lifted the rear end and walked over the snow to Lake Michigan.

“There are still big ice chunks in the water. What if I flip?” I asked.

“You won’t flip. They’re nearly impossible to roll.” He laid the front end into the water and motioned for me to come back to the garage to get the second one.

I hadn’t been in a kayak since I was eight and that was a small sit-on-top. This was tippy and with each stroke farther from shore I could feel the icy water drop off the paddle’s blade onto my chest. Justin cut through the waves with quick and graceful ease while I used all the strength in my biceps to propel me forward. I looked back at the A-frame, a dot on the shore surrounded by little icebergs.

“I don’t think I can turn around,” I said.

“Pick a side and paddle with that arm only or back stroke with the opposite side if you have to and turn,” he said, his voice made small in the wind.

“The waves are going to broadside the boat half-way through the turn.” I continued to paddle straight out, confronting the waves.

“Not if you do it quick enough, like this.” Justin turned beside me. I plunged the paddle into the water and the wind sent my head scarf after it. I reached after the scarf behind me and plucked it out of the water. The shifted weight of my body tipped the boat and I overcompensated rocking it back and forth. The paddle slid off to the other side and bobbed on the surface. If I went into this water without a dry suit my body would go into shock. I grabbed the paddle and dug in hard on the left. The boat rocked a little mid-turn, but nothing serious, before the next wave which sent me surfing back towards the shore. Back on land, I felt my body go into mini convulsions and my shirt was soaked.

Justin wrapped a towel around me and set about boiling a couple of large stock pots of water for a bath. It took a couple of rounds of heating water before I could stop shaking. We lay down on a handmade quilt of patchworked flannel. Rather than stopping before coming, he pulled out and I could feel the hot liquid hit me. He reentered and I imagined him watering a barren desert. I don’t know what he imagined, a cancer patient? My scarf was soaked and unavailable. But for all his months of effort, my back arched and I released an ecstatic cry previously only known to me from the Skinemax channel. It must have been the heat of his come on a frigid body. It was something. It was amazing and sperm holds such promise.

“Maybe we should get hitched,” Justin said a little breathless and ran his fingers along my scalp.

“I don’t come with a tow package.” I said and he laughed.

It was time to visit his folks.

I knew I was in for it when I saw a white picket fence surround the house. A small poodle yipped at us in the window and a little pig-nosed and stout woman stepped up behind him, smiling and waving. She stopped mid wave. Justin rang the doorbell of his own home and his mom threw open the door. She wiped her hands on a dish towel and then started grabbing Justin all over like she was intuitively checking his body mass index. A sweet aroma of stuffed cabbages and squash washed over me the same as her bubbling excitement.

“Mmm, it’s so good to see you, it’s been what? A month. And you have a friend with you.” The mom cocked her head to the side and smiled in my direction, the corners of her mouth tightening.

“She’s one of my roommates at the Water Street house.”

I extended my hand not without noticing that I hadn’t cleaned my fingernails in a month. However, they were painted thanks to grooming group. But I had been too afraid to cut and clean them. I was paranoid of leaving evidence in the wastebasket which could be planted at crime scenes.

“A pleasure. Where’s your laundry?” His mom looked back to Justin and around and behind him searching for the unseen basket.

“I took it to the Laundromat,” Justin said.

His mom arched her eyebrow and flipped her hair when the poodle came flittering into the kitchen. “Tickles, look who came home.”

Justin opened his arms wide. “Did you miss me?” but Tickles, all curls and drool, was too busy sniffing at my ankles and up the insides of my jeans. The dog licked my knee where a hole bared my skin. I bent down to get a closer look at his or her eyes. I couldn’t tell if I was dealing with a boy or a girl dog, not that it mattered. Tickles was immediately drawn to my crotch as all dogs were. At least this one was too small to try to hump my leg.

“Where’s Dad?” Justin peered high and low. I expected his Dad to be crouched under the sink hidden behind the cupboard.

“You know your father,” his mom said. “He’s in the living room with your sister and the TV. Why don’t you take a peek and see what he’s watching.” I let go of Tickle’s jaw that I had clamped shut and sauntered after Justin. “Bill, honey, look who came home,” his mom called from the kitchen. His father stood up when we came in and smoothed the crease in his chinos. The two of them hugged and Justin jumped over to where his sister was on the floral couch and sat with his thigh touching hers. I sat on the far end and pondered the complexities of incest. I smiled and nodded when I thought it was appropriate and turned my attention to *Jeopardy*. I remembered it was always blaring at senior citizen apartments when I went collecting pop cans at the complex for spare change. I was mouthing, *Who is Kierkegaard* when Justin’s mom called out, “Time for supper.” Somewhere she rang a bell. It sounded like a brass one found in a Buddhist temple, but on a smaller scale. I tightened the scarf behind my ears and slipped the silk fabric up off my forehead. It was becoming a nervous habit, but there was no way I was going to let them see that I didn’t have hair. In the center of the dining table one lone fish swam in circles

in its bowl looking out at the dishes. The fish was a deep purple with bulging eyes that looked like one I wanted as a child in the pet store, but had cost six dollars so I ended up with a hermit crab instead.

“Wow, this beats dumpster diving any day. I mean this lettuce is crisp.” I held up the salad on my fork and a tomato wedge flopped back onto my plate.

“Dumpster diving?” Bill asked.

“Yeah, it was a way for me to feed myself when I ran out of money, hitching. You wouldn’t believe how much perfectly good food grocery stores throw out just because it’s one day past the expiration date –produce, bread, deli foods, even fish.” The fish had stopped its circles and was peering at me through the glass.

“Hitching, so you hitchhike, too?” Bill was either interested or feigning it.

“Not so much anymore,” I said.

“Isn’t that a little dangerous? I was watching a *20/20* program the other night and the anchor said that even if someone has a gun and tries to get you to enter their car that your chances are better to try to run and weave rather than getting in. They have complete control of you if you get in and essentially you’re a goner if they want to hurt you.” Bill was mauling his baked potato. I took it as a sign that he was indeed interested.

“Love, you’re going to scare her. It’s hardly dinner conversation. Guns, can you imagine.” The mom turned to her daughter and rolled her eyes towards her husband. The daughter giggled while Justin picked at his cabbage roll. He couldn’t cut through the over boiled

skin. I made a passing note of his mounting humiliation but couldn't contain myself. I had to let these people know I wasn't average. I had experienced extraordinary things.

"It's not that hard to imagine," Bill said. "Lots of people in this country have guns. The cherished right to bear arms."

"That's for hunting, not traveling," the mom said.

"I'm sure not everyone who picked her up were Christians or had the best intentions." Bill wasn't even bothering to wait until he chewed his food.

"Maybe she doesn't want to talk about it." The mom's cheeks were puffing out and turning crimson.

"She's the one that brought it up." Bill sat back in his chair and put his hands on his thighs. "What do you mean she doesn't want to talk about it?"

"Okay, fine! I was just providing an out. Excuse me." Her chair scraped the wood floor as she pushed it back to stand. She returned with a gin and tonic. I could smell the faint woody odor. The ice tinkled the glass as she brought the drink to her lips.

It was my duty to rescue her. "I've never had a gun pulled on me, a hatchet once, but that still wasn't my scariest ride." I said and plunged headlong into a story of hitching from Colorado to Oregon up the coast with one of my boyfriends. I stressed the boyfriend title hoping they would catch on that I wasn't new to the arena of dating. I was in the middle of reenacting the hitchhiker's scarecrow we had set up on the side of the road with a straw hat and some sticks and the excited fervor in which we piled into a nice Lexus when I noticed everyone's wide eyes. This was nothing. Hitchhiking is all about talking with strangers and telling them what they want to

hear, or listening to what they want to say. I wasn't in anyone's car right now so I decided to tell them what they might not want to hear. "The driver said, *my name's David. I'm just flying out of L.A. The whole place is burning up. The whole city filled with witches and demons.*" I imitated David's voice the way it was fast and excited, recalling how he carried Rye Crisps in the backseat and claimed to be fasting and how his plates said he was from Arizona not California, which made me skeptical of his whole story.

"Why didn't you just fly to the west coast?" his sister asked with the tone that said she thought I was an idiot.

"I didn't have the money and you don't learn as much sitting in an air conditioned plane." I surprised myself at the general cool air of the reply though she didn't really deserve any reply. She obviously hadn't been listening to a thing I said. I continued my role-playing. "We passed a hotel with an empty parking lot and a no vacancy sign. David started yelling. *You see that. It's empty because it's filled with angels staying there.*" I explained my terror when he let go of the wheel and with the Rye Crisp hanging out of his mouth made a falling motion from the sky with his hands waving them down to the lot. He put his right hand over his face, up and down really fast and his face contorted.

"Have you ever seen the Three Stooges?" I asked.

Bill leaned back in his chair again and patted his belly. "Curly does that."

"Curly? I thought it was Larry." I looked across the table at Justin, who shrugged. I wasn't exactly cougar status yet, but he was a few years younger than me, which at our age seemed truncated. I didn't want to lose steam and began prattling some more about David taking off his shirt, closing his eyes and driving blind down the road. "*The Father, Son, and the Holy*

Ghost will guide me.” I was busy mocking David and making gravel crunching noises with my mouth when Bill interrupted.

“Why didn’t you get out of this guy’s car?”

Justin’s sister shifted her weight in her seat and was using her nail as a toothpick. They weren’t so civilized after all. I didn’t think I needed to explain that this guy was on the brink so any sudden movement might not sit well with him along with requests to drop us off in the middle of nowhere. Also I thought these were good Christian folks who knew the value of trying to help someone in his time of need. “I thought we could protect him from himself in the throes of his manic delusional state,” I said. Bill was practically a dashboard bobble head, he nodded so much. “My brother got sick like that once. That’s how I recognized it,” I said and started counting the seconds off. One-one thousand, two-one thousand. Just to see how long it would take the good family to connect the dots of a genetic and hereditary illness, manic depressive with delusional features to theirs truly. I thought I saw the wheels turning in the heads of the mom and dad. They looked at each other on two and a half. Not bad.

“I see,” Bill said.

I was really going to have to get to the point now that I had been disrobed. I explained how the talk turned to the Bible and the driver, David, was throwing quotes from all over, even quoting the book names and passage numbers. Samuel this, Revelations that. He happened to throw out one that I knew, but he twisted it, so I called him on it. He jerked the car off to a rest stop and pulled out a copy of a Gideon Bible he’d most likely lifted from a hotel. Somehow he flipped to an exact passage that had his name and a skewed version of my own. “He pointed to it and said, *Because she rebuked David, God made her barren.*” I said and explained how at that

point he had slammed the book shut. I looked to Justin's mom to see what sort of effect the 'b' word had on her. Every mother's nightmare or blessing. I guess it depends on perspective. How easy of a time they've had raising their own. I worked at a daycare when I was younger and always wanted kids, so the thought of being barren touched home.

"Did you leave him at the rest stop?" Bill couldn't fathom the logic of it.

"That would have been the logical thing to do but then faith has no logic," I said. David kept driving and I was happily ticking off the miles on the speedometer, that much closer to our destination. It was getting dark and he continued with alternating driving blind and driving as Curly. Finally we had to get some gas. David came back from inside of the store with a strawberry and nut ice cream bar, two of them, one for me and one for him. "As I started to tear open the paper I noticed the label—I love Good Humor." I hoped Justin's family would see the terror in this. He gave me such a big smile, a sane one. It gave me the goose bumps. I told Jonathan, the boyfriend, to grab our packs.

Tickles was begging at my hip and I leaned down to give her a little potato when my scarf fell off. I reached on the floor to retrieve it and saw Justin and his sister playing footsie with each other under the table. Playful jabs and pokes. Incest is indeed complex. I let out a big puff of air and smiled when I resurfaced. I had always thought this hitching story highlighted my courage.

Justin's mom started to clean up the plates and bring them back to the kitchen. She pointed at my full plate. "Do you need more time to finish that?"

"Yeah, sorry. I got so wrapped up, but I'm starving. It smells delicious." The table got pretty quiet after that. The sister kept looking over her shoulder back at the TV, at some popular

show based on talent and singing, a modern version of *Star Search* from what I could tell. Justin raised his eyebrows at me from across the table. Sometimes I wished he would talk just a little more and save me from myself. It wasn't a good sign that he was becoming adjusted to my antics.

Justin waved the pie away that his mom was trying to set before him. "Thanks so much for dinner, but we have a long drive back."

"True," I said. "I can't wait to get in a hot bath. I'm still chilled from kayaking." His mom stopped scrubbing with the steel wool on a crusted pan.

"Kayaking?"

"We went to the A-frame and took out the boats for a little while." Justin coughed. The mom and dad locked eyes between the kitchen and the dining table.

"Thanks for letting us use them," I added. "It was my first time out on the water in one of those." Bill nodded and clapped his hands together.

"No problem. It was a pleasure meeting you." He shook my hand. "And you drive safe. Keep your eyes on the road and watch for deer okay, kid."

"Yes, Father, I will."

"What do you do if you see one?" Bill pointed his finger at him.

"Honk and hit. No swerving." Justin said as if he'd heard this a thousand times before.

"Right, I knew you were a good listener." He patted Justin's back.

When we got home Justin was insatiable, and he stopped using any sort of protection. A couple of months into this and I noticed that I had missed my period. After drinking my favorite beer, Third Coast, I got up the nerve to tell Justin. We went to Wal-Mart and bought a home pregnancy test. I left the bathroom feeling dizzy and showed the results, positive. We hugged in the kitchen. We were alone, the other boarders gone to class or selling firearms. The geology major had a side hobby besides just tumbling rocks.

“I think we should get a second one,” I said. “Just to be sure. These home ones aren’t the most valid.” We went back to the store and bought a second test and it was negative. I did a little jig and celebrated by finishing the rest of my half of the six-pack. I awoke to Justin in the doorway of my room, bright and early with a third test, bags under his eyes.

“Why again?” I asked.

“Come on. Two out of three? You don’t have to be a scientist.” Justin waited outside of the bathroom door and inspected the line on the stick himself.

“Everything will be okay.” I touched his shoulder with the caution of breaking a fragile work of art. “Life will be different, but we can do this. I can still finish up school. Maybe we can even get married.” My voice lifted at this last prospect.

“We can’t. You can’t. This can’t happen. You don’t understand.” Justin began pacing around the kitchen rubbing his face. The floors needed to be swept, little lint balls collecting by the baseboards.

“I don’t understand! I had all of those party-colored condoms from campus, and you stopped using them. What did you think would happen? Don’t you know how babies are made?” I walked back into my room and flopped onto the bed on my back. I threw the condoms from the nightstand onto the floor.

“You told me you were barren. That’s what you said.” Justin pushed his finger into the flesh on my chest.

I laughed. “You’ve got to be kidding me. Some crazy guy who picks me up hitchhiking tries to curse me and you believe him. I thought you wanted to have a baby.” I pointed to the picture of my friend Sara’s newborn stuffed into the corner of the mirror over my bed. I thought the picture was inspirational for Justin. Though I had to admit the newborn looked a little like an alien. “I imagined that’s what you were up to this whole time.”

“I was up to trying to make you feel something and not using those condoms worked.”

“The promise of a baby. That’s what worked.”

“You’re crazier than I thought. We can’t take care of a baby. And by we, I mean you.” Justin straddled me and started shaking my shoulders hard like he was trying to wake the dead. “You have to have an abortion. You have to.”

My head hit the mattress. He kept shaking and didn’t stop. I remember seeing a billboard in Wyoming of a Harley guy in leather and a bandana holding a baby. *Don’t shake the baby*, it said. Really, do you need a public service message for that? Isn’t that common knowledge?

I had the baby. Two in fact, by different men. One more and my own father said I could make the *Jerry Springer* show. And both of these men, the fathers, and only these men were able

to bring me to a climax. I'd like to think that it's because they planted the seeds and psychologically I could only give myself to a man who was using sex for its original intention, reproduction. But these men also have one more thing in common, they were both mechanical engineers. My body needed to be jump started and then maintained with frequent oil changes, serviced and greased.

The Tip of the Iceberg Lettuce

I smiled at my newborn son the nurses had placed in what looked like a lasagna pan. A surge of adrenaline was making it impossible for me to sleep after the ninety-minute birth. I reached into the mahogany bureau of drawers that he perched atop in his pan and rifled through the serious business of babies—wipes, diapers, bibs, a nose plunger, a thermometer and I selected a disposable diaper, a piece of the two-ton burden America expected me to stuff into my own mouth. If I feed from the earth, then I cannot be separated from what I bury in the mother of us all. Two days later, the nurses were not kosher with my plans for diaper-free child rearing. A nurse gave a side-glance to see me wiping the tar-like miconium off of my belly and sent for reinforcements to spy on my mess. The birthing machine already had me in the grips of its steely stirrups. What was another affront at this point?

I didn't feel so much the burgeoning pride of motherhood, which at some point had transgressed from feeling responsibility to a mix of guilt and gratitude. I was spared a horror show and the staff a comedy. Real blood, real pain, and real relief after labor replaced the enlightened laughter of mania and were far preferable to the laughter of conspirators, foreigners, the not me.

While I was dating my baby's daddy, Justin, and before having the baby my psychiatrist, Dr. Mandelbaum, and I decided that I should switch from the mood-stabilizer, Lithium, to another one, Depakote, due to rapid weight gain. I was admitted to the hospital when I saw a snowmobiler's face turn into what reminded me of a wolf's head. And after swimming laps at

Michigan Technological University's pool I took a sauna where a woman came in and dropped her towel. She was naked and her ribs jutted out of a concave stomach. Her knees were bigger than her thighs and her hair was shaved off. I went to my doctor's appointment and wasn't able to speak too clearly. I was afraid my reality was unraveling. My doctor sent me to Marquette Hospital without notifying anyone.

"Dorothy, bring room 218 some Ensure," a nurse said. "She hasn't touched her food since she was admitted."

The nurse was mistaken; I had meticulously spent each meal since my arrival sampling microscopic portions of each different dish served to me. I was ensuring my survival in this sterile and hostile environment by exposing my body gradually to possible toxins and contagions that might exist in this parallel world's food and water. *Chew on this* and *food for thought* would sporadically accompany my jaw's physical effort to extend a teaspoon of food into a thirty minute eating endeavor. Contemplation proved invaluable during these thrice daily trials. In my own world where I was a boarder in a house on Water Street, my food started talking to me or, rather, I started listening and found myself head down in a pool of snot and tears next to a salad adorned with venison. Abandoning a conversation I couldn't win or resolve on whether to eat meat, I stumbled to a doorway and my mind experienced the paralysis of being suspended between the dark stairwell descending to the left and the light staircase ascending to the right.

Freed now and enabled to rescue my food, life sacrificed for me, I couldn't accept the sacrifice. I couldn't commit the savage act of eating, even the long file ranks of silent martyrs, the vegetables. Plastic perfection and poisoning temptresses, the fruits gleamed in constant

supply. The last straw, the hard-boiled egg, rested before me. I stuffed the still warm egg into my scrubs pocket. I held it close, but it was too late or I didn't have feathers and the egg grew...cold. I clutched it in desperation determined not to forget, caressing it, and casting furtive glances at the nurses, who almost discovered me. I took solace holding on tightly looking into the nurses' pentagon pod of glass where they performed their tests, scientists all of them. They remembered me. I was once in their family. Now I swam in the carpet corridor where any shark could smell the blood dripping down my thighs. I held tight, listening in horror to the baby crying out of sight, in a backroom box from which came an outpouring of people eating what I was made to see as slices of pizza. I believed the baby was breathing fire, my baby, and it would be cooked and eaten, again and again, my memory, my time being rewired. These were horrific thoughts, even though I had never been pregnant.

I was listening to the worms and looking into the black eyes of what I knew were bugs. Bugs were rampant. They were a national crisis and the real national security threat at hand in Iraq. Saddam wouldn't comply with world's efforts to stop the uprising. I had been taught the program, the language to be one of the government's soldiers in the war on bugs by a man with the blackest eyes, a bug with a mouth. I had unwittingly become a double agent. I was among the trainees, small children, in a local library. I happened to walk in on the slideshow of rhetoric that was being given at a speed and complexity beyond most college students. One agent highlighted was the noninvasive invasive evasive beetle agent D. The bugs, he told the parents, are why Michigan was making massive budget cuts to save the trees the bugs were eating. An eight-year old girl proclaimed in a loud voice, "I had a dream caterpillars overtook the world." I was so proud of her. The agent tried to be nonchalant but it was obvious as he hurriedly gathered his books and equipment that he was not in the ranks of the caterpillars.

After I was put on a higher dose of Depakote for a few days, I threw the rotten egg in the trash. I was able to discern that the hard-boiled egg was just a chicken egg and not really symbolic of a baby I never had. I began eating again and clearing my plate at each meal while the nurses beamed big smiles at me and ticked it off on their charts next to the dining cart. I even ate a lunch served in a large Ziploc bag complete with a price sticker that read around \$32,000. I still recognized the staff, vampires dressed in black, who delivered the food. I didn't care. I had resolve and I ate with gusto. I was even functioning well enough to choose my meals from a menu. Then the kitchen sent me a hard-boiled egg instead of my cereal. I held the warmth briefly and traced my finger over dimpled perfection. I placed it with the scraps to be sent back to the kitchen.

Halfway Between Here and There

The cops pull up to the Rice House, a halfway house. I have a banana in one hand and a box of raisins in the other. The cops are wearing brown and yellow and step out of their nicely washed unit. I look at the woman working at the Rice House. She waves at the police with her left hand, while her right hand holds me by the wrist.

When I first arrived, the worker brought me to my room. There were two empty waiting chairs and between them a muslin curtain fluttered over an open window in the breeze. The bed was made but not by me. The woman seemed nice enough when she showed me the toilet filled with my own blood. I was baffled. Did I slit my wrists? A young man offered me an orange after the nauseating smell of a beef stroganoff prevented all my efforts at eating. Was it that simple, not eating their beef and a little blood in the toilet, which sent the cops' sirens for me?

My childhood babysitter, Shelly Sivonen, brought me to the Rice House. She wore black gloves and was smoking a cigarette in the Copper Country Mental Health staff car after she convinced me to get in her ride. I don't understand the purpose of tight black gloves in the middle of the summer. I didn't know how Shelly, who used to tie my hair in tidy French braids, got access to my chapter in the book of life, a large blue file with my name. I didn't realize that I had lived so much already until I saw the size of that file. So much had been recorded and documented.

Shelly gave me an ultimatum to get into her car when I was perched half in and half out, only it didn't make much sense.

“Get in or get out,” she said. “Make up your mind,”

Her boss, my psychiatrist, believes that my brain shrank. My shrink shares my name. Michelle said that having nine psychotic episodes by the age of twenty-eight caused a serious expansion of the liquid surrounding my brain cavity.

Sometimes, I suspect my shrink is another me from a place in time where the sun stopped shining and left her drained, where people do not know how to read, and if you stop speaking long enough you realize that you’re a waste disposal container or better yet a janitor who keeps being rebooted like a computer every time there is a major system malfunction.

“We don’t know who she is, but she has an office here,” the workers say to me in a dream.

The latex gloves I wear at the start of each new day and my bald head lead me to believe that I work here as well. I didn’t have any hair, it was true. I got funny looks when I entered public bathrooms. Women let out little shrieks of surprise and embarrassment thinking that they’d walked into the men’s bathroom. That’s okay. They could think I have cancer, those insensitive pricks. What if I had just had chemo? This is what it feels like? What if I pulled all of my hair out in anxiety? My friends yelled, Sinead, when I walked down the main street of Telluride. These were my old friends back when I was somewhere and had them. Not here, not at the Rice House. Here resides my spiritual family. My brother’s name is Jasper.

“Are my eyes green or are they brown?” Jasper asks me. “I can’t remember. I can’t see them.”

We don't have mirrors in the rice house, only windows. The workers let us outside. We are allowed to rock on the swing on the front lawn of a dead end street. It's a private street where we are allowed to be peaceful with the wind in the curtains and waiting chairs with no purpose next to our beds. People did wait there once, but now they have disappeared. Now it is just us and sometimes it is just me, until the cops come and I check to see how brown the banana turned. That's the thing with not wearing a watch and eating genetically engineered food. You have to communicate with the sugar. The duration of time becomes elongated when food doesn't rot as it should. My raisins stay in my mouth for a long time waiting to become grapes again. I never let a raisin go to the boiler of my belly without reconciling it with its childhood. I am compassionate like that. No one is here but me, so excuse me if you don't see any dialogue. Voices appear and say a few words that don't always make much sense and I don't know who they are or where they come from. I finally know the actors have all been silenced like in a lucid dream after I wake up within the dream.

I sit here waiting for something outside of myself now that I am awake. I am awake and waiting and it is always the same. The cops arrive and they don't want to talk. They only want to listen. I think they may be recording my voice on their machines next to the driver's seat. I believe they are called receivers. There is no relief in a listener here, for everything is a receiver. There is only relief in communication, communication beyond the primal need for sugar, the seed of wonderment, the nectar of fruit. When the cops do talk it is with actions—handcuffs, shackles, pain compliance, isolation tanks, and with questionnaires they seek my past. I am not speaking to someone who doesn't know me. Someone is always trying to help me or reboot me.

The cops open the door and seat me in the backseat with the cage between us. We pass through the covered road, named because of the tunnel the trees leaves make, each curving and

stretching to meet the other side. The maples, aspen, birch, oak and poplars are singing to their highest frequency before October strips them of their decency. Mid-October comes quick, within the course of the car ride. November and December pass along the drive as well. We drive and I know I am carrying contraband, the banana and the raisins. This poison will contaminate the place they are bringing me to. The peel is half down and the box is covered with the residue of juice. My hands are sticky with guilt. We leave the covered road and approach the canal road. It is rocky and covered with litter. The red earth and the empty lift bridge, which crosses the canal up ahead make me think everyone has disappeared. The sun sets large so much earlier than I remember. The sun's rays catch burned foundations littered with drywall. The ashen gypsum dust nearly blots out the sun in a cloud. It's everything I hoped for. Black ash spreads out from the road's cement on either side. I can see what I feel. I think Americans have been living on canned food and fake produce from warehouses since the nineteen-fifties.

"You're like me." I whisper to the banana and the raisins.

The cop who was driving opens the door for me. My lips are cracked and my tongue has the filmy layer of dehydration. Automatic doors and immaculate tile floors stretch out to the volunteer sitting behind a semicircle receptionist's desk. I am protected on both sides.

"Fifth floor?" she asks.

She hasn't seen the sun for ages. We move ahead and pass with confidence to the elevator. I suspect the highest level opens onto the roof. I press the six, and the driver presses the five. He does not make eye contact with me. The elevator doors part. A series of windows surround the hall creating a box pattern in the middle of the building, with a large red stripe. I can't see how many stripes encircle the opening in the middle from this floor down to the cement

or from this floor to the sky. Up, up and up, it looks like a chamber. There are more waiting chairs here. They line the walls along with some artificial flowers and pastels of more fake bouquets. My new guardians meet the cops at the door and turn to the left, to industrial freezer doors. The cop presses a button on the wall.

“Hello,” the cop says. “Houghton County Sheriff’s Department.”

“Come in,” a voice comes through a metal circle on the wall. “We’ve got your bed.”

The doors slam behind us and lock automatically. We are in a high security zone of the building. People wander the carpeted halls. One man hugs the wall with his head and one side of his body sliding against it as he walks ahead of us. He keeps flicking his ears and making shouting motions without any words coming out of his mouth.

“Get into my room, motherfuckers.” An elderly woman’s voice comes from down the hall. “Motherfuckers, get into my room.”

“Come on, Carol,” another voice replies. “Just the pudding is left and then we’ll be all done. Be a good girl.”

“Any valuables?” a woman asks me.

She wears a name tag, Dorothy. She looks at me through her personal second pane of glass. Her voice drips sweetness. It can’t be genuine.

“Any valuables? Oh, don’t cry, honey. There’s nothing in your pockets?”

“Do you want us to check her pockets or do you?” the cop asks her.

“You can get back to work,” Dorothy says. “We’ll get her personal items to the safe from here.” She comes out from behind her glass, what looks like a fish tank of computer monitors and files. The files are more chapters in the book of life.

“Are you afraid?” Dorothy unlocks a door. “Don’t be afraid. Here, let’s go to the family room.” Dorothy opens the door and introduces me to my new brothers and sisters—Sylvester the cat, Pink Panther, and Bugs Bunny stuffed animals. I don’t remember the actual characters, but those are the stuffed animals I had in my bedroom when I was a kid. There’s a picture of a mirror hanging opposite the crisscrossed windows looking out into the hall and a roving camera posted up in the corner of the ceiling flashes its blinking red light in my eyes.

Forever Family

Before I saw the return address was a children's hospital, I almost threw the envelope in the trash. I'd donated a couple of times to kids' cancer organizations and ever since they'd bombarded me with requests for money. Then I noticed the postage stamp of the liberty bell, one of the same stamps I kept stuffed in my computer desk, mine and my husband's first names handwritten as the recipients. We're married but I never took his last name, so we don't often receive joint mail. The hospital that had sent the card was based in Steven's Point Wisconsin, about four hours south of us.

The letter, marked as a Family Finding notification, aimed at reestablishing connections between children in out-of-home care and their relatives and would provide lifelong support for children. It was like receiving a letter from a long lost child you never knew you had and the family finding specialist wasn't providing the name of the child. My aunt, Debbie, had just called me last week from Arizona. She left a message asking that I wire her one-hundred and twenty dollars to get her car out of impoundment. She was making phone calls to all of the relatives, trying to raise the money. I had the money but not the time to wire it and with her, if you said yes once, it meant yes all the time.

I took the envelope and flipped it to its backside and wrote down the names of all the orphans Debbie's daughter, Kelly, had left behind when she died. There was the youngest, Josiah, and the oldest, Liz, and three more who I couldn't remember their names. One girl was born blind and Kelly, an exotic dancer, gave her up for adoption right away.

I called my grandma and then my mom to get my aunt's phone number. But my aunt must have drummed up the money through other channels, so she didn't return my message. My

grandma called almost immediately after. She lives in senior citizen apartments a few blocks from me and receives her mail around the same time.

“You called me,” my grandma said. “What do you want?”

“I was looking for Debbie’s phone number, but I got it. Hey, do you know the names of Kelly’s kids?”

“Elizabeth and then there’s the baby’s name, that one from the Bible.”

“What about the three in between?” I asked.

“I don’t remember their names. Did you get a letter in the mail?”

My grandma told me she’d received the same letter and thought it was for the oldest girl who was half-Ojibwa. I tried to connect a sixteen-year old girl who was bounced around different foster homes with a children’s hospital. Rehab was the closest connection I could make. Grandma thought they were trying to find Liz a home. I reread the letter. *The family planning team will work urgently to achieve a forever family using a Permanency Pact.*

“I told my sister she should take her,” Grandma said. “She’d have six hundred extra dollars a month for the casino.”

I wrote Elizabeth’s name at the top of the envelope and Josiah at the bottom. I left three blank lines in between. On one I wrote, *blind girl*. I was fairly certain she was taken care of since she left when she was a baby. She wasn’t there when Elizabeth found her mom, stiff with her tongue out next to a bottle of OxyContin. Kelly and her husband, prescribed OxyContin for rheumatoid arthritis, popped the pills for recreation. Kelly called me five years ago, two weeks before she died. It was the only time I ever remember receiving a phone call from her. She told

me her doctor had just diagnosed her with bipolar disorder. She also said her father molested her before her parents divorced when she was a little girl and that her mom still didn't believe her.

"I'm thirty years old," Kelly said. "Why would she think I'd lie about this?"

I told her I didn't know, but suspected that the truth might be too much for my aunt to handle. My siblings and I were not close with Kelly while growing up despite that she only lived five minutes away in the town of Hancock. We blamed Kelly when small amounts of money and jewelry from our home went missing and branded her as a compulsive liar. During our brief phone conversation, I felt closer to her than I'd felt as a child. I believed her. Why would she hold onto such a horrible lie, if it wasn't true?

"There are people walking around downstairs in the middle of the night," Kelly said. "But no one is there."

I suspect she didn't tell her doctor about the OxyContin and he prescribed her medication, which interacted in one of her pill cocktails. It was better than thinking she'd orphaned five kids of her own freewill.

I went into the basement with my grandma and my mom, where Kelly was laid out with her arms folded on a table before being cremated. Her belly was distended like she was pregnant for her final child. My mom ran her fingers through Kelly's hair, but my aunt Debbie stayed outside with my brother Jesse and his wife.

I thought of how I could possibly rearrange my house, a two bedroom with a walkthrough to fit one extra person, a teenage girl, Elizabeth. There might be problems trying to share one

bathroom between the five of us. I could even put the extra money aside for her towards a car or college.

“That’s like inviting the devil into your house,” my mom said.

“I was that much trouble?”

“Not you. That’s Kelly’s daughter. Do you remember the stunt Kelly pulled with her mom and her new husband back in Sheboygan?”

“No,” I said.

“You can’t keep a young girl, unrelated to you, in your house.”

“You have an extra room and live alone. Why don’t you take her?”

“She could run away and then I’d be responsible to the state for her.”

“The state would give you six hundred a month for her,” I said.

That pretty much sold my mom on the idea. Like all of my family, she was struggling for cash. I imagined them all storming the Steven’s Point children’s hospital fighting over who got to take Elizabeth home. When I was sixteen, I moved out of my family home and rented my own apartment. I held down two jobs at nearly seventy-five hours a week in the summer. But the state wasn’t after me. They didn’t pay anyone to guard me. And Liz, sixteen and an orphan and foster child knowing exactly what all of the fuss was about, would bite the wrists of the family-finding specialist as she tried to bring Liz to her family. But Liz didn’t protest or buck against anyone. The family-finding specialist didn’t return my phone call.

Drug-Fat Bodies

How do you begin to talk about abandoning your child? Those were her words not mine.

Who is she? Only my best friend and part-time soul-mate. We were never romantically involved, but I felt a deep connection with Sara. I should say all this in the past tense.

I went to South Dakota with my son, Yalmer, to visit her. She took time off from her job in insurance to see me, her best friend from college. We were both new mothers; she had a three-year old boy and I had a two-year old boy. She pushed me out of her apartment and tried to lock the door on me, with my son inside even though I did nothing wrong. She was upset that I cancelled our trip to Custer State park where she'd rented a cabin, but something was off with Sara. I didn't want to go with her and fight anymore. She wasn't who I remembered her as. Then she said the words that made me snap.

“You're so sick, you abandoned your child!” she said.

Sara of all people should have understood that I would never leave him. I was just sick and was put away in a hospital for two months when he was four-months old. I got the same treatment that Hemingway received. I don't know if it was the new maternal instinct in me being separated from my son or the drugs, but I felt heat rush to my head for the first time and I put her in a headlock and squeezed. Then I punched her on the skull, three maybe four times, but not too hard. She didn't fall down but I got past her and back into the apartment where my son was sleeping. In my Lithium body I was nearing the heavyweight division. A Lithium body is one derived from added weight while ingesting the drug. I don't know what body she had? Seroquel maybe, but let's just say she was pushing Sumo. Sara told me that she mouthed off to a girl in a

bar the week before and that girl decked her as well, but Sara didn't fight back. She knew how to start a fight but I think considered herself a pacifist and now I would have to consider myself an abuser.

Last spring my friend, Carrice, in her Lamictal and Depo-Provera body and myself, in my new Abilify body, had a fightclub in the parking lot behind our favorite watering hole, the Doghouse Saloon. It ended with bruises, blood gushing from my nose all over her gloves (with the fingers cut off), and I swear that after when we went to her house she forced me to dropkick her in the boobs. This was supposed to alleviate her guilt for almost breaking my nose.

My previous soul mate called the cops on me. Can you believe it? The trooper with the Viagra body stood watch over me as I tried explaining that my best friend thought I was a demon and that she was different after spending three months in the state mental hospital. I asked him to understand that I was staying in the house with my son and had nowhere to go. Another officer talked to Sara and then I took a cab to a hotel, which I should've thought of myself. When I met Sara, she had panic attacks and pulled her own hair out. I thought she looked punk rock after she Bicked her head bald. But after a cross-country road trip together, she had a major fissure when I left the car and hitchhiked back to Telluride. She started tearing the wallpaper off in her room when she got home. Maybe she'd read "The Yellow Wallpaper" as well. Later, she was found barefoot and clutching an orange thirty miles into the Black Hills.

A good citizen reported her on his cell phone.

I didn't abandon my child.

A judge with Albuterol lungs deemed her schizophrenic and sent her to the South Dakota state hospital after the orange incident. Something about oranges really scares the authorities. In

The Godfather films, an orange means you're going to get wacked. But that didn't stop me from nurturing our relationship. Why am I telling you all of this?

We were drinking, just one or two Corona lights, nothing serious, when my previous soul mate started blaming me for everything wrong in her life.

You're a demon in my life, she said. And that wasn't when we moved to California and we saw each other's faces become demonic when we were still young, childless, prediagnosed.

I stopped taking meds to nurse my second newborn. He's suckling and pulling his hair out. He has colic. My weight is manageable but I have no one to talk to.

These sentences are really diminishing into couplets here aren't they? Like bad poetry, like a bad marriage.

Mail-Order Bride

A row of white Hindustan ambassadors parked single file under the palm trees. Opposite them were auto rickshaws, buggies with three wheels. The drivers were lazing about—sleeping, reading, socializing, smoking, a few bare foot soles waving out of windows. As an American, I noticed the cars before I observed the crowd of brightly dressed women in saris and men wearing what looked like skirts, called mundas, a stark contrast to the drab grays and earth tones of the uniforms worn in customs. They pressed up against the partitioning rope outside the airport craning their necks like pigeons and waving down loved ones. I scanned the crowd until my eyes rested on the three familiar faces from the photographs—my husband’s mother, brother, and sister-in-law. My husband, Kiran, was ahead of me and had already abandoned the baggage cart and started to hug his mom and show off our son with pride. A small tribe was gathering around them and touching our son’s hair, inspecting the new relative with curiosity. Kiran’s sister-in-law, Annie, came up and hugged me, jasmine wafting from her hair put up a good fight against the body odor collected from three days on jets. I never liked jasmine that came from a perfume bottle, but this was fresh and positively intoxicating. “Welcome, your son he is beautiful,” she whispered into my ear. Her voice oozed a sweetness which made me want to curl into her lap and let her push my anxieties away with stroking fingers. She stepped back and I noticed she and Kiran’s brother, Arun, were the only ones wearing jeans in the tropics. All to make me feel comfortable, I thought.

Later in the trip, I noticed Annie changed her clothes as many times in one day as a leading lady in a Bollywood film. Whenever I became too uncomfortable because I was showing an inappropriate amount of skin or wasn’t dressed like a good Indian wife, or couldn’t ride a

motorbike or play basketball or soccer without splitting the armpit seams and revealing sweat circles which I was told were commonplace but never saw any on the women, I changed my clothes. Without fail Annie would run upstairs and change her clothes as well. I was torn between interpreting it as either a fashion show-down or that Annie thought that all American women did this. I expected the maid to give me a tight smile when she climbed the stairs to the rooftop to hang all of our wash, but she didn't.

We crossed the street after leaving the airport and a couple of young men were holding hands as they strolled towards us. They made eye-contact with me and dropped their hands while putting some distance between themselves. They slugged each other in jest. We were taken in a mini-van taxi with all of our baggage towards the city of Kochi, where Arun and his family lived. This was my first time driving down the left-hand side of the road and I couldn't help but feel with the speed, virtually non-existent traffic lights or laws, and the constant passing of other vehicles, that I was viewing the landscape through a child's eyes caught on a sugar high. Motorcycles and scooters would weave down the center of the road threading through the traffic with women riding side saddle on the back, pressing their baby between the driver and themselves. Silk trails of neon fabric billowed behind them. I was both in the future of lawlessness with motorbikes, a lack of order and systems, and in the past—heavily steeped in custom, tradition, gender roles, lack of adequate water, and medical supplies. We stopped at a hotel for food, another name for a restaurant. It was situated next to an open dump, or maybe it wasn't one but just looked and smelled like one. The chutney, dosai, and masala were of the same heat as those I'd learned to make at home, but I had a difficult time cleaning the plate with the artistic efficiency of my new family, whose hands were built for scooping rice, without scattering it all over the table.

Kiran took our son from my lap, “Everyone is impressed that you can eat the food, as hot as it is. I told them I’ve trained you well.”

I think, at this point I realized that it was more important in our relationship for me to cook and eat spicy food with my hands than to speak his mother-tongue. Who needs to talk? I limited my intake of water, not wanting to use a public restroom (I had experienced the difference at customs and determined not to be a tourist I wasn’t carrying toilet paper), and to avoid the stares, laughter and general signifying that seemed to have me at its center, until we were in Kiran’s home place, Kottayam.

The taxi driver, behind schedule due to our lunch stop, paced in front of the hotel and kept looking at the sun and back down to his cell phone. We did make some stops for Annie to vomit out of the car. The vendors, bright saris, pedestrians, sporadic religious vigils with drumming, candle walks, and god umbrellas became overwhelming. On Friday nights, Indians didn’t take the opportunity to go bar-hopping; instead they marched on the streets. I don’t know if the gods being protected by the velvet umbrellas with tassels were a manifestation of Jehovah, Christ, Allah, or one of the three million Hindu gods. The deity struck me as feline in nature.

It was like looking at the sameness of difference over and over, like chain restaurants and gas stations at home. Our son was standing in the backseat, being thrown around when we would come within an inch from hitting the headlights of a bus. My heart started pounding in my ears, a blackness in my peripheral vision. My legs itched to run, run immediately, jog, and get out of my body. My whole body yearned to escape the trap of flesh. I’m going to die, that’s it—I have no control. I swept my vision from front, to back, side to side, laid my head back, crouched my head between my knees. Fuck, I thought, a panic attack and I can’t get out of this car, out of

this place. The driver laid on his horn again (a signal that we were passing); we were up to a horn blasting every increment of eight seconds at this point, and that is a conservative estimate, in actuality it was closer to two seconds. He floored the gas up the hills and coasted down so that my stomach rose and dropped, like on a roller coaster.

Roller coasters are archaic mechanisms that usually carry the name Demon within the title, as if that somehow implies a fun time. My mom forced me, crying and pleading not to go on The Demon at Six Flags Theme Park so that she wouldn't have to sit in line all day at the water rides. She wanted me to overcome my fear. That's how it always was though, she did all of the hard work so that my dad could enjoy the good times, like taking me on a free-falling elevator, The Demon Drop, at Cedar Point.

I closed my eyes, and realized I wasn't able to leave the car. This is where I was. When we arrived at their home I escaped to the solitude of the bedroom designated for us. I bypassed the hanging paper stars, Kiran's mother lit up so proudly, to welcome her new Christian daughter-in-law and did nothing more than make a vague acknowledgement and climbed the stairs. Kiran found me curled up in the bed, rocking and staring out the window.

The next morning, his mom held a pin in her mouth and wound the lower half of a white cotton sheet around my waist three times. She stretched out the remaining fabric of the sheet with her free hand and started to fold it into smaller increments, the span of her pinky to her thumb, then folded the fabric back onto itself seven times in pleats before it met her other hand at my waist. She removed the pin from her tight lips and placed it there. I was inspecting the lack of gray in her long black hair. She had less gray than I did even though she was the mother of the groom. A smile and a gentle bobbing of her head in that way that means *definitely yes*, but looks

a little like an undecided shaking *no* to a westerner. “Nice, yes,” she said. I looked past her shoulder to the mirror, my love handles threatened to burst the pins, the sari blouse gave me unnatural points that made my breasts seem like empty snow cone paper wrappers. It was easy to see that there was nothing in there, save the air beneath the points. I squashed the cones down flat with my palms and they sprung back. His mom had the sheet folded, I think, into quarters from the waist forming a long panel. She brought it over my right shoulder covering the snow cones and placed her final pin at my shoulder. She smoothed the short sleeves of the blouse and made sure the back of the sari was wrinkle free. Content with her work she stepped back and called out, “Kiran, come look at your bride.”

“Wait, how will I go to the bathroom?” I whispered.

She could understand English perfectly well, but she was more comfortable using body language than speaking it. She lifted her sari and squatted in the mock position of peeing in the center of the room. I had a memory of a girlfriend of mine, Megan, who wore skirts and used to put fires out in the same manner. I smiled politely. She must not have recognized my fear that I would come unraveled like a superstring theory ball of yarn.

Kiran parted the tapestry, which served as a door into her bedroom. “Oh, pretty, pretty.”

I smiled in the way of knowing that he couldn’t be serious. Three days of travel with a screaming, not crying, one-year old and eighteen hours spent strictly in the air, was enough for any stranger to spot an untreated case of jet lag. But his mom wanted the wedding first thing after we arrived, so we went along with it. I followed Kiran back across the granite floors into the living room area, anxious to get to the temple. It was already fifteen minutes past the time we should have left. I squirmed around for another hour, waiting.

“We’re on Malayali time. Don’t worry about it.” Kiran patted my ankle and grabbed for our son, running past us towards the screen door to point out some flying *kilis*.

Annie’s daughter, Ammu, descended the stairs in a red and white sleeveless, and rather short checkered dress with bobby socks, and a bow at the waist. It’s funny that the children show much more skin than the adult women, restrained to mid-calve length dresses. She ran to her younger brother, drinking chai and gorging himself on biscuits.

“This is the marriage pendant, a tali, and this string it’s on I’ve soaked in turmeric,” Kiran said. “When we tie the knot, I’ll tie the string around your neck.”

I could see him looking at me through the loop for my neck, as he demonstrated what any simpleton could understand. “That sounds romantic,” I said, and tucked my hair behind both ears wishing for a hairpin. After another hour of entertaining the kids, Annie made her grand appearance adorned in heavy jewelry and makeup to match, a crimson silk sari fitted perfectly, and her signature jasmine following her around. I looked back down and realized with everyone’s eyes lit up how foolish and awkward I looked. I could barely walk. White wasn’t made for white skin, and nothing was made for scraggly hair.

We loaded into the family car, a mini smart Honda, all nine of us. In the absence of car seats, the kids were loose monkeys in a cage, using our laps and the vehicle as a romp-a-room. I saw Kiran from the backseat fidgeting with Ammu’s bow at the waist, like he was entertaining tying and untying it. I closed my eyes again for most of the journey. Once into the more rural area, we rode the switchbacks up the steep mountainside and I felt another onslaught of motion sickness. The rest of the car was filled with the happy chattering family, speaking in Malayalam, and was starting to get under my skin. After living with my husband, I still know nothing beyond

introducing myself by name and asking, “What’s your name?” and “Do you want to take a cigarette with me?” Even that, I butchered, by putting the wrong respect level appropriate to the person I was addressing. Learning that phrase was really pointless, since only whores smoke, another point of distress. A nicotine habit is tough to kick on demand, and felt like a whore when I’d sneak my fix on the roof in between pretending not to be a piece of furniture and really picking up the language by ear. I found it safer to smile and try to master the head bob. Sometimes I actually enjoyed not knowing what anyone was saying. It was almost a relief not to have to talk, to sit peacefully and listen without having to contribute, a relief from listening to myself.

We spilled out of the car at the Shiva temple. Ours was virtually the only car there, yet the place was packed in the courtyard area outside of the inner temple. The devotees must’ve all walked or rode bicycles, though I saw none. I knew little of architecture, but found the building impressive. I was in a rice paddy community and had stumbled on a Buddhist temple. It had a central peak and curved down an awning to four endpoints which reached back towards the sky. A semi-circle of dusty steps, the color of sandstone, led inside and were littered with slippers. The priest who performed the ceremony stepped out of a side building. He was frail but looked healthy in that way that he didn’t have any extra skin to spare. His muscles were taut and visible. He was barefoot with some beads and he wore another man skirt. He seemed to blend into the clay rock and he pulled Kiran and his brother into the office. I saw them giving him a donation from their wallets.

Kiran returned to me to translate. “The priest said that the temple was robbed of the idol a few days ago.”

“Idol?” I was having a hard time imagining robbers taking a crucifix from a church as loot.

“It’s not the original deity but the one that they carry on the elephant during the demon-god celebration, Onam, that festival I told you about that goes on in September,” Kiran said. “I think it’s made of gold with some silver accessories, things like that. The people who belong to this temple have come to pray continuously for one week.”

It sounded beautiful but indecipherable, which made sense—that’s how everything sounded, like listening to humanity in a seashell.

“It’s a chant,” Kiran said. “The Lord’s name, Rama, for this temple is said over and over, unbroken, we call it *akhandanaamajapam*.” He finished with another word that I would never be able to pronounce.

“I should have asked this before getting married here. Who is Rama?” I had little memory for the plots of epics. One I do recall because it excludes women is the annual pilgrimage to the man-temple, Sabarimala. The temple is named after Sabari, a female saint who was there before the male deity. Along the path to the deity, Ayyappan, in an auxiliary temple resides Maalikappurathammna, a woman so in love with Ayyappan that she wanted to marry him. He said no, I’m celibate. She said, yes. He said, no. She said, fine, I won’t leave this mountainside until you do. And he said, if I have no new followers for one year then I will stop being God and settle down. On the path stands a Banyan tree that first time visitors are supposed to put an arrow into. Ayyappan agreed to marry Maalikappurathammna, if there are no new arrows in one year. Every year the tree is ravaged with arrows from men all across the country.

“He’s the incarnation of Vishnu. He was born as a prince and marries Sita, who is then abducted by a demogod, Raavana. They go to war; Rama wins, saves Sita and comes back.” Kiran was looking around the grounds for something, not interested in reiterating the old story he had most likely told me many times.

“Don’t they get tired chanting for a week?” I motioned inside beyond the wall to the courtyard.

“They take shifts.” Kiran reentered the office to deliver the *tali* to the *poojari*, for blessings.

Annie and his mom had the four kids in arms. Annie came up bouncing her youngest on her hip and whispered into my ear (she seemed to have an affinity for whispering to me. Only now I wished she were mute rather than wanting to curl into her lap) while looking at Kiran. “You have a good man, a very good man.” She sized Kiran up from head to toe, bouncing the baby. Her high cheekbones and aristocratic nose shone with beads of sweat. His mom was in her fifties but managed a baby on each hip, whereas I left my one-year old to fend for himself in the name of independence.

Kiran came back out of the office. “The *poojari* told me that because we are late we can’t go into the inner temple to see the deity. He is eating lunch.”

“That’s a shame; I would really like to see the inside.” I was already beginning to disdain my new sister, who acted like a diva, Malayali time or not.

“Yes, we’ll come back,” Kiran said. “The carvings inside date back as far as fifteen-hundred years. Normally we would put in a special request on paper for our son and we would receive holy water, water steeped in flower petals.”

“Would the priest say a prayer for him?”

“Not in front of us, the *poojari* doesn’t talk, and we don’t talk to him.” Kiran led me to the front stairs of the temple.

I slid the slippers off my feet onto the steps and made my way to the courtyard. Everything felt right, being in the sun, the chanting worshippers who reminded me of the Hare Krishna followers who always pushed their sugar cookies at me back home in the States. The chanting itself was getting me all worked up. I could feel my molecules singing to one another. The chanting drowned out Annie’s whispers, Kiran tying and untying Ammu’s bow, and my gray and scraggly hair. And it seemed like everyone was genuinely smiling and happy to see us. I don’t think I had ever felt so loved, in a courtyard of strangers. I started shaking so hard it must have looked like I had a case of mini tremors, making ugly faces and trying not to open my mouth and bawl. Kiran was smiling in the sun, under a bell, looking gorgeous in white. He didn’t seem nervous at all as he smoothly tied the tali around my neck. No panic attacks for him. The priest did *chandana kuri*, dabbing sandalwood paste on our foreheads between our eyebrows and gave us each a garland of jasmine and *jumande* (these purple looking balls and little limes). We wrapped them around each other’s necks and Kiran’s brother appeared from behind us where the women and children were hidden, and joined our hands placing a folded beetle leaf with a piece of areca nut in the middle of Kiran’s palm and then meshing mine on top of his. The devotees halted their chanting and made celebratory whooping calls, which sounded like kids playing

Cowboys and Indians going into battle. A few paces beyond, the chanting resumed and we made our way to the outside of the inner temple on the east.

“So that’s it. We’re married now. We walk around the building and pray in the four directions.” Kiran stopped and made a fluid bow with pressed hands towards the deity feasting within the temple.

Burning Santa Claus

I shacked up with an Indian man after a night out at the Douglass House Saloon and within the first week of our late-night meetings became pregnant. His best friend, Biju, assured me that I was the first *woman* Kiran ever slept with even though we were both twenty-seven.

I'd bought a cheap house a week before I met Kiran and asked for his help in remodeling it. I took out a cash advance on my mom's credit card for nine thousand dollars and paid for the rest in cash from disability back-pay. I signed Kiran onto the title and we took out a mortgage to pay back my mom and refinanced the house for additional equity after remodeling. We needed the extra money so that he could make a trip home to Kottayam, India. Kiran didn't tell his mom that he'd met me, an American woman that he'd had premarital sex with, and that I'd given birth to our son, Aditya, out of wedlock.

When Aditya was three months old Kiran went home to tell his mom that he had a wife and child back in the States. It was a lie, since we still weren't married. He came home after three weeks abroad with a suitcase of spoils and video footage from his first time meeting his niece, Ammu, and nephew, Kuttu.

Kiran hooked up the camcorder to our television and played the video. Kuttu and Ammu were shy of the camera, ducking behind their mother and sneaking out from her hips to tap on the glass of the camera. They giggled and ran back to their mother's flowing skirt. Their mother, Annie, gave Kiran behind the camera a tight grin and said, "Happy family," in English. Kiran talked excitedly in Malayalam with a woman behind the camera who kept giggling.

"Who is she?" I asked.

“Who is who?” Kiran asked.

“The woman behind the camera,” I said.

“Our neighbor, Mary,” Kiran said.

I took off my shoes and went down the thirteen stairs to the laminate floor Kiran had laid down in our kitchen. It was raining outside and I started running up the street to the nearby snowmobile trail. I hopped over roots and logs until I reached the wider path blocked with large clay-colored puddles. My left ankle started to throb and I slowed down to a walking pace and continued north. I felt a hand touch my shoulder. Kiran was wearing my black jacket with the hood up. His face bore the same vertical wrinkle down the center of his forehead and his eyes took on a sympathetic tweaking at the corners, both of which he didn't normally possess but which I did.

“Let's go home,” he said.

“No,” I said. “I want to walk.”

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“I'm just walking,” I said.

“You know you'll never walk far enough,” he said. “And your mom will have the cops here soon if you don't come home.”

I looked back down the trail towards our home. I didn't want the cops showing up at our house like so many previous places I rented. I owned this house. I wanted to make it mine.

Kiran put the teapot going and I sat down next to the fire in the fireplace room to dry my hair. He reached into his suitcase and lit a couple of sticks of sandalwood incense and placed them in the crack of the stove's door. He poured oil into the cups of a four-tiered gold lamp with a peacock on top and laid down wicks in each, then lit them.

“I want to tell you something I've never told anyone,” he said.

His secret burdened me. I tried to sleep that night and ripped off all my clothes and then started to tear at the flesh on my legs. I felt trapped in my own body. Kiran lay on our mattress on the floor underneath the window. He patted the bed next to him. I tried to lie down on the red sheet and felt an overwhelming heat rush into my entire being. I skittered back off to the foot of the bed and went back to working on pulling my skin from my ankles up to my shoulders.

Kiran smiled. “I've never seen that before.”

It would only take two or three bounds past him and the bassinet to get out of the second story window behind his head. I needed out.

I called my psychiatrist, Michelle, the next night. She asked me to pump my breast milk and then to take one Seroquel, an antipsychotic medication. I borrowed a mechanized pump, which was much more efficient than my hand pump, but when I hooked the suction cups up to my breasts, I lay down and only a couple of drops filled the bottles. The machine whirred for half an hour and the bottles remained empty.

Kiran drove me to Marquette Hospital that night. He stopped at a rest stop after an hour and a half and had a cigarette. I hadn't seen him smoke since I became pregnant and he'd quit along with me. He was a stranger and the Seroquel didn't work.

I'm not good with secrets. What I want to talk about I can't, because it's not my pain to share, though it may seep into my paranoia.

I spent two weeks with my breasts bound wandering the familiar halls of the psychiatric floor and recovered quicker than the last time that I suffered from post-partum depression. Kiran stayed home from his office on the MTU campus and weaned Aditya from frozen bags of breast milk to formula. I tried to introduce Aditya to solid foods when Kiran was in India but couldn't do it. Aditya had colic for eight months and it made every transition difficult.

When I left the hospital, Kiran made a decision that we should get married and I agreed. I was no longer making it on my own.

In Kottayam, India arranged marriages are favored over love marriages and premarital sex is considered taboo, along with homosexuality. Despite depictions in the Kama Sutra and other Hindu texts like Manu Smriti and Sushruta Samhita of homoerotic lovers, the government, after colonization by the Brits, imposed a strict rule called Proposition 377 regarding same sex relations. It became illegal and punishable for up to ten years in prison to be caught having homosexual sex. I think this is more difficult than being a man caught drinking his chai with an upturned pinky finger. In the summer of 2009, Proposition 377 was overturned.

In 2008, Kiran and I scheduled a trip to India, and three weeks before our departure the Taj Mahal Hotel terror attacks happened in Mumbai. I was already nervous about my first trip abroad and my marriage into an Indian family. Kiran's mom cried when he told her about his American wife in the States. I don't know if this was entirely her disappointment in him marrying out of their culture or her disappointment that he hid it from her and was spending all of his time during their visit a married man with his neighbor, Mary. After a year of receiving pictures of Aditya, his mom wanted to have a Hindu ceremony to make our marriage legitimate in her eyes.

After our wedding ceremony in a Hindu temple, eight family members and I jumped into Kiran's brother's Hyundai and careened down a mountain road to Kiran's grandmother's house. His cousin's wife gave me an oil and candle light holder. According to custom, I had to enter each step and doorway with my right foot first until I reached the prayer closet bedecked in about a dozen pictures of Ganesh. I just looked at his cousin's wife.

"Pray," she said.

Sure, I thought and got in a typical prayer position on my knees with bowed head. I had no idea what they expected of me, but I was not going to have a heartfelt dialogue with a psychedelic elephant god. I was sober and so I just sat in the closet until I heard some laughing and Kiran called from the dining area with his usual "Oi." Kiran occasionally came in to talk to me, but I felt strangely close to his grandma who'd had dementia and asked a good thirty times to everyone who I was and what my name was. I gleaned all this through translations. She renamed me *Manisha*, which I thought meant fish eyes. The women served us four-course meals.

The food was fabulous and of better quality than the South Indian food I cook at home, but I felt too sick with nerves to eat and only dabbled a little at each dish. I engaged in conversation only as a duty. Kiran's cousin's wife convinced me to put on a nightie (a long polka dotted smock which reminded me of an escaped hospital patient's gown) part way through the day. She admonished me for not knowing how to wear the wedding sari properly since it drooped too loose and occasionally revealed a small bit of the blouse underneath on the right.

"You're giving a free look" she said.

I didn't understand since non-sari blouses or kurtas clearly show the shapes of boobs and she started lecturing me about not wearing anything shorter than mid-calf and the cultural expectations. The female children ran around in tank tops and shorts, and it seemed like a double standard, or that they were promoting the idea that children's flesh can be ogled over but not the flesh of an adult. Kiran said she was not a cultural authority and that it was just her personality type. I felt foolish and a little lonely and was thankful to need more rest just to hide in the bedroom with our sleeping son, Aditya.

I was what Kiran called, *the light of the house*, for a day, which doesn't say much since I was staring at the walls. Though I wore long sleeves and pants in the blistering heat I received many stares and laughs when I took walks. Men-boys held hands and slung their arms around one another's shoulders. They wore skirts yet the women were draped from head to toe in sweltering heat. I did see tourists about thirty kilometers north by a river and houseboat rentals, yet Kiran said I was not like them and "You are my wife," so I shouldn't wear a tank top.

Kiran brought me to a temple in the morning only to inform me that I wasn't allowed in to look at it without a sari or some other dress on. Why should the deity care if I appear to be

easy access or not? And how would I scale fences in a skirt? I'd never felt so attached to my clothes, nor realized that they played such a large part in framing my identity and perspiration control.

Kiran's mom watched an Indian version of the television show, *American Idol*, in the evenings. I'm not a fan of Idol in the States, but found their version which included theatrical performances amusing, despite not knowing Malayalam. The only channel in English was BBC news and even more hatred appeared to be headed in my direction as an American. Israelis were massacring the Palestinians with bombs and drones. There wasn't too much to worry about, seeing as I could barely go on a walk by myself to sneak cigarettes if I was not protected by some male figure.

The airport personnel lost some of our luggage so we had to go back to the city of Cochin to get it. I was nervous about the drive and feeling over stimulated by honking horns and flashing lights. It was a longtime dream of mine to travel abroad, but I suspected I was internationally autistic and meant to stay at home forever.

In Cochin, I met the Arabian Sea with my feet for the first time. It was incredibly warm and I dove in the water fully clothed. On the drive there, we also saw a parade of the "Hundreds of Men," a march of drummers followed by strange costumes like a man dressed like an American and wearing a large cross, followed by a man with a large stick strung over his shoulders like he was a slave and then a man with white paint on his face dressed like a skeleton. I felt it was a commentary on imperialism and colonization of India by *whitey*.

We spent the 2009 New Year's Eve at Fort Cochin in a neighborhood with a large Christian Indian population. Kiran's sister-in-law, Annie, and her family were Christians, which was a point of contention for Kiran's brother, Arun, and Annie's love marriage.

Throngs of men and boys, many visibly drunk, danced frantically before a DJ spinning house techno music under a large tree strung up with Christmas lights. A hundred feet from the tree was a huge blow-up doll of Santa Claus. Women were not allowed to dance and the young man-boys were bumping and grinding groins together like a nineties MTV dance party. I snuck away from the women and children to get closer to the dancers and was approached by a man about my same age, thirty.

"You need to go back to the other side where the women are," he said.

"Why can't I watch the dancers?" I asked.

"You could get groped or touched in an unwanted manner," he said.

I didn't bother to go into my goosing days. I went through a phase when I was nineteen and frequented bars with my fake ID where I grabbed men's crotch areas, namely their taints (it ain't the balls and it ain't the ass) from behind them and gave them a good little scare. This was my idea of fun. The notion of unwanted touching hadn't occurred to me since my crotch was groped by a creep in a Denver arcade when I was eight-years old.

"They are drunk and would go crazy for women," he said.

"I think they are only crazy for each other," I said.

Yes, he said, and then he tried to justify it in terms of cultural differences between America and India. He said that according to their culture Indian men are just touchy feely

among the same gender but are not homosexual. He stressed this point. I didn't tell him that I was married to an Indian.

“Even if boys around puberty start having sex with each other,” I said, “they are not *exactly* homosexual.”

He agreed, saying that they consider it just fun and while he would at first only admit to twenty percent of the male populace engaging in same-sex relations, when I raised the percentage to fifty he also agreed. So naturally, it must be closer to eighty percent, I thought. The man then told me his name was Arun, the same as Kiran's brother. He also said he studied Psychology in the States. I politely excused myself to return to the women's side before I was molested by the interested men.

In some cultures men have sex with men but do not identify themselves as gay or homosexuals, merely as men who have sex with men. They are a portion of the populace referred to as MSM's. It is difficult to educate this community on the dangers of HIV, when many remain deeply underground. To surface above could mean imprisonment or even death at the hands of an angry mob. My husband is not gay. He swears to this after much prodding because he seems so, well, gay. Like a best friend who knows long before her loved one in the closet comes out, I am confident that he will have his day. I realized there was an expiration date on our marriage before I bought it.

I rejoined the group. Not long afterwards Kiran and his brother reappeared. He didn't say where they had been, but I didn't see them dancing or grinding up against any other men. A teenage boy came over to me and touched our son on the cheek. Kiran stomped in the boy's

direction and leaned his head towards him in an aggressive manner. The boy and Kiran went back and forth a few times in this reproach.

Before midnight, we moved along with the crowds towards the beach on the Arabian Sea. Multiple scarecrow Santa Claus figures were sporadically staked outside of people's homes and in alleys. We found more large ones with jolly arms outstretched on the beaches. Loud drumming and fireworks popped off over the boardwalk by the sea and at midnight fires were lit all across the city of Cochin. All of the white Santa Claus faces melted onto their fat bellies. Young men danced around the flaming pieces of straw and burning red pants.

“Why are they burning Santa Claus?” Kiran's niece asked.

“So that he comes back next year,” Annie said.

We needed to visit Chennai, on the other side of India and next to the Bay of Bengal, for Kiran's visa appointment. It was a twelve-hour train ride on bench seats each way and the bathroom consisted of a hole that fed straight onto the tracks. There were no tampons for sale at grocery stores and I was struggling while on my period with a metal bucket on a chain and the pipe behind the hole, which my ass kept hitting. I didn't know how I would abstain from smoking for the trip. We snuck one smoke by the open door of the train compartment and were told to put it out half-way through by a train attendant.

Coconut fronds burned in the streets of Chennai and their odor smelled like marijuana drifting into our taxi. Our barefoot driver doubled as a swami and gave us a nice tour of many small alleyway temples. I was even allowed to photograph the amazing artwork inside the

temples, which Kiran said was unusual. Our camera was stolen from our luggage on the way home and I didn't get to keep the pictures. We left our son with Kiran's mom at his home in Kottayam for the trip.

The night before the visa appointment I made Kiran bring me to a nightclub outside of a hotel bar where I saw other people dressed in western clothing. I danced alone and made a general spectacle of myself in the club. Kiran sat in a dark corner and watched. It was either too early or no one but us was willing to pay the cover charge to listen to the DJ spin house music. There was one other table where people were drinking.

In the morning, Kiran left me in another rickshaw on the street for half an hour while he was in the bank. That's when I started noticing every man that made eye-contact with me. But I wasn't flirting. I imagined them jogging back to their flats or making a quick call to their extreme Islamist brothers and putting a hit on me. Large circles formed under my armpits. This was more nerve racking than when the large group of blue uniformed men at the Arabian beach started snapping pictures of me with their cell phones. I thought they took the pictures because I was a woman and smoking or because I was being followed by Research and Analysis Wing, RAW, agents.

Kiran came back from the bank and no one kidnapped me for ransom.

I was not allowed into the U.S. Consulate for his visa appointment. I stood outside in a long line that snaked around the building. I scoped every car and paced along the fence, the only *whitey* in the crowd, and imagined my face melting onto my belly. The long line of tired and weary Indians taken to celebratory dancing around my burning red pants and my peach skin lit up like straw on the sidewalk.

Waiting for Monday

The State of Michigan wouldn't have awarded Justin and me joint legal custody of my son, Yalmer, if it were versed in the story of King Solomon. The Friend of the Court officer said, "Researchers find the child develops best under the equal care of both parents." Never mind the advantage of stability or centuries of wisdom from civilizations across cultures which favor the early development benefits of the mother-child bond. That produced some real Fruit Loops.

On Sunday, my son and I were playing Chinese checkers. The game was going well until we read the rules. I was moving my blue marble pieces closer to the green apex of my son's star. And while he realized I was advancing quicker than he was, he wasn't really bothered by it. Then my husband, Kiran, read the regular checkers rules and said that each time I jumped one of my son's pieces that I should remove it from the board. This isn't the rule for Chinese checkers but my son got it in his head that we should play according to the new jumping rule. He jumped one of my marbles and put it in his pocket.

I jumped three of his pieces in a row and tucked the marbles next to my thigh. My son flung his body onto the floor like he was receiving electroconvulsive shock treatment.

"You're not acting like a parent should!" he said.

"Because I'm not letting you win?" I asked.

"You shouldn't be allowed to be a parent."

I've prepared myself for such confrontations. I just wasn't expecting my parental authority to be questioned so early. Yalmer is only six-years old. Too young for his vocabulary and too old for tantrums. I wonder how much his father, Justin, has told him about me. I swore I

would tell my son about his dad when he was old enough to understand. How he tried to force me to have an abortion. But each year my son gets older and it seems incredible that I would ever consider it.

The State of Michigan also rules on the mental capacity of each parent.

When I put him to bed for the night after reading him a story I imagine, he's the only kid in Lake Linden who tells his mom, "Goodnight, I love you, and I'll see you in the morning" before I can even say the first word. He inhales the skin at the base of my collarbone, oohing and aahing at my scent. He says his dad has a special smell, too. The smell of a weasel, I think. I worry mine has a hint of Merlot.

Every other Monday, my son packs up his backpack for school and wears the clothes that have tags designated with a letter D, for dad. He makes his bed before leaving, puts his scattered clothes in the laundry basket, and waves goodbye to his stepfather, Kiran, at the door before he and his brother clamber into the back of our Jeep. We make the twenty minute commute to his school, where his father decided he should go because the test scores are higher. He and his new wife conveniently bought a house there after he convinced me to place our son in that school of his choice. It happens to be the same elementary, where I played *run until you die* in gym class and my fifth grade teacher, a Vietnam vet, kicked my desk in for holding up two fingers in a V shape to indicate how many wrong I got on a test to a friend. It must have looked like a peace sign.

In a parent-teacher conference his first grade teacher says, "Your son shuffles from his classroom to the lunch room in line but always scowling." The teacher also refers to him as, "an intense little boy who likes to move his mouth to shout but no words come out and pantomime

his frustrations.” He curses out everyone but without getting into any trouble. He’s clever like that. His kindergarten teacher referred him to see a school counselor for anger management. But the State thinks he’s developing according to plan.

I pull into the parking lot and walk my kids to his classroom. He turns to me, his backpack almost takes him down, and he mumbles, “See you soon.” My son holds his arms out to me in the manner of a hug. He’s so light. He reaches into his pocket and hands me one of my blue Chinese checker marbles he jumped. I know he will think about his words all week, as I think of mine. Every time I lost my temper, lost my patience, all the little things I didn’t do that he needed of me rerun within my mind until the next Monday. The teacher’s back faces us as we part.

My plan for the week is deflecting the questions from my youngest: Where is my brother? Where did he go? Even though I give the same answer each week: He’s gone to his dad’s house. A three-year old can’t process this. He still puts marbles in his mouth.

My husband has to move to get a job. The State of Michigan requires that we go back to court if we want to relocate over one-hundred miles. I can give up my son and let his father tell him everything he wants to about me; Justin and I were never married. I can fight for him and lose again in court. I can fight for him and win! My son wants to be a father someday. I can teach him the way, how to hold onto his marbles.

In Eternity and Waiting for a Spoon

Trying to place everything that I've forgotten after receiving eight electroconvulsive shock therapy (ECT) treatments is a little like trying to find one metaphor to explain a void. For an author, nothing is more integral to the writing process than memory. Memory and history, neither one completely objective, compete for a place on the page of defining truth.

Most literature buffs are familiar with Ernest Hemingway's suicide, but not as many know that he was admitted for his second involuntary ECT treatment at the Mayo Clinic two days before his death. Was Hemingway so depressed that even ECT could not stop him from killing himself? Or was his memory so damaged that he didn't think he, as a writer, would survive the side-effects?

My truth is that for a period of two months, four months after having my first baby, I was locked on the fifth floor of a nearby hospital in Marquette, MI. I have no need to write a novel about my life because I've obtained nearly seven hundred pages of my medical records. My book of life sits in my basement collecting mold and has as many authors as a King James Bible, each doctor with his own version of the truth.

I can't write a novel about my life because of the missing pieces, blots of white color over so many events, and fissures in the picture like the obscured vision at the beginning of a migraine. A white light floods from behind another patient I would follow down the halls, haunted by the melody he played on the piano. It's amazing I can write anything. Grainy film trespasses over daily landscapes.

My youngest son, three-year old Aditya, was playing with his outer space placemat while eating waffles. He said that the sun was the hottest planet. His dad corrected him saying that it was the hottest star. I poured tea kettle water over coffee grounds in our French press. I didn't correct him because I couldn't remember if the sun was a planet or a star. More than just memory, my language and signifier/signified processing centers have collapsed. *Star* and *planet* are words that have no differentiation. My brain has room only for the most significant details—the sun, a fiery hot ball, is needed for life. Once, out of an airplane window, I saw the sun replicate itself. Each of the two suns was surrounded by a sunbow. All logical processes break down in the space before a hospitalization. I couldn't fathom the existence of a reflection formed by ice crystals and preferred to believe in the birth of a second sun. I only just learned about sundogs and recently NASA's Kepler mission discovered a planet that orbits two stars a mere thousand trillion miles from our solar system. I'd like to think that I'm in tune with the universe, but I'm also devising plans to be on that planet and see the suns eclipse one another.

Proponents of ECT treatment claim that it is now much more humane than in the past due to the anesthesia administered just prior to the treatment. In the past, the patient's body flopped around causing bones to break; now, however, the patient lies serene. Nevertheless, the target of the procedure, the brain, is not put to sleep: it undergoes an induced grand mal seizure, recorded to last as long as one hundred and four seconds in some cases. As many as eight ECT's may be administered within approximately two weeks.

It had to do with love. That's how I ended up in the hospital. That much I remember. The father of my first child abandoned me after I became pregnant. I tracked him down by writing a letter to his parents when my son was nine days old. I had met his parents once and thought they were sweet in a nostalgic manner. His mom wore an apron and cooked stuffed cabbages for dinner. I didn't want to deprive my son of his paternal grandparents or deprive them of their right to be a part of his life. Three weeks later, the father arrived at my door. And three months after that and for no reason that I can possibly understand, I sat across from the father on the brown shag carpeting of my low-income apartment next to the baby's blanket, where my son lay on his back trying to kick through his footie pajamas, and with great pain and effort I managed to eke out the words, "I love you," to the guy.

The next morning I went to my Educational Psychology class at Michigan Technological University and the film of my life started to overexpose under the pressure and heat of my admission of love for someone who was trying to hide from me. The professor decided to show the class a video about learning disabilities. The point of the video was to place the viewer empathetically in the place of someone who suffered from a learning disability so we could imagine how difficult it would be to learn in that position. The instructor on the video began lecturing at a super high speed, almost manic in his speech. The instructor's eyes began to turn black in the video. My heart rate increased and my palms began to sweat holding my pen. The video worked and I became unhinged, not becoming necessarily learning disabled, but disabled to function in my own way. I looked up from the screen and the other students and the professors all became strange to me. One student, Bob, took a loud bite of his apple, and looked at me while he did it. It was this signifier of eating from the fruit of knowledge and the Garden-of-Eden guilt

paralyzed me. I lost my appetite. I knew I would not need to eat or sleep ever again. I thought, this is what it's like in eternity—a place I've been before.

After inspecting the rocks in my Geology lab and concluding that they were samples of molten lava from hell, I drove home with the radio off. Yes, I'd actually heard and thought the voices coming from the radio were directly talking to me when I lived in California and had my first mental breakdown at age eighteen.

I asked my mom to come over and watch my baby, Yalmer, and asked my grandma to take me to the hospital. My eighty-three year old grandma Marge ate Saltine crackers and paced around the ER's hospital room with me and looked at the clock over the span of many hours.

“I hate doctors,” she said.

She avoids doctors and sometimes I think this belief has kept her healthy all of these years, despite her smoking and drinking habits. She eventually left the hospital before help arrived. I sat on a bed and looked at the clock from nine p.m. until dawn, when the mental health professional arrived to bring me to a halfway house called the Rice House. I'd written specific instructions in my personal care plan that in the event of an emergency as an alternative to going to the hospital I should be taken to the Rice House.

My childhood babysitter, Shelly Sivonen, who used to tie my hair in tidy French braids, worked for mental health at the Rice Memorial Center, a gateway to the Rice House. She'd put on a lot of weight and had a rough and intimidating voice which resonated deeply when she spoke. She wore black leather driving gloves in the middle of the summer, which I took as a sign that she was performing a crime by transporting me to the Rice House. I perched half-way in the car with my right foot on the cement parking lot and my left foot on the floorboard.

“Get in or get out,” Shelly said. “Make up your mind.”

That was a problem. I was straddling the line between choices and felt paralyzed to make a decision. It was just like the previous breakdown I had two weeks after I switched medications from Lithium to Depakote. I froze against a doorframe caught between two staircases in a boarding house. I’d rented a room on the ground floor while taking classes at MTU. One staircase climbed to a sun-lit second floor at a forty-five degree angle and the basement stairs descended along the same angle into the dark. I was stuck in M.C. Escher’s lithograph, *Relativity*. These parallel systems of inverse symmetry between light and the absence of light was the perfect physical representation of the impossibility of choice, as if every choice was a masquerade for the same endpoint. Freewill became a game for fools who couldn’t see the reality of predestination.

I got into Shelly’s car and she drove me to the Rice House while she smoked a cigarette. In my delusional mind, she was snuffing out my spirit with that smoke and my body was just a vessel left behind. I didn’t last long at the Rice House before the cops showed up to drive me two hours southeast to Marquette General.

But what was different about this hospitalization period in Marquette was that the staff was willing to let me stay in eternity rather than trying to wrench me back to reality, the land of eating and bowel movements.

In the hospital, I was pumped up with 2600 mg of Tegretol per day and Wellbutrin and I wasn’t eating. I found myself stuck on the toilet for long periods of time trying to squeeze one out. In hindsight, I can see that the medications made me grossly bound up. But rather than pushing the red nurse’s button next to the toilet and telling the staff that I was constipated, I used

a skill that I gained as a handicapped camp counselor at Camp Independence. I performed a self-digital and manually removed my bowel movement with a sweep of two fingers so no else would have to do it. I thought I was cleaning my body cavity out before I died.

My doctor had a sort of high-tech approach to prescribing me mood-stabilizers and anti-psychotics. Dr. Von Greiff, whose name rearranged as scrabble tiles to produce the word *grief*, pulled me into his office at the hospital. “What medicine would you like to take?” Or maybe he really said, “Why are you here?” He gave me a choice as he drummed his fingers, laden with gold rings, and tapped his gold watch. The only problem was that I was certifiably nuts as evidenced by my being locked away and excavating my intestines. I thought I saw naked burning bodies lying in bed like I was in a death camp, a self-created narrative from seeing so many emaciated patients without their clothes on. I postulated that time travelers kept coming across dead zones with wasting bodies and eventually had to accumulate all the bodies into incinerators in one time-space called Germany. Today it’s called North Korea. Dr. Von Greiff asked me again in his thick, and to my mind, German accent, “What do you want to take?” I looked around me for a sign. There, right on his desk was a pencil holder with the name for the drug, Risperdal. The charts say that I pointed to it and said, “That.” Besides that, the family room in the last hospital I’d stayed in had served popcorn out of a bag emblazoned with a Risperdal logo. What movie did we see in that family room, something benign like *Hope Floats* with Sandra Bullock?

I just realized that the entire last paragraph is a completely misplaced memory. The way I recognized it is the drug. This whole scene must have been from a previous hospitalization at the same hospital with the same doctor. Although I clearly remember the popcorn bags from the Colorado hospital. I’ll demonstrate my memory sleuthing skills for you. I had taken Risperdal and Zyprexa, two antipsychotic medicines, for different mental breakdowns in my past. And one

of these drugs caused some nasty side effects like the symptoms of Tardive Dyskinesia. The charts say the movements were consistent with Retrocollis which can be caused from an imbalance of neurotransmitters like dopamine in the brain and as a side-effect of the medications. I was jogging on a treadmill at the university gym when my neck arched back and stayed that way before devolving into uncontrollable seizures. My neck distended up and back to the sky and rotated in wild circles. I may have been able to invoke sympathy at least with my pregnant belly. It was nine months of physical pain and no one would touch me (meaning help me) because I was pregnant. One neurologist, Dr. Bixler, suggested it was psychosomatic because I could stop it when intent and focused on a task like methodically weaving the needle for my baby's quilt. Which I might have believed, but a dozen shots of Botox he administered to the back of my neck stopped the erratic movements three days after I gave birth to my first son, Yalmer.

This experience brings me to why I was rotting away in the hospital. I had a history of side-effects, and my doctors and I were leery about the prospect of taking more antipsychotic medicines. Dr. Lynn Miller held out a peach capsule of the mood-stabilizer Depakote, like a silver bullet, in his hand and a paper Dixie cup of water. He said, "Just one." After much deliberation and days of pacing, I took it, swallowed it, and as if something exited my body, my knees buckled and I dropped to the floor hard with all of my weight. It's impossible that the medicine caused this collapse, but rather it was an act of my willpower, an act of surrender. However, this whole scene took place during my first stay in Marquette. In one of my charts found in my basement, Dr. Sandra Swenby says that she heard from my nurse that I had an eating disorder and yesterday began vomiting some bloody material—which seems convenient to tack on after someone is in the throes of a depressive episode. Remember, you don't eat in

eternity, much less try to look skinny like the girls in magazines. There are some advantages to living in a non-place.

After running down the different wings from one end to the next to try to get some exercise, I felt so trapped that I had to try to escape, to breathe fresh air, so I kicked at the emergency exit. Another patient in his early twenties, Aaron, who played the piano in the therapy room, told me about some of the things I couldn't remember after we were both released. He found me at the Presque Isle Beach walking on an outing with the other patients who'd advanced to level III. Level III patients were allowed to use the hospital gym and even leave the hospital in a group before being discharged. I was picking up different Lake Superior pebbles and turning the smooth ones over in my palm in post-ECT euphoria. He slipped me his phone number on a piece of paper.

“Now you can follow me,” he said and jogged down the beach out of sight.

Aaron told me, a team of nurses tackled me, “a skinny little thing,” after I kicked the door. Aaron was in love with Sara, another patient he met in Marquette Hospital. He showed me her picture on his fridge and she was almost bald just like my college friend named Sara. Sara spoon-fed him in the dining room and also brought him back to the hospital when she found him with his head in the stove at his house. I wished I could elicit that sort of love. No one spoon-fed me.

The attending psychiatrist at Mayo was honored as president of the APA for his *work* with Hemingway. The depression was cured; the patient was dead.

My sister, Crystal, took time off from completing her second masters program. Her first Masters degree in Philosophy didn't prepare her to help people in the way that her Clinical

Psychology program was preparing her. She travelled north from North Carolina to help my mom take care of my baby. My father, a salesman in Vegas, and my brothers didn't call or visit. My eldest brother, a Pentecostal born-again Christian called for my exorcism as he once tried to exorcise the demons from my other brother, who seemed afraid to talk or see me. A conversation with me might trigger him to have problems. My sister and mom visited me a couple of times in the hospital, but I don't remember much more than looking into my son's intense blue-gray eyes and holding him briefly.

The charts say that I was found on all fours, swaying around on the floor of my room and had a seizure and hit my head, creating a nice green and blue hematoma. The doctors ordered urgent neurological consultation since I was confused. I sort of remember the MRI and CT scan machines. I think I passed out and hit a countertop. The doctors scribbled notes ready to peg me as an epileptic.

I remember watching my sister and mom crying in the visiting room, like watching rain trickle down a window. In the charts, Dr. Debra Morley said, I clearly looked drug-toxic and she recommended withholding my Tegretol medication and checking an EEG for my recurrent vomiting.

One patient, a girl in a wheelchair, loved the paperback romance novels stacked on the bookshelf in the visiting room. I was convinced that she was induced into labor when we were listening to the radio station, 97.7 the Wolf, in the smoking room. She groaned, grunted and appeared to be pushing as in labor from her seat among all of the smoking schizophrenics and artists. I didn't see any babies shoot forth from her, but then again I saw and heard things that

weren't there during episodes. Having an episode is like slipping into dementia. It seemed just as logical that I couldn't actually see the babies as well as I could see people who weren't there.

A lawyer came to my room. I don't remember who I really thought she was, but her high heels, horn-rimmed glasses, and snakeskin scale purse tipped me off that she was strong, unlike myself, and maybe even Satanic or a practitioner of Voodoo. Religious ideation permeates all relationships. When she asked me to undergo ECT treatments, I said, "No," one of the few times I spoke.

My organs were starting to shut down from lack of nutrients, water, and food. I was going to die. That's what the doctors told my mom. That's what Dr. Von Greiff told the judge. I remember little about the justice system portion of this affair. My mom said that I sat with my lawyer and asserted my rights to not have ECT treatments. On the other side, Shelly, my childhood babysitter, my mom, given a video to watch on the benefits of being shocked, and the doctors from Marquette General advocated for the treatments.

Some demon had possessed me, some demon called love. When that love was unrequited, I curled inward. I convinced myself that the hospital water and food were poison. I drifted from doorway to doorway in hallways of ghosts under surveillance. The lost and mentally ill patients, also known as clients, kept intersecting paths in one another's delusions of reality. The charts say I was admitted for suicidal ideation under Dr. Anthony Holzgang, a name I wore with a barcode on my wrist. I kept waiting to see him, but all my memories of him have been erased or we never met. Dr. Robb Imonen interviewed me for thirty minutes on my sister's birthday. He said I seemed sad, depressed, mute at times, and engaged in thought-blocking. He strongly recommended ECT treatments.

A nurse put me on a gurney and rolled me to the hospital basement and parked my bed next to another bed. A naked toddler stood on his bed rattling metal bars. I thought that he may be my son naked and screaming like an animal trapped in a cage, and that the team of doctors had kept me from him in this place called eternity, a form of hell I floated in for longer than two months. Someone on the outside ticked off two months time on a calendar. I ticked off time using the second hand of a clock and my internal clock, which seized without my baby. The nurse hooked me up to an IV and then I was rolled back into another room with the humming MECTA5000Q machine at a frequency of 40 hertz. Dr. Von Greiff sat in a chair in a corner of the room. He stood up and walked over to me. He smelled of thick cologne, sparking good memories of my absent father. I remember those gold encrusted hands he used placing electrodes around my head, the tender and gentle touch of them. I don't think he used a gag and even now I question whether we really counted backwards from ten.

The charts say Dr. Von Greiff was the administering psychiatrist and surgeon of electroconvulsive therapy treatments one through eight, each spaced two days apart.

According to the charts, two days after the eighth treatment, Dr. Lynn Miller slapped a new diagnosis on me and continued the ECT treatments for two more sessions. He also used a new machine, the Thymatron DGX. I'd met with Dr. Miller once at the Rice Memorial Center when I spent six months in Houghton before returning to Telluride, Colorado. We compared our impressions of some writings by existentialist authors—Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, and Kafka. I told him how I read *The Metamorphosis* in the same time span, two weeks, that it took me to read, *Brothers Karamazov*. I found it interesting that a short story could span the same depth as a novel. At the time of our interview I finished reading Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*,

Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward*, and Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. Dr. Miller was well read for a psychiatrist and I thought we had a pleasant exchange of ideas, even as intellectual equals.

When I was admitted for the first time at Marquette General I told Dr. Holzgang that I had been there before and Dr. Miller agreed that he remembered me. But the doctors didn't find a chart because I'd never really been there.

"I think I'm already dead," I said.

Dr. Holzgang scribbled his intake notes. But these are confidential secrets from my basement.

The Keweenaw Star

Shock treatments obliterated so much of my cyclical negative thinking about martyrdom and my food being poisoned that I was soon able to enter the Marquette Hospital dining room and watch the other broken-down patients eat their food and even eat along with them. One of my favorite tables in the past had two chairs and overlooked the courtyard, a concrete square blocked in all sides by the exterior walls of the hospital, a red stripe on the ground around the perimeter. In the courtyard were four planter containers filled with what looked like unnatural plants, too dark and too evergreen, with leaves that had ultra sharp points on the ends. A few of the plants produced green tomatoes, yet I never saw anyone water the plants. The only sound in the courtyard was a loud humming from an outside fan, part of the cooling system for the entire hospital. The square with the red line also looked like my elementary school gym and exactly like a recurring nightmare I'd had as a child. When someone pushed me out of one door, and opposite me on the square a huge black spider emerged from another door to chase me along the red line, spectators cheering for the spider to overtake me.

Our courtyard was set in the middle of the hospital, and the building pinnacled around it another two floors so we were completely safe and confined in a box. The door, usually locked, was open and sometimes I saw a patient or two wandering outside, peering at the plants, looking far up at the sky and listening to the loud white noise coming from the fan. During one of my hospitalizations, one group of patients stood in a circle and kicked around a hacky sack which reminded me of my ex-boyfriend, Jonathan's, full-body hack performances at Bluegrass, Blues and Brews, Telluride Mountain Film and The Nothing Festival. That was a sight, but then the patients disappeared. Sometimes the same patients were there from previous hospitalizations and those patients took on special significance, like one named Michael who breathed in

wheezing rasps and would sit in one of the two chairs framing the smoking room entrance. In my mind, he became a guardian dragon.

One time Michael even sat across from me at the table for two overlooking the courtyard. I always felt I was in a marriage sitting at that table. Usually I had to stare at my food in silence, alone at that table, but sometimes someone would be brave enough to share a table with me, someone who refused to eat. Tables for two lined the entire dining room and two long tables sat in the middle of the room each with eight or more seats. During full moon periods when the patient number would spike, those tables would fill up. I coined the middle tables as *The Last Supper* tables. The most robust and full-of-life patients finished everything on their plate and the back private kitchen was open for late night snacks for patients to raid and rummage for yogurt, chips, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and ice cream. Nice comfort foods for healing with little nutritional value spilled out of the cupboards. Many of the antipsychotic and mood-stabilizer medications side-effects were increased appetite.

Once in a while I see a former patient like Jasper at the grocery store or walking the streets of the local town, Houghton, and if he's plump I know that he poses little threat since he's probably still taking his medication.

I was driving the ten-mile commute to pick up my son from school last week and tuned into the local news on the radio. The announcer described how the police had engaged in a high-speed chase with a man suspected of a breaking and entering in the town five miles north of where I live, Calumet. The suspect drove his mini-van through the front doors of the outpatient facility at Copper Country Mental Health. These incidents cause me alarm and put me into a red

alert mode like terror alerts at airports. The last time I was hospitalized occurred immediately after another mental health patient made the news. A twenty-year old named Jesse took a cruise on a local sightseeing *Keweenaw Star* boat tour. The Star trolls through the manmade canal that separates the twin towns of Houghton and Hancock and passes under a large lift-bridge with twin towers that flash blinking red lights on the top. Jesse plunged off the side of the boat and was dismembered by the spinning rudder. The authorities found his suicide note afterwards. Already in a fragile state of mind as I was enduring depression after my second son's birth, this news set me off. The patients seem all hardwired into one larger organism that ebbs and wanes with the tides. I wondered whether Jesse even knew what he was doing or if he was driven to suicide in psychosis. The note made it seem premeditated, but I remained suspicious.

When a patient drives his mini-van through the front doors in desperate need of help, I know that the siren lights might come for me next. I don't know who I am to this patient, but I might find out in the new space of narratives created within the hospital. After the patient Jesse's death, I knew I couldn't hold out much longer, and when I reached the hospital it was what I like to call a full house, packed and loud with laughter, tears, shouting, madness, pacing, and rocking. One of the patients, Mary, sat outside of another patient Charlie's room crying for him for days. Mary was obese and had short blond hair and glasses. She came up to me in the hallway of the hospital and stopped within an inch of my body and face.

"The nurses don't know about me and you," she said. "Who we are to each other."

A nurse broke us up after saying that we were making her uncomfortable. She had a threatened look in her eyes. Another nurse always fingered her gold cross around her neck when she talked to me. And three of the nurses were so skinny that they looked anorexic as well and

they wore wedding rings and gold jewelry. I imagined that they had recouped their family's lost gold during the atrocities of the Holocaust and that maybe I was somehow responsible, a Nazi in a past life. They would weigh us each every morning at nine a.m. and mark it down in their charts. And I got lighter and lighter. It also reminded me of weighing in for a boxing fight. But the opponent is unseen or is everyone. Everyone and no one.

Many of the patients sit in an area with magazines and four telephones hooked up to the walls. It's kind of like indefinite waiting as we watch the nurses come on and off duty behind glass walls sitting with their files, computer monitors, and medications. We watch them more than they could possibly watch us and eavesdrop on one another's telephone conversations. I was convinced one patient with a rat tail was a reporter. He scribbled notes while talking on the phone and then I started thinking he was talking about me with every mention of a vague woman as *she*.

All of the memories blend together, like when I finally entered the smoking room to have a cigarette after quitting for two years. The lighter was a button on the wall and a flaming red circle would light up and the patient would have to stick his face to the wall. I pressed the button and Charlie, moving faster than any man in his seventies should, sprung from his chair and choked me with all of his force. The nurses were watching through the two panes of glass and pried his hands off my throat. I imagine I was Charlie's demon in all this and he didn't see me as belonging to that select group of people smoking. The Native American belief that I was familiar with was that tobacco gave people access to the spirits and I was ready to try anything to release me from that place of eternity. I trespassed over Charlie's territory and did not try to smoke a cigarette again until after my ECT treatments, when I was no longer hell-bent on keeping my body a temple, so holy even food and water could defile it.

The nurses pulled Charlie's arthritic fingers one by one off of my soft neck and escorted me back to the pod of waiting chairs and magazines next to the telephones. I sat back down and stared through the glass at the smokers in their hazy lair. I waited and waited. The nurses called out for everyone to come and take their p.m. meds at the center pod where the nurses stayed, the nurses' station. Some days I took the medicine and some days I refused to take the Dixie cup that tasted like cardboard into my mouth along with the fleshy looking capsules. I picked up a *National Geographic* magazine whose article seemed like a positive hoax. Every article in every magazine on the table seemed fake and manufactured for the patients' benefit—So much so that reading made me feel that I was feeding my brain more propaganda. I wish I could remember all the individual articles. One was about an explorer in some region of Africa letting this man named Michael lead an expedition. Michael Fay, an explorer-in-residence, didn't know that he was being studied and being coaxed to lead under observation. It made me think that my whole life was an experiment and that I was under observation.

Snippets of conversation came back to me from my family members and the awkward experience of watching my sister, Crystal, and my boyfriend at the time, Josh, grocery shop together. Maybe she cared for him because he was so noble to pretend to date a developmentally retarded girl, me. That's it! I was tested in the first grade to see if I was a slow learner. I remember being tested on a computer, but it seems unlikely and may be a misplaced memory of the Commodore 64 my mom's boyfriend programmed with Easter egg hunt riddles for me and Crystal and Jesse (my brother shares the same name as the dismembered). My mom always claimed that the test was because I started school earlier than many of my peers at age four and it took me a little while to catch up. But what if all of my little successes and As were applauded

by those cheering on the retarded girl? All my boyfriends in the past years were taking advantage of an obviously slow girl who didn't fit in and said things at inappropriate times.

My whole life suddenly made sense when I made this revelation. Video reels of old family movies we projected onto our welfare home's cream colored walls, blipped past me in my mind. My dad kept calling my name, "Michelle...Shellers," but I never responded and my eyes didn't quite focus even though I was old enough to walk. I imagined the stress of raising a special needs child was too much and my dad ran away from our family in Hawaii because of the responsibility. My sister wouldn't try to take away Josh, who was like a father to my son, Yalmer, from us. She just found compassion in a man who pretended to be my significant other and help me raise my child, despite the sneers from people in the community, laughing at the guy dating the slow girl with a baby.

That delusion stayed with me for a few days. I even confronted Josh on the phone at the hospital in the waiting area.

"Am I retarded?" I asked. "Tell me the truth."

Of course, he said, "No." What else could he say? The entire experiment would fall around him. I also suspected my husband, Kiran, led a double life. When he went to work, he had a chance to be with his real wife, Mary, and her children and that our child together and our marriage was really part of his work with the Department of Energy. I hadn't completely figured out how exactly or why exactly a wife and child would be supported by the DOE, unless the government was harnessing my energy in some unknown fashion. I didn't confront my husband with this suspicion.

I cradled the phone back in its hook and went back to staring at the walls. It became dark and the halls more restless with patients roaming. Either a patient or a nurse knocked over a stack of pamphlets on contracting HIV all over the floor by my feet at the same time that a phlebotomist from the lab came to my waiting chair and tied the tourniquet around my wrist. He tapped my vein with his powdered purple glove. This is the moment they stick a dirty needle in me and give me the HIV virus, I thought. The doctors were using me to create a vaccine just as they deliberately infected African Americans in the Tuskegee experiments and the Guatemalan mental health patients with gonorrhea and syphilis. There were some drawbacks to Medicare coverage. The phlebotomist took a couple of vials of blood from me and left. I always thought the color purple was supposed to denote loyalty and royalty. I would have to navigate those words into this new scenario of the blood-letting. In the past, I imagined I was receiving something similar to star stickers for the levels I gained with each day that they drew my blood for lab work. I had blood samples taken every morning while doctors adjusted the medication. The inside of my elbow darkly bruised and pricked made me look like I was a heroin addict. It would be easy to find my body on the streets after a hospitalization and discard me as a junkie. Thinking that I was passing into different levels of reality with each passing day and conquering levels of enlightenment like I was playing Mario Brothers or Metroid on a Nintendo gaming system I gladly extended my arm for the men and women with purple hands to collect my blood, to categorize it, to find a place of meaning for my genetic composition, Michelle Primeau exalted at the 539th shell of heaven. Like a Buddhist attaining an extra dimensional heaven or an electron orbiting a nucleus in a new and more complicated orbital shell, I marveled at the advances science could make from the study of my blood.

This all seems silly, of course. And the sillier the first thoughts seem when I arrived at the hospital, the closer I know I am to recovery. I attended all the groups that I was allowed to: Arts and Crafts, where I hammered out a leather belt and checkbook holder and then graduated to woodworking a small step-up stool for my son to stand on when he brushes his teeth. I never did get to make a pair of moccasin slippers. I was forbidden from that project and I suspected it was reserved for patients that the nurses expected to stay in adult foster care in half-way homes when released. I also attended a Grooming Group where I relearned to make-up my face in garish cosmetics derived from animal fats gathered from euthanized pets and road kill. But my lips looked ruby red and my lashes full. I was ready to start fitting in as a woman again. I pushed down any thoughts that I looked like the Joker from *Batman*. *I am beautiful. I am normal.* I attended the Goals group where we made a goal for our upcoming future. The goals have to be realistic. Mine usually follow along like this: to leave the hospital, to raise my son, and to finish graduate school. I hope mine is realistic. I realize that I am high-functioning and don't want to appear like I'm flaunting my recovery and prospects. I attended Anger Management where we discussed coping skills and even forced myself to watch a video for the Bipolar Group about seeing the world with rose-tinted glasses. I was slightly paranoid that I forgot one of my art projects behind in the hospital. There was a strict rule in place that all art projects must go home with the patient. My project was a tile mosaic made from colored pieces of glass embedded in grout, but somehow the grout turned from white to rose color, unlike everyone else's. I became convinced that the authorities used my mosaic as a pattern of how my brain works in its rose-colored hue. I pushed down all thoughts of paranoia.

I reached level III, and the staff tested me to see if I could responsibly handle a day pass, or an outing with other patients. I stayed with the group and did as I was told. It was the first

time I'd breathed fresh air in months other than in the courtyard, which somehow doesn't count. That is the air of nightmares.

My world seemed brighter and calm. I left the hospital, eating full meals again and with a new list of medications and a case manager to check on me and supervise me, filling my prescription medicine box correctly for each day of the week. After the ECT treatments, the psychiatrists started me on a new medicine called Abilify (my mom thought food was manna from heaven when she started Abilify at the group home, the Rice House, where she listened to a three-fingered man play guitar) from that same class of antipsychotics which they wouldn't give me before the treatments, added to that a sleep aid, Ambien, and a mood-stabilizer, Lithium.

I didn't want to have another post-partum episode and was unsure of how capable I was to take care of myself and my children if I were ever to get pregnant again so I decided to take a Depo-Provera shot once every few months as a birth-control measure rather than just getting my tubes tied, which was another option.

In the realm of mental health, patients are referred to as *clients* as well as *consumers*. A supportive group in Ontario called Northern Initiative for Social Action publishes a literary magazine, *Open Minds Quarterly*. In their mission statement and title they describe the mask of mental illness hiding the individual underneath and the need to show these individuals can be productive and have worth in society through their art. It states: *Once you read an issue of Open Minds Quarterly, you'll see what we see: strong, creative, intelligent, human writers, people who have stories to share*. While I believe this statement was made in good faith, I can't help but flinch at the inclusion of the word *human* and be reminded of Arts and Crafts group both in the psych ward of the hospital and at two places I worked at as a client supervisor at Vocational

Strategies Inc. and a counselor at Camp Independence. Clients sat down and made art as a vocation, churning out Christmas cards, jewelry, woodwork, and paintings. The client, Jesse, created cubist style watercolors of cardinals, Christmas trees, and windows which were made into prints for holiday cards which I bought for my friends and family. My brother, Jesse, bought his wife Jessica a necklace. She told me that he said the retards made it.

Creating art is a valuable vocation and has a benefit to society, more than many other jobs I can think of which pay far more. The clients were receiving less than minimum wage when I worked there. But something about this whole endeavor reeked of the emphasis on art almost to prove clients have souls and are human like the clones or donors in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*.

Before I was hospitalized, I played Patty-Cake with Yalmer and danced to Israel Vibrations reggae music with him in my arms around my apartment. I helped him crawl towards his teething toy keys and propped up stuffed animals for him to look at while I cooked meals. He was still taking soy formula in bottles and I started feeding him organic baby food, occasionally making my own pureed foods. A banana in rice cereal was the easiest to mash. I wanted so badly to breast feed and even tried to bring my son's lips to my nipples, but my psychiatrist at the time strictly forbid it, since he was treating me with an anti-seizure medicine named Tegretol. The nurses took my son from my breast in the moments after birth. My body was tricked into thinking that I had lost my baby. Not being able to express milk and my hormonal imbalance caused a deeper depression. Without the physical act of nursing, I was not programmed with the need to be well for my son. My body thought it could die and my mind followed suit. Tears

dropped from my eyes onto my son's bare chest. I knew he needed my milk, but my milk was laced with poison. Each time I gave him a bottle of soy my stomach knotted up and my breasts ached.

Walking out of the hospital after ECT with my son, Yalmer, in my arms was rebirth. The aspen and birch trees leaves blew in the wind and goldfinches flittered back and forth. My son gurgled and squirmed in his button down sleeper outfits. He was just starting to smile and it seemed spontaneous. I giggled, he smiled. I bounced him on my knee and he smiled. I nuzzled his stomach with my nose and mouth and he laughed. He was pure shining love.

Curriculum Vita

Michelle Primeau was born in Kahuku, Hawaii. The fourth child of Donna Primeau and Robert Primeau, she graduated from Houghton High School, Houghton, Michigan, in the spring of 1996 while dual enrolled at Michigan Technological University. In the fall she entered The University of Minnesota at the Twin Cities College of Liberal Arts Honors program with the Auzins Chemistry Scholarship, The Gopher State Scholarship, and the Houghton Rotary Club Scholarship. In the fall of 1997, she studied at Humboldt State University on the National Student Exchange program. She worked at the Weisman Art Museum in Minneapolis from 1996 to 1998 while pursuing her studies. In 2002, she completed conservation training with Southwest Youth Corps, a branch of AmeriCorps. In the fall of 2003 she transferred to Michigan Technological University and in 2006 worked at their Writing Center as a writing coach. She began substitute teaching and received her Bachelor's of Arts degree in Interdisciplinary Studies from Michigan Technological University in 2007. In the fall of 2008, she entered the Graduate School at The University of Texas at El Paso. She volunteered as a co-editor for the literary magazine, Quicksilver, and published poetry in Blue Lake Review.

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