THESIS

SHAPING CONFUSION:
KEEPING ALIVE THE THINGS WE FORGOT WE REMEMBERED

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts
Colorado State University
Pueblo, Colorado
Fall 2016

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Abstract

Shaping Confusion: Keeping Alive the Things We Forgot We Remembered

*Shaping Confusion: Keeping Alive the Things We Forgot We Remembered* explores the applied concept of creative nonfiction as genre and practice. This study begins with the author’s own discomfort with the title of author and the implications of that title. The nebulous, indirect nature of creative nonfiction is distilled into a cohesive definition for study and analysis. Through the literary theories of New Criticism, Deconstructionism, and New Historicism, the collection of short stories, *Classy Girls Don’t Stay Out Past Midnight*, is analyzed and discussed. The author’s responsibility to truth versus fact and how that distinction relates to *Classy Girls Don’t Stay Out Past Midnight* is also analyzed. The collection of short stories follows the author from childhood through adulthood, engaging in ideas of feminism and politicism.
Acknowledgements

Many thanks to my thesis advisor, Iver Arnegard, for encouraging me to continue writing and to find meaning in the experience.

Gratitude to Juan Morales and Cynthia Taylor for serving on this thesis committee.

To everyone I’ve ever shared stories with, thank you. Except for that waiter at Marigold’s who didn’t think I was funny. You, sir, get no thanks.
Dedication

For Mom.

You were right. About almost everything just about ever.

and

For all the girls who want something more than this Provencal life
and for all the mothers who teach them it’s possible.

Stay classy.
An’ that’s one more thing a woman knows.
    I noticed that.
Man, he lives in jerks—baby born an’ a man dies,
an’ that’s a jerk—gets a farm and loses his farm,
an’ that’s a jerk.
    Woman, it’s all one flow,
like a stream,
    little eddies, little waterfalls,
but the river, it goes right on.
    Woman looks at it like that.

-John Steinbeck
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Introduction

“Your thesis, huh? What’s it on?”

“Some short stories. Creative nonfiction.”

And there it was. The all-too-familiar skeptical, slightly disappointed look flashed behind her eyes. “Oh. A memoir. That’s cool. What did you write about?” A seemingly innocent question, but I know what she’s really asking. Why you? What do you have to write about? What have you done that’s so noteworthy? All fine questions. I’m not a rock star. Or an actress. Or a politician with a juicy scandal. Or a… Or a… My discomfort with these questions plagued me until I accepted that I too have stories, that I have a voice worthy of being heard. As Frank McCourt noted after writing Angela’s Ashes, “I learned the significance of my own insignificant life” (qtd in Attig).

I stumbled into the genre of creative nonfiction quite by accident. I needed an elective course that started after work hours, and Intro to Creative Nonfiction was the only thing left. Not knowing what to expect, I quickly realized that creative nonfiction combined all the aspects of writing I admired—story, character, experimental formats, beautiful language, and truth. I continued writing and reading creative nonfiction, experimenting with new genres and formats and exploring themes through personal narrative. I also found that I began to remember things that I had forgotten, memories that were until then lost to me. My own life tapestry began to fill in, began to take a more formed shape, began to incorporate rich new shades of memory and experience. Along with these memories came the self-doubt, the questioning of truth. How
could I determine that a newly remembered event or moment was real and not fabricated? What responsibility to the truth did I have as a creative nonfiction author? For these answers, I turned to theory and academic discourse.

**What Do We Mean When We Say Creative Nonfiction?**

Creative nonfiction has a contested and varied past. In seemingly equal amounts, creative nonfiction is defined just as much by what it is not as by what it is. The problem with this approach, as noted by Becky Bradway and Doug Hesse, is that “[d]efining something by what it’s not is both unsatisfying and perilous” (3). Allowing a definition based on prescriptive notations of what does not constitute creative nonfiction results in a passive definition, the equivalent of shrugging one’s shoulders and mumbling an unintelligible, careless response. Robert Root also avoids a passive definition and defines the characteristics of an ideal definition: “[w]e want in a definition something not only accurate and current but also pointed and precise, something not compendious or cumbersome but still encompassing and inclusive. We want the definition to exclude what doesn’t belong but not what does; we want a match between term and artifact” (244). These characteristics provide a framework for a more comprehensive and useful definition of creative nonfiction.

Perhaps the most clearly articulated definition is provided by Barbara Lounsberry. In the introduction to her book, *The Art of Fact*, Lounsberry describes four characteristics of the genre, the first of which is “documentable subject matter chosen from the real world as opposed to ‘invented’ from the writer’s mind” (Lounsberry xiii). This is the main distinguishing point between fiction and creative nonfiction: the events portrayed in the text must be based on verifiable events. It is important to note that events must be based on actual memories, but that the way in which the event is used or relayed does not need to be exact; if it were, we would be
left with nothing more than an historical timeline. The second characteristic is “exhaustive research” (Lounsberry xiii), which she claims allows writers “novel perspectives on their subjects…[and] also permits them to establish the credibility of their narratives through verifiable references in their texts” (Lounsberry xiii–xiv). This authorial credibility is built not only through verifiable information but through the assemblage and structure of that information. It is the difference between a soldier’s remembrance of a past battle and a transcript of a radio operator’s terse communication of a battalion’s advancing or retreating coordinates. We as readers can derive the same information from both accounts, but our experience with the two texts is markedly different. Lounsberry asserts the third characteristic important to defining creative nonfiction is “the scene” (xiv). Her final criteria is “fine writing: a literary prose style” (Lounsberry xv). Recreating the scene for the reader and the use of literary prose are essential to the genre; they separate creative nonfiction from a mere accounting of occurrences. In summation, she states, “Verifiable subject matter and exhaustive research guarantee the nonfiction side of literary nonfiction; the narrative form and structure disclose the writer’s artistry; and finally, its polished language reveals that the goal all along has been literature” (Lounsberry xv).

Before we get too comfortable with Lounsberry’s prescriptive definition, Root observes that “[d]efinitions, almost by definition, are never definitive” (243). Bret Lott appears to support this un-definition in his article, “Toward a Definition of Creative Nonfiction.” His style, tone, and voice substantiate his authority as a writer, critic, and theorist of creative nonfiction; Lott asserts that “[c]reative nonfiction is, in one form or another, for better and worse, in triumph and failure, the attempt to keep from passing altogether away the lives we have lived” (359). Lott does not apply a rigid, one-size-fits-all definition; he correlates a singular definition with the
notion of “truth” and, because he cannot determine a comprehensive meaning of truth (the truth of truth, as it were), he does not provide a singular definition for creative nonfiction. Rather, he guides both readers and authors to a creative, nebulous, and beautiful way in which to consider the tenets of creative nonfiction and its place in the literary catalogue.

Bradway and Hesse also cite difficulties in defining a genre that seems to defy definition. They even take issue with the term creative nonfiction itself. “Oh, people have tried to devise that alternate label. Most of the terms are just too specific; they don’t encompass creative nonfiction’s many subgenres” (Bradway and Hesse 4). 1 After a lengthy discussion of the issues inherent in formulating a definition, Bradway and Hesse revel in the untidiness of terminology:

Creative nonfiction allows for a certain looseness of exploration. Some writers…are attracted to creative nonfiction for its very lack of definition. Over 250 years ago Samuel Johnson defined the essay as “a loose sally of the mind; an irregular indigested piece; not a regular and orderly composition.” This very irregularity is what makes creative nonfiction so much fun to write, if the writer is comfortable with that openness. (8)

This openness allows the author to explore not only concepts of self through story, but also concepts of self through presentation—linguistic style, format, and compilation. Creative nonfiction allows the author, and by extension, the reader, to recognize, understand, and employ rhetorical conventions within his or her own context, while simultaneously granting the ability to view these experiences within the context of the world at large.

Where is Creative Nonfiction Situated in the Literary Theory Spectrum?

As previously stated, creative nonfiction has a varied and contested past. It has been in and out of favor with readers and critics as the landscape of the literary world has changed. Autobiography marks one of creative nonfiction’s first avenues of mainstream acceptance. The

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1 While it may be true that the term “literary nonfiction” better captures the essence of all “…the stylistic and aesthetic elements that make creative nonfiction what it is” (Bradway and Hesse 4), I will retain the term creative nonfiction for the purposes of this paper.
notion of autobiography began before the term itself was born—Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography existed before the term, and only after its original publication was it referred to as autobiography. This historical and theoretical view does not extend to the faux-fiction produced in works such as Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre and Anthony Burgess’ A Clockwork Orange, which Leslie Schenk posits are “thinly veiled memoirs” (475). The repression and subjugation of self in favor of creating a more socially contextualized literary work is placed in opposition to the very nature of creative nonfiction. Three theoretical movements in particular shape the way creative nonfiction has been received in the past century.

Beginning from its vantage point as the lauded “new” autobiography, creative nonfiction found its foe in the New Critics, who proclaim the death of the author. If the author is irrelevant, how can creative nonfiction and all its subgenres speak to a personal truth or even to an authorial persona? The removal of both historical and biographical contexts from the interpretation of creative nonfiction meant that any text could mean anything, as long as the analyst could support his or her claims. Thus, new criticism became the basis of modern criticism, especially close reading. Removed from the context of Alaska, my flash nonfiction piece, “Ice in the Gearshift,” would lose its potency and would no longer speak to the full experience of my life that has been shaped by the fact (and the truth) that I grew up in Alaska. As Charles Berryman states, “autobiography was sacrificed by the New Critics on the altar of formalism” (73).

Taking it a step further, Deconstructionism and, namely, Jacques Derrida, take the death of the author to a radical extreme—language is a force unto itself, and language, not the human mind, is in control. A tenet of deconstructionism is the idea of différence where “meaning is made through differences among signs but never made certain and secure through those
differences” (Hall 162). While the view that nothing is certain or permanent—that relativism, skepticism, and disillusionment run rampant—resonates with the tone of failure, his descriptions of descriptions shock with their imagery of the brutal beauty of a vast emptiness. All words are “traces” or “a latent remnant of presence that is always slipping away from us” (Derrida qtd in Baldwin). These traces exist outside of history. We search for an origin, but the origin we seek is itself a trace; we cannot reach it. “Thus a text is floating, dying, ever changing before our eyes, like the night sky. What do we see in the heavens? Stars? No. We see ancient history. We see light which has traveled for millions of years from stars which are likely burned out and gone. We see what isn’t there anymore” (Baldwin).

I explore this fading away and impermanence of language in the segmented essays of “Word Association, Part 1” and “Word Association, Part 2.” Each set of words is joined by a specific memory or scene, and I attempt to express that scene through a single word. The words themselves have no more explicit or implicit connection than what I perceive as the answer to the initial word. The second word in each set cannot in its simple space relate the idea behind it—it is a weak signifier of the vivid memory expressed. The words themselves, the very language of language, are incomplete and leave us always striving for the ability to communicate. Language is imperfect—but so is humanity.

Sydney Lea states, “…the lyric essay, brief or book-sized, has at its core the way in which the essayist him- or herself, whether as persona or as someone named ‘I,’ considers his or her own sensibility,” (345). Because of this negotiation and reimagining and versioning of self and the language used to communicate this ephemeral self, the story presented by creative nonfiction is concerned more with the author’s truth rather than the undeniable, complete fact of

2 This notion of a definition through difference hearkens back to Bradway and Hesse’s dissatisfaction with such a definition model for the term creative nonfiction.
a situation. In this way, creative nonfiction finds its champion in New Historicism. New historians viewed defining the self as an expression of power—“Literature and history become interchangeable when all writing is interpreted as a form of power” (Berryman 73). New Historicism seeks to understand texts through cultural contexts and to understand history through literature. This process of thought centers creative nonfiction in the realm of both history and literature and makes writing about the self into a historically centered, political act.

I see my stories—and myself—situated in the ranks of the New Historicists: interconnectedness is a reality and the way in which I experience the world. Growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, this idea of politicization was instilled in me. Political discourse was the main mode of conversing with my father, as alluded to in my story, “1991–1992.” Because I was a child, political topics were never approached as such, but they shaped my view of the world and my role within it. I was brought up in a house that espoused feminist thought and outlook, and I benefited from the opposing political views of my Republican father and my Democratic mother. Their differing opinions taught me the value of seeking outside opinions and subsequently respecting those opinions, even if they are contrary to my own. Writing is a politicized movement, and the role of author is politically charged, whether or not the material itself is overtly political. Writing is politicized the same way sex, gender, and race are politicized—experience with and of the world is shaped in large part by these factors, and an author provides a glimpse into and sometimes a mirror image of that experience.

In the flash nonfiction story, “Becoming,” I am explicitly writing about my friend’s hobby of doll making. She is very talented, and there is beauty in the art of her creations. Implicitly, however, I am referring to the ways in which I as a girl/woman was taught to view beauty and how that view shaped my view of myself in correlation. This shaping of social norms
and social expectations of women is highly politicized. I titled the piece “Becoming” for several reasons. On the surface, the lifeless porcelain is slowly transformed into a doll—an effigy of femininity. It is becoming a recognizable object. It is also becoming in the adjectival sense—it is beautiful. In an abstract way, this story underscores my personal development, my becoming a woman both mentally and physically. Along with this notion of womanhood comes the realization that I am both more and less than the socially constructed feminine ideal. This realization is a binary that has the potential of fracturing my sense of self. Through identifying and analyzing this binary, alluded to in the final line of the story, I take ownership of the interconnectedness of femininity and feminism.

What is Creative Nonfiction’s Responsibility to Truth?

Once I was comfortable with the act of writing my memories, I was confronted with the concept of truth. Were my memories real? Do I have a right to claim something as real when I only remember moments and scenes? Do I have the right to impose my reminiscent will on someone else’s version of the same moment in time? To answer these questions, and to set my mind at ease, I engaged with authors of creative nonfiction in both practice and theory. I immediately drew comfort from Patricia Hampl’s contention that

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. It offers to shape this confusion—and in shaping, of course it necessarily creates a work of art, not a legal document. But then, even legal documents are only valiant attempts to consign the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth to paper. Even they remain versions. (“Memory and Imagination” 313)

It is this notion of truth as a versioning process that I, like so many other authors, have adopted in my writing. In my short story, “Ice Maze,” I write about wearing a hooded sweatshirt. I don’t really remember wearing a sweatshirt, let alone that specific Spitfire sweatshirt, but I do
remember the cold and the way my nasal cavity tingled with each breath. I chose to write that I was wearing a sweatshirt because it was typical, it was frequent, and in truth, I probably was. That detail speaks more to the truth of the situation than to the fact of it. It’s a minor detail, one probably not worth quibbling over, but it speaks to the impermanence of memory and our belief in the veracity of our own memories—I asked Schmitt about that day, and he swears I was wearing a green dress.

Creative nonfiction crosses genre lines, being at once truthful and fictive. While the notion of Deconstructionism’s authorial irrelevance seems to stand contrary to the very base of creative nonfiction, its defiance of absolutes provides the author a bastion of hope, a sense of calm reassurance. By questioning the very nature of language itself, the differences between truth and fact are called into question and rendered useless. For what is the use of a signifier when it can only hint at the truth of the signified? And how is that different than the shadowlands between truth and fact? If there is no absolute truth and no absolute fiction, then creative nonfiction cannot be culpable in selling unintentional half-truths. The emphasis of the word “unintentional” speaks to the spirit of all of the un-definitions of creative nonfiction—the intent of the author is to tell the truth in an artful way.

The loose structure of memory is a prominent theme for many creative nonfiction theorists. As Phillip Lopate notes,

The personal or familiar essay is a wonderfully tolerant form, able to accommodate rumination, memoir, anecdote, diatribe, scholarship, fantasy, and moral philosophy. It can follow a rigorously elegant design, or—held together by little more than the author’s voice—assume an amoebic shapelessness. Working in it liberates a writer from the structure of the well-made, epiphanous short story and allows one to ramble in a way that more truly reflects the mind at work. (351)

As a reader and a writer, I find that I prefer this “amoebic shapelessness” of prose. While there is comfort in a nicely packaged story with a conclusion, I prefer the open ending. These stories
resonate and keep me thinking of the possibilities still available to the characters. In many ways, I believe this sort of non-ending is more true to life—what seems to be an ending in the moment turns out to rarely be a true ending, but more of an intermission. As Robert L. Root, Jr. states, the openness in creative nonfiction “… makes demands not only on the writer but on the reader as well” (378). The reader must be willing to join the author in an open-ended story and must be willing to draw conclusions for him or herself. This way of engaging in a text allows the reader to draw parallels from the story to his or her own life and to expand another’s experience into a collective experience that may guide the reader to a deeper meaning and truth.

The nature of truth is slippery. It asks more questions than it answers, as any good teacher does. In this way, memory provides an interesting avenue for reaching a deeper truth. Memory is faulty and fickle; it is constantly being informed by the author’s perception of the world and his or her place in it. As Lea states, “…the lyrical essay chiefly concerns the essayist’s perception of his or her surroundings, whether natural or otherwise. And since it’s concerned with perception, it is ultimately concerned with the essayist’s own mind in action” (348). Peter Ives adds, “I would like to challenge the nature of memory, to question the notion that all must be known before an event can be rendered truthfully as story. Indeed, because a large part of our lives can never be retrieved, it is a storyteller’s duty to use whatever tools are at hand” (325). For the creative nonfiction author, these statements provide relief. The author must make an honest attempt at telling the truth, but the nature of memory denies a perfect transcript of events, people, and conversations. This glorious flaw of memory allows Lounsberry’s “artistry” to step in and complete the scene, help the author find his or her voice, and help the reader incorporate the meaning into his or her life.
Through the art of creative nonfiction, the author is revealed. When I wrote “The Moon was Just a Sliver Back Then,” my only intent was writing a segmented essay that captured memories of a treasured friendship. However, when I workshopped the story and re-read it later on, I realized that it spoke to more than a friendship. Dave was a first love, whether or not I realized it. Our friendship was a pivotal moment in my transition from childhood to young adulthood, and the lessons I learned from that relationship have informed many relationship decisions since then, including romantic relationships, which I allude to in one of the segments of that essay. I found Jorge Luis Borges’ ruminations on the subject of authorial revelation to be entirely accurate and prescient: “A man who sets himself to the task of portraying the world may spend years drawing images of kingdoms, mountains, stars, horses, and people, only to discover shortly before his death that the labyrinth of lines traces the image of his face” (qtd in Spengemann 167). Authors reveal more about themselves through the stories they choose to tell, the words they choose to write. In this way, every act of writing is a political statement about the self. Readers, too, learn about themselves by what they believe is the meaning behind the story, by what they believe is the applicability.

Conclusion

Humans live their lives through texts. These texts invite change, whether that change is omission, re-emphasizing, or re-telling. My inauspicious introduction to creative nonfiction awoke in me a desire for locating myself within the context of the world. I appreciate the opaque nature of creative nonfiction—it seems to mean something slightly different to each person. The difficulty of terminology is a main point of Deconstructionism, and I revel in its uncertainty. Without strict bonds of definition, the creative nonfiction author is free to test limits of structure, memory, and language. But it is with the New Historicists that I locate my writing. The
interconnectedness of society, politics, history, and humanity define my experiences and my true self. Truth is a sly term, and its meaning in creative nonfiction is somewhat obscured. I have found a balance of truth in my stories: they are true, they are real. As Mimi Schwarz states, “Go for the emotional truth, that’s what matters” (400). This emotional truth extends beyond the author and reader to encompass the imperfect state of being human. As Hampl notes, “The past is radiant. It sheds the light of a lived life. One who writes memoir wishes to step into that light, not to see one’s own face—that is not possible—but to feel the length of shadow cast by the light…” (Stories 36).

With that, I offer Classy Girls Don’t Stay Out Past Midnight.
Works Cited


Lea, Sydney. “What We Didn’t Know We Knew.” Root, Jr. and Steinberg, pp. 344-50.


CLASSY GIRLS DON’T STAY OUT PAST MIDNIGHT
October

Neighbor Jim looked up as I walked down his driveway. For a moment he seemed cross, and I was sure he would send me back home. But then he glanced at his children, products of his first and second divorces, and nodded me over. I was younger than Jesse by two years, but the same age as Karen. They watched, Karen crying, as he hung the dead fox over the chicken wire that surrounded the chicken coop. I knew he’d lost several chickens in the last few days. Dad said it was shaping up to be a harsh winter and the snow had come early. It was cold in early October. I already had my pink coat on with the mittens run through the arms on a long string. I was defiantly not wearing the mittens, content to let them dangle at my sides. My mom had wanted to put me in my snowpants, purple overalls with plastic snaps, but I’d run out of the house and down the driveway before she could finish snaking them out of the closet. As I stood with Jesse, trying to mold my face to match her dispassionate interest, I wished I had my snowpants. Jim took a long curved knife and slit the belly of the fox. It’s innards ran out in one long, winding loop. I’d never given much thought to what was on the inside, but I’d assumed it was all one piece. Now I stared, horrified at the pile of steaming guts, wondering if my own internal organs were in such sloppy disarray. Karen let out a sickened sob and ran inside. I wanted to follow her, but I stayed. Jim peeled the pelt off the fox, leaving a hollow meaty carcass. Its clouded eyes were still in their sockets. For a moment, I was convinced they were looking at me. Into me. Accusing me. Jim turned and headed back to the house, pelt in hand.

“Are you gonna take the fox down?” I asked in a small voice.

He turned, that cross look flitting across his features again. “No. The smell of the fox will warn the others to stay away from the coop.”
“Won’t they just eat the fox?”

“Nature doesn’t work that way.”

I stood, weighing his words. I thought about the ground squirrel I’d come across that summer. It had split the skin off a fellow ground squirrel and slowly ate it, pulling pieces out of its body and nibbling delicately, its tiny hands grasping and turning the flesh. I opened my mouth to share this insight, that nature did too work that way, but then thought better of it. I watched Jim walk up the steps to the porch, Jesse right behind. The smell of the stinking carcass and pile of guts mixed with the smell of baking cookies that wafted out the front door.

November

Dad said it was one of the coldest winters he’d seen in a long time. He said it, I took it as fact. It was cold enough to crack the glass in my bedroom window. I woke up one morning staring at the silvery crack running an arc. My dad said it was 65 below. I knew that was cold because he told me it was 65 above in California, 130 degrees of difference. We didn’t fix the window. It was the outermost of a triple pane, and so it didn’t need fixing, Dad said. That winter was the first time the moose came to my window. She brought her yearling to the pliable branches of the pussywillows that grew outside my bedroom. I watched as they munched on the still-tender shoots, their breath fogging the glass. The yearling was still awkward on spindly legs, its knobby knees unsteady in the snow. Mama had to nudge him to get him moving. In the dark November mornings, they were my visitors. I watched in silence as they wandered through the yard, munching on trees, the yearling skittering down icy patches of the sloping sideyard. They always disappeared into the forest to the north. Dad said it was our land, 11 acres of it. I didn’t know what that meant, an acre, but I thought he was wrong. The morning belonged to the moose,
and the land must also be theirs. It was still moose season, and dad hung No Trespassing signs along the perimeter of the 11 acres. It didn’t stop all hunters, though, from crossing the lines. Dad and I were out snowshoeing when we came across a hunter’s campground at the back of the property. They weren’t there. He waited for them to return that afternoon and told them they had exactly 10 minutes to pack their gear and be gone. I watched from the edge of the trees in a trench we had dug in the snow. Dad did most of the work; I used a plastic garden trowel for my part. One of the men in the party tried to engage my dad in small talk and explain that they were just using our land as base camp, that they weren’t hunting there. Dad ignored him and checked his watch. “Nine minutes.” Dad held a rifle casually at his side, the old canvas strap hanging from his shoulder. Every minute Dad nonchalantly counted down their remaining time. I watched from the trench in my purple snowpants, the edges of my snowshoes biting into the crusted snow. Dad followed them until they were off our land, signaling me to stay put. As they walked, Dad told the men about a place a few miles up the road where the game trail crossed a creek and was still active.

As we snowshoed toward home, I asked “Why did you help them?”

“If they think they have a better chance somewhere else, they won’t come back here.”

“But isn’t that your place to hunt?”

He turned to look at me then, his blue eyes peering through the opening in his balaclava. They crinkled at the corner, so I knew he was smiling. “It’s not my place. It’s no one’s place. And I’d rather have them far away than near our house. Did you see the bottles in the snow?”

I nodded. There had been a few half-empty bottles of something the color of amber and some bigger, square bottles that held a darker liquid. “One of the bigger bottles belonged to someone named Jack Daniels,” I said.
Dad stopped walking, put his hands on his hips, and laughed. His laugh was a slow rumble that started in his chest and rolled out of his mouth in a way that made me feel happy, as if he embraced me with that laugh. I didn’t know what I’d said to make him laugh, but I grinned as if we shared a secret. He shook his head and turned back toward home.

“Come on, kid. It’s getting dark.”

December

My seven-year-old image is forever captured on glossy 5x7 paper. My brown hair is shiny in the flash of the camera. Knowing we would be taking Christmas pictures for the family, my mom washed my hair in city water boiled on the stove. We would shampoo and rinse my hair over the kitchen sink and then mix a paste of some white powder and water and spread that on my hair. Then she’d put her shower cap on my head and let it sit for awhile. Too long. The paste started to smell and the shower cap was itchy. Mom heated more city water and waited for it to cool. She removed the cap and the raw iron stench assaulted my nose. The now-orange paste stripped the mineral deposits from my hair. We rinsed it down the drain and shampooed my hair again. I asked Mom why we had to do this. She said there was too much iron in the well water and that it made my hair gummy and dull. It’s also why we couldn’t use the dishwasher or the washing machine. I told her I didn’t mind washing dishes in the sink and that I liked going to the laundromat where there was a Pac-Man arcade game and we could watch reruns of MASH on TV. She had smiled then, and told me I was an alright kid. Mom still made some of my clothes, and in the picture I’m wearing a blue floral dress with a white Peter Pan collar. The fabric reminded me of our wallpaper, except that the wallpaper was brown, like our carpet. I’m standing in front of the Christmas tree. It’s dripping with tinsel and showcases my Grandma’s handmade ornaments. Grandma Gladys died before I was born, but Mom said I would have liked
her. She had died of cancer, which Mom said was like having a foreign cell in your body that
turned your other cells against you. “Like a mutiny?” I had asked, thinking of a word in a book I
had read. “Yeah, you could say that.” She gave me an odd look then, and I thought it was like the
look she had given me when she read my school report card, which suggested I stop correcting
my teacher, even if she was wrong. But it was Christmas and my hair was shiny and I was
wearing one of Mom’s handmade dresses. Standing in front of the tree, I thought nothing could
be better. The day was cold and clear, the daylight already fading at 1:00 in the afternoon. I was
missing two teeth, and my broad grin proudly displayed their absence. That year my big gift was
two Ninja Turtle action figures, Donatello, my favorite, and Leonardo, who was alright too.

*January*

I woke up to the sound of sobbing. It was coming from the living room. I rubbed my eyes
and walked out of my bedroom. Mom was holding Karen on the couch that sat in front of the big
windows. The curtains were closed. Karen was crying. I didn’t know why Karen was in my
living room or why she was wearing pajamas. Then my dad led Jim in the house too. Dad
pointed Jim to the phone, which was where it always was, sitting on the stone hearth that
surrounded the black potbelly stove. Jim sat next to the phone and slowly picked it up. I looked
into his eyes to try to guess what was happening. His eyes were blank, and his face was slack. He
had to clear his throat several times before he spoke into the phone. I turned back to Mom, scared
now. She held her free hand out to me and I crossed the room to her. She was still holding Karen,
but now she held me too. I snuggled into her warmth, wanting to ask what was happening, but
not wanting to know. I had stumbled on a scene of disquiet and I felt like a stranger there. After
Karen had stopped crying, Mom sent her to bed with me. We crawled into my bed, now cold
with the air that whispered through my window. I held Karen’s hand and told her it was going to be okay, not knowing what it was. She nodded, and I felt her tears hit the pillow. I squeezed her hand and put my arm around her. In the morning, Mom woke me up and told me I didn’t have to go to school that day, that I would be staying home. Karen was still asleep, but I got up and shuffled into the hallway to find answers. Jim was sleeping on our couch, wrapped in my Care Bears blanket, one leg dangling off the edge of the sofa. He was still wearing his boots and Carhartts. The curtains were still closed, so I opened the front door. The rush of cold air stole my breath, and I looked out at the clear cold day and saw steam and smoke intermingling, curling lazily into the sky. It was coming from where Jim’s house was, but there was no house. Only stones in the ground marked where the house had been, and I followed the layout, picturing each room. The four-wheelers and Jim’s old brown truck looked untouched. The shed was gone, and the chicken coop was singed, its raw-hewn timbers black from smoke and fire. I thought about the fox, its entrails spilled out onto the ground. I had watched then too as the steam rose, twisting into the bitter air.

*February*

I sat with Dad in the car, watching the light fade over the horizon. The sun had stayed out until 4:30 today. Days were getting longer. Paul Harvey was just finishing his broadcast. I didn’t listen to his stories like Dad did, but I liked the sound of his voice over the radio. The cadence changed depending on what part of the story he was telling, and he punctuated his sentences oddly, bringing emphasis to certain words and phrases. I liked that there was always a promise for “the rest of the story.” There was stability in those words. I also liked the way he said “Good day” at the end of the broadcast. There was something about it that was final, but not *final* final
because he said it in the same voice he would say “the rest of the story,” almost like he wanted you to know that he was leaving for the day, but not forever. His voice marked the passage of time and afternoons spent with Dad. I didn’t like the guy Dad listened to after Paul Harvey—his voice was not pleasant and he always seemed angry about something. His name was strange, Rush something. I had always thought of rush as a verb, but when I saw the picture of him, I guessed it had been a long time since he had rushed anywhere. The local news came on and reported another suicide, this one a teenager. I didn’t pay much attention, but I did hear the newscaster say that suicide was on the rise as winter wore on. February and winter was perched comfortably on the town, showing no intention of departing. Dad said February is a hard month in Fairbanks. Despite all evidence to the contrary, people still seem surprised at winter’s ability to stay, unbidden, for months at a time. I’d heard Mom say that it was hardest on people from the Lower 48 who were used to daylight and seasons and fluctuating weather. Mom said that’s why Fort Wainwright had one of the most in-depth suicide prevention programs of any Army base in the world. She was a nurse, so I figured she would know. I thought that made sense because people from the South faced a big change coming to this land with its legendary weather and hours of unbroken darkness. Dad called it an inability to adjust.

“Why would someone want to kill themselves?” I asked.

Dad thought for a moment. “Sometimes life can seem overwhelming, like there’s just too much or too little going on. And sometimes people lose themselves.”

I thought about that. “But why? Don’t they have friends to talk to?”

“Well, kid, not everyone feels like they have friends or people who love them. If they don’t think there’s anyone who can help, they might just…give up.”
I still didn’t understand, but I turned back to my book. There were things in the book I didn’t understand either, but that had context and I could pick at the meaning. But ending your own life had no context. It was too dark now to read, so I put the book down, contenting myself to watch the stars overtake the afternoon sky.

March

Another gray day. I didn’t want to watch a movie, and I didn’t want to read. I wandered from room to room in the house accompanied by exaggerated sighs of boredom. Mom quickly tired of my listlessness and sent me outside. I didn’t want to play either. I sat on the hill in front of the living room slowly picking up handfuls of snow. It was too dry to form into a shape, so I let it sift through my gloved fingers and fall back to the ground. The snow had been here for too long, I thought crossly. I couldn’t even sink into it, it had such a thick crust on it. I got up and went to the garage, dragging my feet through the snow and kicking at the banks on either side of the walkway. I opened the garage door and was met with a blast of heat and a warm, sharp familiar smell. Gun oil and metal shavings and burning wood. Dad was working on a new gun, the machine slowly shaving off a spiral of metal of what would be a sight. He looked up when I came in and then went right back to work. I sat on a stool in the corner by the stove watching the spiral of metal get longer and longer until it broke off and fell to mix with the wood shavings on the dirt floor. Dad turned off the machine.

“Hey, kid. Want to help make bullets today?”

I grinned and nodded. I liked holding the wax and plastic forms while he poured in the molten lead. Every time Dad saw a lead wheel weight on the road, he would stop and pick it up. He melted these and other things down to make bullets. After the shooting range closed for the
day, I would walk up and down the range with Dad and pick up the spent bullets. Sometimes other men would be out doing the same thing, scavenging the cast-offs for useable treasures. When we were joined by others, Dad would nod at them, and they would nod back. No words would be spoken. Every few weeks Dad would collect enough lead to make a few cases of new bullets. I watched him lock the gun parts he was making in the safe at the back of the shop. He got out the metal bowl for melting lead and his big work gloves for handling the hot implements. I picked up the oversize tongs and waited for Dad to hand me the molds we would use that day. We waited in silence for the lead to melt. Words were kept to a minimum.

“Now hold it level, like I showed you.”

“Like this?”

“Uh-huh. Good, put it on the counter and grab the red one. Mm-hmm. Keep it steady, yep like that.”

When we had filled all the forms, I left Dad in the workshop and walked out of the garage, my boredom long forgotten. The heat steamed from my head as I stood in the bright daylight, so different than the dark, cave-like atmosphere of the garage. I walked back up to the house, anticipating the next visit to the range where we would get to shoot the bullets we had just made.

April

Breakup was my least favorite season. Dad said some places had a season called Spring, and I thought that sounded much nicer. Mom said spring was a time when the temperatures warmed and flowers bloomed. Spring promised new beginnings; breakup promised mud. It meant that all the snow that had accumulated throughout winter was finally melting. We lived on
a rutted dirt road called Adventure Road. Our road sign was frequently stolen, and after the fourth request, the borough stopped paying for replacements. Then Dad and the neighbor with the two sled dog teams hauled a giant boulder and a rusty old CAT track to the road where it met the highway, and we just told people to turn at the boulder and CAT track. In time, those were also stolen. But by then the city officials had changed a few times and Dad’s request for a new sign was granted. “Wait long enough, kid, and eventually Government forgets.” During breakup, our road was a mud pit. Mom and Dad parked the car in the gravel pit and we changed into our puddlejumpers. From the gravel pit we’d haul groceries, backpacks, purses, and guns down the road and up our winding driveway to the house. In winter our car sometimes couldn’t make it up the driveway, but it wasn’t muddy then. Just cold and icy, which was far more predictable than slippery squishy silty mud. Mom said that’s why the mud was so slippery—all the silt in it. She said if you fell in the river, it didn’t matter how good a swimmer you are, the silt would collect in your clothes and drag you to the bottom. Clearly, mud was not to be trusted. Sometimes breakup was punctuated with deep freezes that turned the once quarrelsome mud into obedient frosted land carved into whatever tracks had been driven through it prior to freezing. I was thankful for the bitter cold as it allowed us to drive all the way home. Because of the changing weather, we always had at least two different types of footwear in the trunk, puddlejumpers and winter boots. That’s the same reason Dad taught me to drive the previous summer. He said I needed to be able to get somewhere and get help since we lived so far out of town. But it was like when he taught me to shoot my rifle. These weren’t trifling games. He taught me reverence for the beautiful, frightening power of each.

“A man who can’t be in sufficient awe of the destructive nature of a gun has no right to shoot one. Same for vehicles. If you remember that, kid, you’ll be ok.”
May

Dad liked going to the dump. I liked it too. We didn’t have trash service out in the rural areas, and consequently, there were no dump fees. You could come and go from the dump at your leisure. Even better were the dumpsters labeled for specific use—timber, metal, recycle, and miscellaneous. Dad and some other guys would pick through the timber dumpster to find any salvageable wood for whatever project they happened to be working on. Currently my dad was intrigued by printing presses and was talking about building one in the garage. When I asked why, he responded “Why not?” He poked through the metal and recycle dumpsters as well, often filling the back of the truck with findings to exchange at the recycle center in town for money. Dad said the best time to go to the dump was in spring and summer because it was finally warm enough for people to clear out all the stuff they’d been sitting on in the cold winter months. I liked the giveaway platform. It was a gazebo set up near the entrance of the dump that people could drop off things they didn’t want anymore but that were too nice to throw away. I liked going through the books. Sometimes there were movies too and cassette tapes. I picked up my first The Who tape there; Mom said she already had that album. There were old metal benches affixed to the concrete base of the gazebo platform where I would sit and go through the remnants of other peoples’ lives. When I found a good book, I would just start reading it while Dad finished poking through his bins. He told me about how the city had tried to make dumpster diving illegal, but that so many people had showed up to protest that they dropped the issue. When Dad was ready to go, he’d help me carry anything I wanted to take. I looked through the back window of the truck as we left the dump and watched the men going through the various dumpsters or holding genial conversations, and I pictured what they would look like in the small
June

Early summer meant time for gardening. We couldn’t plant in the spring because the ground was still frozen above the layer of permafrost. We had a garden for vegetables on the north side of the house up the steep hill. We planted flowers in the front yard and nurtured the wild raspberries to the south of the house. We always got our flowers from the greenhouse up the road. I asked my mom why it was called the greenhouse when in fact there were several greenhouses. She said it was a generic term, that it was really called a nursery, but not like the kind with babies. I was relieved. I found babies to be unbearably noisy and sticky. We spent hours going through each greenhouse, choosing flowers and vegetables. The growing season was too short for some of the late-season vegetables, so Mom usually bought started plants. We started the green beans and sweet peas from seed though. And the carrots. Potatoes were fun. Because the planting ground in Fairbanks is shallow, Mom and Dad devised a way to plant the potatoes above ground using tires. Dad would bring home old tires from the dump, and mom would stack two of them and fill them with dirt and plant the potatoes in the top. Then she would keep adding dirt until it was time to throw another tire on top. The long daylight hours meant the tire tower could be over 4 feet when it was time to harvest. This way we didn’t have to dig for the potatoes from the top-down. Dad just cut away the old tires and we dug from the middle. My job was to haul the water up the hill to water vegetables. Mom taught me how to test the moisture in the ground to determine if it needed watering. She taught me to tell when the vegetables were ready to be picked. Sometimes I’d forget to water during the day, and Mom
would send me up the hill with the heavy metal watering can in full daylight at 9:30 pm. If there was water on the way back to the house, I would water the pussywillows next to my bedroom window. I decided I was gardening for the moose too.

_July_

July turned me into kinetic desire. I needed to move, to run, to feel the warm breeze on my face. Soccer was a season in my mind, and it was never long enough. I played on a team with some of my classmates. We usually won, but sometimes we didn’t. Mom and Dad made it to every game, even in the rain. They were at every event I participated in—the spelling bee, the Jesse Owens games, soccer, school plays and recitals. Some kids had parents who didn’t have time to attend such events. I never knew what it was like to look into the audience or down the sidelines and not see my family. Mom even came out to the Girl Scout camp to pick us up for soccer games, drive all the way into town, watch our game, and then drive us all the way back to camp when we were done. Evening hikes in full daylight were a nightly ritual at camp. We’d hike to the lake or to the hills and tell stories and play games, often not getting back to camp until after midnight. By then it would be dusky, never truly dark, and the sun would track its way back up into the sky. Moose were frequently sighted at camp, and we walked to the beaver dam to watch their busy progress. I also went to a camp in town at an old defunct dairy that had been turned into conservation land. It was called Camp Habitat, and we took nature hikes and made paper from leaves and flowers and learned about the ecosystem. I liked being outside in the summer, feeling the sun warm my skin. Soon enough winter would come again and bring with it the indomitable hours of darkness.
School would start again in a few weeks. I looked forward to that, but I also enjoyed hanging out with Dad. This really involved a lot of riding around in his truck, a white standard cab Nissan that he referred to as “Jap junk.” There was a gun store that was a frequent stopping place. It was simply called The Gunsmith, an olive green cinderblock building in old downtown. It had thick metal bars all the way around the building, not just the tiny windows. A dingy place, the old carpet threadbare in areas of high foot traffic. The lighting was subpar. But the smell was glorious. Gun oil and metal and new foam and something like stale popcorn. Stan, the gray man behind the counter, favored me with a grin that was more empty than white. He would take out a jar of Bazooka Joe bubblegum and hand me a piece. It’s slick plastic wrapper was cold in my hand. He would offer a second piece only if I could answer a math question. They were sometimes hard questions with fractions, but Dad helped me work through them.

Stan said, “The most important thing in learnin’ is math. Once you know math, the universe sorta unfolds and ever’thing makes a little more sense.”

I nodded, having no idea what he was talking about. Dad told me later that Stan had a PhD in Physics and used to work in a lab until he found math perfected in the formulas used to build guns. I asked what a PhD was.

Dad said, “Well, you’re in grade school, then there’s junior high, then high school, then 4 years of college to get a Bachelor’s, then 2 or 3 years of more college to get a Master’s, and then 2 or so years of more college to get a PhD.”

“That’s a lot of school,” I said, my eyes wide. I started listening a little more closely when Stan talked. I wanted to hear what all that school sounded like. The day Stan introduced
me to fractions, he and Dad were talking about someone named Christopher McCandless. I vaguely knew the name from Mom and Dad talking.

I interrupted their conversation. “Who’s that?”

Stan replied, “Oh, some idiot asshole from Cal-i-forn-i-a who thought he was hot shit and hitched up to Denali to live off the land in some half-ass tribute to Thoreau. A course he died.” Dad looked disapprovingly at Stan’s choice words, but seemed to agree with the central message.

“How did he die?” I asked.

Dad spoke this time. “Well, it looks like he starved to death.”

“In summer?” I asked.

“Yep. He camped out in one spot and took his chances there. All the game moved out of the area for summer and he was trapped on the other side of a river.”

“Why didn’t he follow the animals when they left? That’s what you taught me when we went hunting. You have to follow the game trails and can’t rely on animals to come to you.” Dad and Stan smiled.

Stan said, “Maybe this boy didn’t have someone to teach him about game trails.” Turning back to Dad, he said, “It’s sad, but I think it’s a good thing the boy died out there. It’ll keep other tourists from drivin’ up here in droves and crowdin’ up Denali. People don’t have proper respect for the weather and nature and think it’s a walk in the park. Lit’rally. Denali ain’t Disneyland.” Dad nodded. I sat back, chewing my bubble gum. The flavor was already gone.

*September*

Our truncated autumn brought the feral urine stink of low-bush cranberries. Mom and I spent a few weeks gathering supplies: fresh and frozen fruit, Ball jars of varying sizes, packets of
pectin, pounds of sugar, and the big yellow plastic canning funnel. On the day before we started boiling and mixing the ingredients, we hiked up the hill on the east side of the house and spent a day picking cranberries. “Remember to get the stems off now so we don’t have to do it later.” Their juices stained my hand a crimson color, and the smell leached into my skin. Once we had picked enough berries, Mom hauled the buckets down the hill. I scooted down the steep embankment, responsible only for getting myself safely home. That night we started with the first and favorite batch of jam: cranberry-apple-plum. The bitterness of the cranberry was a perfect counterpoint to the sugar-sweet apples and plums. I peeled the plums, slowly removing their soft skin from the dark flesh beneath. I tried to peel it in one long spiral because that’s how Dad peeled his oranges, with a knife and never his fingers. My favorite part was mashing all the fruits together, mixing and jabbing with the metal potato masher. Between the big glass bowl and the masher, the fruit yielded with a satisfying plop. Mom had me sterilize the jars, pulling them from the boiling water with tongs. I performed this task warily, watching the hot bubbling water that wanted to latch onto the naked skin of my wrists. Evenings after school were spent mixing and boiling and canning jams and jellies. The luxuriant dark liquids glistened in their jars. I especially liked how they looked lined up on the counter illuminated only by the stove light. There seemed to be a secret preserved in those jars. Mom would donate her jams in a few small baskets and one large basket wrapped in cellophane to the school auction. I was only in second grade, but Mom’s baskets were already one of the favored items. I knew she was pleased by this, her smile reaching out to light up her eyes.
Anamnesis

Driving in our old mocha Taurus, I watch the lights from the sanitation facility. Mom told me it was Angel City and that the lights meant that the angels were happy. At eight years old, I still believe that the angels are watching me, ready to protect me from myself. “Honey, can you get my makeup?” Excited, I mumble, “Mm-hm” as I search through her purse. I can never remember which pocket she keeps it in. Fumbling in the dark, I give up and lift the heavy purse to my nose and sniff it out. In the zipper pocket on the back of the purse. Where it always is. I pull out the compact, lipstick, and chapstick, all that my mother ever uses. She uses her left hand to steer the car, and I place the powder in her right hand, already open. She lightly dusts her whole face, hands the powder back to me. But I know better than to put it away. Next comes the chapstick, top already off. Then the lipstick, the point turned into a tall, slender mountain. Every day I wait for it to break off and crumble to the floor, but it never does. She hands the lipstick back to me and I give her the powder again. This time she uses it only on her lips. When I ask her why she does that, she says, “It seals in the lipstick so it doesn’t rub off on you and embarrass you when I kiss you.” I never told her that it doesn’t embarrass me when she kisses me.

The picture is mounted on wood, engraved by my mother’s own hand. She has epoxied it for eternity. The scene is idyllic, pastoral. The light plays on her hair, bringing out the tawny highlights in her mass of darker curls. Her long neck bends gracefully toward grass captured waving in the breeze and made vibrant in the photograph’s color palette. She must smell the heat baking the grass, drying it to hay in the blazing sun. She wears a loose crocheted top, the color of
moist bark stripped from a sapling oak. Her eyes are soft and blue, crinkled at the corners. Her mouth, beautiful and thin, smiles, exposing white teeth. She is reclining on the grass, looking at her beagle, Juneau. He meets her gaze and they seem to share a secret, forever locked away in the glossy photograph. His tail is caught in mid-wag, a sure sign of devotion. A dandelion plays on the breeze, dancing in silence. My mother, a young woman, has her whole life ahead of her, convinced that she doesn’t want children. Years later, her daughter will look at the picture hanging on the wall, and dream of growing up to be just like her mother. Beagle and all.

Mom is wearing a black bathing suit with a fluttery black skirt attached to it. But maybe it’s brown. I’m wearing a bright pink swimsuit with large silver polka dots on it. It’s 1989 and I’m learning to swim. She takes my hands in hers, made soft by the water. I love the water. I love the way it makes my skin slippery and shiny, caressing me with its cool touch. I let my body float and then I begin kicking. Mom lets go of one hand and I’m momentarily paralyzed with fear. She’s never done that before. I kick even harder and, to my surprise, I stay afloat. I smile and giggle and continue kicking. Then she lets go of my other hand and I move forward, awkwardly at first, gaining momentum and grace. Then I lose coordination and the chemical scent of chlorinated water enters my nose and its acrid flavor assaults my taste buds. I sputter and cough, afraid of something dark and primal that I don’t quite understand. But then mom is there, holding me, comforting me. She doesn’t smell like chlorine, but wears the silky smell of powder, even in the water.

The smell of rum and cocoa filled my nose, filled our house. Tradition. Rum balls meant Christmas, meant that I had to start being good so that Santa would bring me gifts. I still thought
that Santa hibernated like bears, and that he could only see what I was doing at Christmas time. Being good only applied from the day after Thanksgiving through the week after New Year’s—coincidentally, the big sale season. I would pull the tinfoil out of the big blue and silver box and cut the foil into squares. Mom would roll the balls, drop them onto the foil, and I would wrap them. Every year I had to be reminded to wrap them tight. “Why?” I would always whine. “So that the rum doesn’t evaporate.” Every year the same patient explanation, the same tone of voice, the same powdery mom smell evident under the heavy scent of alcohol and Baker’s cocoa.

A girl in a princess-seamed white tank top stands with feet slightly turned in, hands clasped behind her back. Behind her is a house and a dark car, a sedan. The long ranch-style house, so popular in the fifties, dominates the background, conjuring aromas of freshly baked cookies and azaleas. A free-standing birdbath, complete with loops and whorls, stands next to the young girl. She is about ten years old. Her hair is light brown and catches the sun, playing with it before reflecting it back at the camera. She has a tentative, unsure smile on her face. Her long bony legs stick out from beneath a pair of shorts. The picture is not black and white, but finished in shades of gray and cream. The girl squints into the sun. At the age of sixteen, I wonder where this was taken, when I could possibly have been standing next to a birdbath in a stranger’s yard. Looking for clues, I turn the photograph over and read the inscription. “Patty, age ten, 1962.”

The infinite black of the night sky gaped at us, the stars glowed and flickered. When I was younger I waited for them to flicker out, like a light bulb that had spent too much time screwed into its socket. But they never did. We lay in the snow, wrapped in sleeping bags and blankets, our heads resting on pillows made of snow. It was tradition. The first clear night after
the first snowfall was spent like this. Some years the northern lights would show themselves, the colors dancing as cosmic winds swirled fathomless patterns far beyond us. We lay in the snow, watching the theater play itself out above us. I always fell asleep outside, drifting away to my mom’s soft humming and the silky scent of her body cuddled close to mine.

The photograph is sepia-toned and worn, bent at the edges. The colored paper pulls away from the white Kodak backing, exposing its fibrous innards. It’s 1961. A girl and two boys grin at the camera, all of them exposing teeth in the famous Wells fashion. Patty is nine years old, but already looks like a teenager. She will look the same 44 years later. She and her brother Bob sit sprawled in the snow, a mess of arms and legs. Brother Ralph somehow managed to stay on the sled, a classic red toboggan. They all look straight into the camera. Patty wears two sweatshirts, the hood of the inner one pulled over her head, concealing her mass of dark curls. When she takes the sweatshirt off, she’ll have a static problem, making her short bob even more voluminous. Her long legs are hidden by Bob, showing only a hint of one of her breathtaking features. She’s hunched over in the picture, making her body seem slight, when in fact she is the tallest girl in her grade, much like her daughter will be at the same age. Behind the camera is Step-father Harold, when he was young enough to walk up and down the driveway, the makeshift sledding hill. He is more like a father to Patty than her biological father. She will sob on the phone at work to her daughter when she finds out that he has died. She will also be glad he didn’t suffer, that he died the strong and vibrant man she always knew. At the age of 92 he began counting backwards; he was only 89 when he died. Patty’s breath hangs frozen, suspended in the air above her head, captured forever. Her daughter will one day look at this picture,
noticing the red trim on her mom’s gloves, wondering what Patty was thinking. Looking into the camera, Patty doesn’t know any of this.
I glance across the table to measure the progress of my classmates. Katie’s head is down, golden brown hair the color of warm toast spilling over her shoulders. Her eyes guide her hand from the small scrap of leather to the bead bowl and back. Her tongue pokes between her lips in a picture of intense concentration. She’s almost done with her flower! I think frantically. I look at my own scrap of pale leather. Only a few beads are strung in a wobbly line that was meant to be the outline of the first petal. Katie’s got almost her entire outline done, and you can’t even manage a petal my inner voice chides. Great. Another thing I’m not good at. Heat rising in my cheeks, I glance sidelong at Jon. He’s almost done with three petals. Even Jon is better than me and he picks his nose! It’s not fair. I drop the leather on the table and stare out the window, my right hand absently picking at the run in my white tights. I watch as kids I don’t know run and play on the unfamiliar playground. Suddenly the boots I’m wearing are too hot and my pinky toe itches. I squirm in the molded plastic chair and think about getting up and running outside. I close my eyes and I can almost feel the cold settling on the bare skin of my face and see my breath wisping up and away from me.

I hear folds of fabric moving in my direction. I can smell the raw leather and the stale rabbit fur lining Nasnan’na’s parka. I quickly pick up the leather and try to get back to work, but the joy is gone from the task. She stops behind me, and I feel her eyes following my hands from the leather to the beads and back. I know her milky eyes track my progress, seeing nothing. She’s humming a low melody, and I remember when she told us that her name means “surrounded by song.” She also told us how most Athabascan women are named white names like Esther and Suzie and Cheryl. She told us that her mother named her a traditional name because she would
have to hear the song in everything since she was blind. I stab my finger with the needle and quickly suck in my breath.

She bends down, the rabbit fur tickling my cheek. “Shh, Raven. It is as it is. Don’t give up. See how the others outline first and fill in later? No. Work in spirals. That is the heart of our designs.” She straightens as much as her stooped posture allows and moves down the row past other heads bent forward in concentration. Jon and Katie continue working as though she had never been there, and I wonder why she called me Raven. I remove three of the carefully placed beads and extend my line up the slope of the raven’s back. I work his head and chest in a spiral of purple beads. I slowly spiral the black wing before switching back to purple and moving on to his tail feathers. The spiraling was a much faster technique and defined the different areas of the bird, which otherwise would have been a squat, lumpy silhouette.

I sit back in my chair, proud of my work. I trace the beads with my index finger, thinking his other wing should be arched above him, ready for flight.

As I reach for another bead, Ms. Douglas stops behind me, hands on her hips. “Juliet, that’s not a flower.”

“I know, Ms. Douglas. I made a raven instead,” I say, pleased with myself.

“I see that. But the assignment was to bead a flower. You’ll have to start over.”

I don’t look up from the table, but I can feel everyone looking at me, waiting for what would happen next. My cheeks blaze and tears bite the backs of my eyes. “Yes, Ms. Douglas,” I whisper to the table.

Nasnan’na’s voice booms across the classroom, “What is a flower or a bird or a pine tree but Creation? Does your Bible not tell us that God cares for even the unnumbered birds in the sky?” Her parka shuffles past me, and I look up in time to see her cast a wink in my direction.
“Besides, Mrs. Dooglas, we already have a field of flowers. Should we not also have a raven to carry the seeds to new lands?”

Ms. Douglas’ nose twitches and her jaw stiffens. “Fine, Nasnan’na. It’s your art project.”

“No, Mrs. Dooglas. The art is the children’s.” Despite saying this with a smile on her lips, her voice is sharp and the words fall like stones between them.

Ms. Douglas turns to look at Katie’s artwork. “That’s turning into a beautiful flower, Katie.” Katie beams at the praise and, when Ms. Douglas turns her back, sticks out her tongue at me.

Nasnan’na tsks and says, “You should not be so quick to offer your tongue to passing birds who will eat it up like a wriggling worm.”

Katie pulls her tongue back in, contenting herself to glare at me. I wonder how Nasnan’na knew Katie stuck her tongue out, but Nasnan’na seemed to know about all kinds of things she couldn’t see. I smile and turn back to my raven who is in need of motion. I spiral his other wing. And I decide he needs a landscape, so I spiral mountains, first the white snowcap and then the icy blue rock. I decide he is flying over a field of flowers and sew single-bead, multicolored dots onto the land below.

The bell rings, and it’s time to get on the bus to take us back to our school. I stand and tug down on my blue jumper. It was designed for someone shorter than me. Someone like Katie my inner voice says. I zip my pink coat but leave the mittens hanging from their string. As I walk past Nasnan’na, I hand her the raven. “Thank you,” I say shyly.

She smiles as she runs her fingers over my design. “Ah, spirals,” she says more to herself than to me. Then she presses the warm leather scrap into my hand. “No, Raven. You keep this.” Her pale blue eye winks again, and I run out the door to the school bus.
2006

I sit next to Jeff on the sternwheeler, ready to depart for our scenic and insightful trip up the Tanana River. I’ve been on this tour many times before, and my favorite part is at the end—the Wedding of the Rivers. Here the clear, spring-fed water of the Chena rushes into the silt-laden Tanana creating a roiling, tumultuous show as the silt clouds rise and fall in rhythm with the current. These two waters eventually mix before feeding into the crashing Yukon River. But before that, we have a few other stops, including the replica Athabascan village.

I step off the boat, the sun impossibly high overhead. Back at sea level, I’m reminded how gentle the sun can seem. Jeff is right behind me, and we follow our tour group to our rally point in the shade of an aspen grove. Arboreal weeds I think with a grin.

“Alright, wolf pack! Let’s start with the tanning and smoking hut. Follow me!” cries the tour guide in over-exuberant tones.

“Wolf pack,” Jeff mutters next to me.

I smile. “Hey, we’re tourists now.” I kiss his cheek and then mimic: “Follow me!”

Our tour group moves from station to station, stopping to take pictures with the pelts and fish hanging out to dry. The tour guide informs us that the canned salmon sold in the Lower 48 is generally used as dog food for sled dog teams. This information is met with a smattering of chuckles. I look around at the other members of our group. Most of them are wilting in their jackets and sweatshirts. People are always surprised by the heat and humidity in Fairbanks in July. I’m a little surprised too, actually. I remember how I used to put my pillow in the freezer before bed so I could sleep at night in the summer, but I never seem to remember the humidity.
I let my thoughts drift as the man at the tanning hut explains the process of skinning the animals and either leaving the fur on or using stones to remove it. Pelt versus leather. I scan the faces of the tour guides, wondering if I’ll see anyone from high school. Not this time. The Athabascan village hires only Alaskan Natives, and there were only a few Natives who attended the Catholic school.

“Is that true?” Jeff asks as my thoughts dissipate and mingle with the aroma of hot pine in the morning air.

“What?”

“He said wolves don’t really come as far north as Fairbanks.”

“Oh, yeah. I guess that’s generally true.”

“Then why are we the Wolf Pack?”

“It’s one of the Big 5 in Alaska.” I note his blank stare and clarify, “The Big 5 are the big game of Alaska—bears, moose, caribou, Dall sheep, and wolves.”

“Got it.” He turns his attention back to the presenter, but it’s already time to move on to the next station—beading.

As we walk across the camp, I say, “Did I ever tell you about the time we were in third grade and we were doing this inter-school thing where we learned different languages and crafts? One time we had to bead a flower onto a piece of leather, and my teacher—” but we were already at the demonstration. Jeff looked at me to continue, but I shook my head and pointed to the woman waiting for everyone to be seated.

The presenter is Dixie Alexander, whom I remember from previous tours. Her work is featured in the Smithsonian. I listen as she talks about beading techniques and the symbolism of the designs. She calls for a man from the audience to model the traditional hunting gear, and a
man from Florida is chosen. As Dixie places the parka on him, he comments on how heavy it is. Dixie laughs and explains that the weight of the skins is what kept the men warm and alive during the hunt. He grins and poses for a picture with Dixie before returning to his seat.

As Dixie prepares the quill she’ll use as a needle for the demonstration, a stooped older woman appears to the side of the hut. I watch as she prepares the trays of beads and the leather that Dixie will use. She tilts her head and stares up into the trees. A raven caws and takes flight. She smiles then, and I see that some of her teeth are missing. As she looks across the audience, I feel that her eyes rest on me, and squinting, I can see that they are a familiar milky blue.

Nasnan’na.

When the demonstration ends, tourists file down the narrow amphitheater stairs to get a closer look at the traditional parkas and moccasins and to watch Dixie’s beading technique. I also watch Dixie but can’t help sneaking a look at Nasnan’na at the other table. When we’ve moved past the demonstration, I veer toward the side of the hut. Jeff glares after me as he’s trapped in yet another conversation with the octogenarian sisters from Milwaukee. I ignore him and walk over to Nasnan’na.

“Excuse me,” I say, suddenly shy. “I know you probably don’t remember me, but one year you taught my class how to bead and how to say some Athabascan words. I really enjoyed that and wanted to thank you.”

She smiles at me then, her blind eyes staring directly into mine. “Ade’Dotron’.”

I pause, trying to remember if I’ve ever heard that phrase. Ade’ is hello, but I don’t know the other word. I take a breath to apologize, to tell her I don’t understand. I feel as if I’ve failed her.

She smiles then. “Hello, Raven.”
Most people don’t know the sweet taste of day-old chlorine. The water enters your pores; some is ingested. You absorb. You are not that far from single-celled organisms after all. No matter how it gets there, you can smell it a day, sometimes two, later. Showering isn’t enough to be rid of it. At first, you worry that someone else will smell it on you and think you strange or unclean. But it makes you feel clean. To smell it emanating from your skin is pure. Running down the soccer field, enveloped in the chemical scent of chlorine sweat. It is familiar, comfortable. It was foreign, now a part of you. You wear the smell proudly. It is the lightning perfume of a tribal few. Swimming may take away the afternoons, the weekends, the plump thighs, but it gives you the scent of victory. It is a filter through which to experience the world. You lose your remaining baby fat, your limbs grow long and lean, your thighs are pure muscle. Because you swim, a doctor will one day ask if he can show your thighs to his interns. They will poke, they will discuss structural muscle disparity, they will dissect muscle fibers, but they will be in awe. Your last thought before you go under will be that you can smell chlorine in the air.

One, two, three, breathe. One, two, three, breathe. One, two, three, breathe. The fluid rhythm lulls. Your thoughts drift, impermanent as the smooth surface of the water. Nothing is ever really still. The water molecules are constantly in motion, slipping, sliding, somersaulting over each other, breaking old bonds, forming new ones. The only constant is the count. Counting for breath, counting for distance. When the breath count outpaces the need for oxygen, you switch to backstroke. You are slower, less confident in this stroke. Even now, fourteen years later, you envy Ali’s smooth strokes, how she seemed to glide effortlessly through the water. She
was born for backstroke. She was a good pair for you, you who were born for butterfly. Lily and Kelsey rounded out your team, and you never lost. You long for the smooth, crisp strokes of the backstroke swimmers like Ali. But you always need to see where you’re going; you hate having to trust your timing to the flags. But now you can breathe easily again. Flags, one, two, three, breathe, flip, turn. At this point, you are just content to be moving.

You barely even notice the ribbons that line the walls in the hallway. A few months ago, you had to start keeping anything below fourth place in a box. You vacillated between shame and pride in that box—pride that you placed, shame that you didn’t place higher. Rows and rows of blue, red, and white ribbons. You had to start double-hanging the ribbons. Then you put fourth place in the box. Your determination grew. Even though there would be more room without them, you couldn’t bear to associate third place with the box. Most of the white ribbons show water stains, faint brown at the edges. When you hold them to your face, you can still smell the chlorine mixed with shiny ribbon thread. You think this must be the best smell in the world. Sometimes you pause, running your finger along the edges of the 10&Under Most Valuable Swimmer plaque. You’re not ten anymore, but you still feel pride in that award. After all, you dethroned Ali for that honor. And Dave dethroned Hunter. Dave with the cobalt eyes. When he looked at you, you felt a little sick, but in a good way. Apparently that’s what a crush feels like. Lily said he really filled out the Speedos nicely, and you agreed, even though you didn’t know what that meant. Not really. You know now, and your expired innocence makes you smile.

Another plaque hangs in your bedroom: High Point Champion, 2nd place. You threw that final race of the meet. It meant more to Kelsey’s mom for her to win than it ever did to you. Kelsey
was your friend, and you were happy to slow the last lap for her. But you knew you could never tell her. The race was still close, and your smile is even bigger than hers in the picture.

When you were ten, your body betrayed you. Worst of all, Peter was in the Principal’s Office when the school nurse crowed in a singsong voice to your mother on the phone: “Your daughter’s a woman now! She’s had her first period!” Not only had you just lost your favorite pants, but you knew the news would spread around the playground by recess. You wanted to kick the nurse, but you knew that was impolite. So you stood there, wearing a pair of sweatpants that were two inches too short while Peter grinned at you from across the room. At least you got to go home early that day. But you had to learn about maxi pads and tampons. You’re a swimmer, so tampons were prescribed for pool use. You hated talking about these things—they were so improper. You had just started wearing sports bras. Wasn’t that enough embarrassment for a lifetime? They never mention the body hair. Or maybe they do, but you don’t know that because you go to a Catholic school. Sex ed started three months too late to really be useful for you. When your armpits sprouted hair, you begged your mom for a razor. She refused, saying you were too young to shave. Clearly, the logic of your body escaped her in that moment. But you were obedient; rather than willfully disobeying her proclamation (thou shalt not shave thine armpits), you stalked to your room and shut the door with marginal force. At swim practice the next day, you talk to Brendan as you wait for your turn on the clock to begin the drill. You lower your head enough to clear your goggles of fog, one elbow hooked in the gutter. That was just enough. “What the—? Lift your arm for a second.” You do, thinking there’s something wrong. “You have armpit hair!” “What? No, I— Whatever, it’s my turn to go.” Angry and embarrassed, you push off the wall and swim as fast as you can the rest of practice. You jump out of the pool
and runwalk to the locker room before he can catch up with you again. The next day, you convince Holly to skip the bus and walk to Safeway with you instead. You buy razors and shaving cream with your allowance. Vowing to never tell your mom that you shaved, you walk the two miles to the swimming pool. Your armpits burn when you cut them, clumsy with the razor through bitter tears. You sit on the shower floor, feeling the hot water rain down on your back. The chlorine enters the locker room, hitching a ride with the old ladies who swim excruciatingly slow laps. It perches on the handicapped bars in the shower, a silent companion riding out your misery and anger.

Chlorine is stardust. It becomes when a star dies. When the core of a massive star collapses, gravitational potential energy is released, resulting in a supernova explosion. Supernovae cause a burst of radiation that briefly outshines an entire galaxy before fading from view in just a few months. During this short interval, a supernova can radiate as much energy as the Sun is expected to emit over its entire life. The explosion sends a shockwave of stardust into surrounding space at 10% the speed of light; you could travel to the moon in less than 13 seconds at that speed. This shockwave carries the hope of a new star or planet. Entropy. On Earth, chlorine is found primarily as the chloride ion. Chloride is a component of the salt that is deposited in the earth or dissolved in the oceans—about 1.9% of the mass of seawater is chloride ions. Chlorine is necessary for all known species of life.

Brendan is three years older than you, which makes him exotic. He was never popular like Dave or Hunter, but you never really went for the popular guys. You like the quiet ones, the nerds, the dorks, the broken ones. He is not broken, but he is a nerd. And you love him for it. At
the swim team lock in, you are the only two still awake. You sit in the overlook with the gym
equipment, whispering. When you kiss Brendan for the first time, you delight in the sting of
chlorine on your lips. The electric chemical in his skin awakens your tongue, and you hope all
kisses are this new and exciting and familiar.

One, two, three, breathe. One, two, three, breathe. One, two, three, breathe. Cliff’s advice
runs through your head. “Keep your elbows high, breathe every third, don’t breathe off the start,
extend through the pull, kick like hell.” At this reminder, your legs go into overtime. Water
splashes into your mouth and you make yourself swallow the chlorine to keep the pace. To choke
would mean losing rhythm and losing time. Only 800 meters left to go. You feel the swim cap
pulling the hairs at the back of your neck every time you turn to breathe. Your goggles pinch
your nose, but this is a good sensation. It means they’re tight and the seal between hard,
unforgiving plastic and tender flesh won’t be broken. Flip turn. Don’t breathe off the wall.
Keeping your head down, you watch the tile on the bottom of the pool glide past. The black T
shape running down the middle of the lane reminds you of Greek columns. Greek mythology.
Need to remember to write your paper for English. Shit. You lose count. Need to breathe. As
your right arm arcs out of the water, you turn your head to the side to suck in the intoxicating air.
You hear your team cheering you on. Back down into the calming waters. The silence surrounds
you. Hello silence my old friend. No, that’s not right. Hello darkness my old friend. Who sings
that? You see the red distance board underwater. Only 250 meters left to go. Kick like hell. At
this reminder, your legs go back to work, picking up their own slack. The tightness in your chest
worries you. This constriction might mean you need to take an extra breath. Bad. Need to keep
the rhythm. You stroke slowly, extending your arms to their full length, allowing your chest to
relax. Tightness gone. Flip turn. As you come out of the water, you see Cliff and Barb timing your splits on the side. Damn splits. Bet there’s gonna be a big difference between the beginning and the end. Feel like you’ve been down here forever. Learning to fly, but I ain’t got wings, coming down is the hardest thing. Thank God this is free and not fly. You’d’a been dead a long time ago. As you pull yourself through the cool water, you begin to think of your next race. 200 meter fly. You’ll have to cool down and get right back on the block. Oh well. Breathe. Only 100 meters left to go. You suck in a huge amount of air and really begin to race. You pull harder, stroke faster, kick stronger, and change your breathing to every fifth. Flip turn. Only 50 meters left to go. Your arms are lead, your legs no longer readily obey your demand. You will yourself to finish this length. You tilt your head to the side, gasp, flip turn. No breathing until you hit the wall. Your lungs ache, your brain gets fuzzy. You don’t let yourself breathe. One more stroke. You slam into the black time pad on the wall. Expelling the stale air in your lungs, you greedily devour the oxygen around you. You pull your goggles off and look around. The other lanes are still full of splashing swimmers. Some of them look like they’re swimming pretty fast too. You panic. Did you skip a lap? Did your counter turn the wrong number? You look at Cliff. He’s jumping up and down. He reminds you of an ape. From the Discovery Channel maybe. He yells something to you. Your head is still wrapped in fog. Lily races toward you, her hair flying beneath the Pool Rules: No Running, No Horseplay sign. “You got first! You broke the record! You broke the freakin’ record!” You gawk at her, unable to comprehend. The chlorine is all around, hazing your thoughts, affirming who you are. As the information clicks into place, you nod. You know this is good news. You know this is what you train for. You know you kicked ass. You also know what the real victory is. You smile to yourself. You didn’t let yourself breathe.
You walk from the locker room, hair wet against your scalp. Your whole body aches, and you swear you’ve never felt pain like this. But you smile. You’ve never felt joy like this either.

You are in your chlorine cloud, your tribal signifier. You are once again who you are.
“Swingset,” he says.

We spill out of the blue van with the sweet-dust smell of yellow foam oozing from cracked plastic seats. I run across Slater Park, headed toward the swingset with its giant Tin Man topper. The swingset with the Scarecrow is already full. The Lion sits atop the long metal slide that pulls at bare skin. Clarke beats me to the last empty swing. I change course and head for the orange and red carousel that sits in the middle of the sand pit, a large ring of cleared sand around the metal base. Crystal and I grab the handlebars and run, run until the carousel is spinning furiously. We jump on the platform and lean back. The wind whips my hair in my face, and the sudden inversion of the world whisk my breath away. I lean further and further, back arched, hoping the ride never ends, hoping I can see the world as blurred color forever. The carousel slows, and my hair drags the sandy ground. Watching the world slow to a stop and right itself as I dismount the carousel is in itself beautiful. Everything makes sense again. I run and jump and lean back and run and jump and lean back again and again, until I’m so dizzy that the world doesn’t right itself, even when I think I’m right-side up. Peter and Sheena are picking the wild strawberries in the field, and I join them, loving the sun-red taste and the sticky juice that coats my fingers. I wipe my fingers in the grass to clean them. I stand up, and something thuds into my right arm. It feels weird, but doesn’t hurt until I move. It feels like splinters grinding inside my skin. I look down, and a thin piece of wood, a cross between mulch and shim, is stuck in my arm. Blood beads around the edge of the wood, and I cry. I don’t like this thing in my arm, and I don’t like seeing my blood that’s supposed to be on the inside now on the outside. Pam rushes to my side and pulls the wood from my arm. The blood flows freely down my arm, dripping from my
fingers into the grass. Armed with only a Kleenex, she puts pressure on the cut and Carlos drives us back to the daycare. Mom says this never happened.

“Disputed,” I say.
“Tree,” he says.

Tall stands of birch ring the perimeter of the schoolyard, the black knots vividly contrasting with the white bark. I watch as Ian tears the delicate paper bark from the trunk in large, curling pieces. He drops them on the ground, kicking the brittle yellow and brown leaves over the evidence. Using a twig, he writes on the moist, newly exposed wood. He throws a rock at a squirrel, and I’m pleased that he misses. Stuffing his hands in his pockets, he walks the fence around the edge of the yard. Ian often spends recess alone. I slide off the swing and walk over to the birch trees. The word cock stares back at me, scrawled gray against the mottled green tender wood. I sound out the word in my mind, but I think I must be pronouncing it wrong. I whisper it to get the feel of the collection of sounds. Boldly, I say it louder. A passing teacher hears me and sends me to the principal’s office. I explain that I saw someone else write it on the tree and I was trying to learn how to say the word. The principal tells me not to say words like that anymore. I don’t quite know what she means by that (words like what?), but I promise I won’t. She tells me I’m to be disciplined by staying inside at recess for the rest of the week and cleaning the chalkboards. Standing on the small wooden stepstool to reach the top of the board, I look out the window and see my friends playing kickball. I stand motionless, arm stretched overhead. The soapy water drips under my sleeve, tracing a line from wrist to armpit. I long to feel the bite of autumn on my skin, to take my turn at the plate, to kick the ball as hard as I can, sure to score a point for my team. My arm aches, and I remember that I’m supposed to be meditating on my transgression.

“Punishment,” I say.
“Pain,” he says.

The sweat trickles down the sides of her face as she struggles into a slightly more comfortable position. Mom moans as she settles into the bed. I walk to the bathroom and stand on tiptoes to reach a washcloth from the cabinet. I run it under cold water and wring it out, enjoying the harsh rasp of terrycloth against my skin. I take the washcloth to Mom, wiping her forehead for her. She smiles at me, but the smile doesn’t quite reach her eyes. It’s cool in this room, but the heat of Mom’s pain casts a blazing aura around her. She points to the bedpan, and I hand it to her, leaving the room and closing the door. I wait outside until she calls for me to empty the bedpan. Once I’ve emptied and washed it, I set it in the tub to dry. I run the hot water until it’s warm, then fill the large mixing bowl with soap and warm water. I leave the bowl on the nightstand. When her back goes out, this is how she bathes. Again, I leave the room and close the door behind me. I go to the kitchen to refill her big cup with ice water and grab Pop-Tarts, the only thing I can think of that’s easy to eat while lying down. I bring Mom her dinner and a new book from the shelf. I hand her the orange pill bottle, and she shakes two pills into her mouth. She washes them down with a long drink of water. I ask her if she needs anything else. She shakes her head, and I turn to leave. At the door, she calls to me. “Jules.” I turn. “Thank you.” I nod, biting my lip to halt the tears that squirm and bite the backs of my eyes. I hate that she’s in pain. It makes my chest tight to see her stuck in bed for weeks at a time. With a patient look, Mom says, “Jules, pain is part of life. It will pass. It always does.” Her smile has a dreamy quality and her eyes absorb rather than reflect the light, and I know the pills have started working. I nod again and walk to the living room couch. I watch the snow falling in the glow of the porch light.

“Necessary,” I say.
“Kid,” he says.

I sit on the smooth plastic chair the color of eggshells. My feet swing in tempo to the gunshot-laden passage of *Dick Tracy* I’m reading. My fingers are shiny from the waxy wrapping of the nickel taffy I hold in my hand. Dad is still in line, and I know we’ll be here for awhile. A glance around the room shows nothing new to me. The Teamsters office always looks the same, no matter how many men or how many different men crowd into the dimly lit space. Dad reaches the counter and is given his number. He sits next to me on an identical white chair. Identical except for the deep scratch that mars the back. As Dad leans forward I satisfy my need to run my finger along the etched plastic, tracing the arc from one side to the other. Dad is number 83. They’re calling number 64. I decide I’ve waited long enough and slowly unwrap the taffy, taking care to keep any crumbles off the floor. I return to my book, return to kicking my feet. They finally call Dad’s number. He leaves his green and white baseball hat on the chair next to me as he walks to the counter. I see disappointment cross his features and I sigh, feeling both happy and sad. No work today. I know he wants the work, but I know I want to spend the day with Dad, maybe at the shooting range, maybe at the dikes practicing driving the car, either way listening to Paul Harvey tell me the rest of the story. He beckons me from across the sea of strangers, and I close my book, slide off the chair, and walk toward him. I turn and run back to the chairs to grab his forgotten hat. I run across the room and follow Dad into the bright light of summer, the sweet taste of banana taffy on my tongue.

“Dad,” I say.
“Boardwalk,” he says.

The wooden slats of the Boreal Forest Trail thud under the feet of Team Squirrel. It was a hard-fought campaign, but the name Team Squirrel won out over Team Crane the first day of camp. My first year as a junior counselor at Camp Habitat, my main job is to keep the kids in a group. I walk at the end of our off-rhythm army—no left, left, left right left here as the kids jump from the boardwalk to the spongy ground below to chase boreal toads and beetles. I watch for a minute before herding them back onto the boardwalk. The kids practice croaking, thinking themselves professional toad callers. We stop at the Fire Overlook platform. The field is purple with fireweed, and small shrubs and young trees claim their space for optimal growth. The lush green and dusty blue taiga is an insular oasis from the tundra that surrounds it. Even the most quarrelsome child is stunned into silence by its abrupt beauty. The silence doesn’t hold; as we descend the platform steps, whispers and giggles again become easy companions. We stop at the next observation deck—the drunken forest. Below the active soil layer, permafrost thaws and freezes, and the ground sags and collapses. Trees are rent from the earth, their shallow root systems tipped into the air as though on display. Trees cant in all direction, swooning and collapsing into one another. Laughing, the kids stagger around the platform, pretending they too are drunken trees and flop onto the ground or fall into each other. I lurch and sway after the shy, quiet kids at the edge of the circle, including them in the game. I catch Evan as he trips over a tree root and call them back to the boardwalk.

“Laughter,” I say.
“Spine,” he says.

I lay on the thick brown carpet reading the Sunday comics. My eyes wander over to the short pine bookcase. They’re looking at me again. No matter how many times I turn the books around, they always stretch, contort, jostle their way to face the world again. Or so I imagine. I drop my eyes to the newspaper on the floor, but the bright colors no longer hold my interest. I can feel the empty eyes of the silver boy resting on my shoulder. I imagine the green claw stretching from the gutter and reaching for me, its sharp nails and scaly skin feathering my hair, running a cold nail across my back. My breath is fast and shallow. The claw scares me, but it also beckons. Why is there a newspaper boat floating in the run-off toward the grate? Why is the claw reaching for it? Why doesn’t the silver boy have eyes? I push back onto my knees and stand. I walk to the bookcase, intent on turning the books around so only their grainy, yellow pages face me. I turn the silver boy, breaking his persistent stare. I grip the book with the claw, feeling the raised cover, feeling the claw itself, imagining it stretching beyond paper into this world, reaching out to my face—I shiver as I slam the book back in the bookcase. I pick up the fat spine with the glowing eyes over the horizon. The eyes belong to both man and bird, a shared face. This one doesn’t scare me, not really. I heft the book off the shelf, feeling its dusty weight in my hands. I hesitate, poised to place it back on the shelf. I feel something shift in my brain, a tangible alteration, and I carry the book back to my spot on the living room floor. The Stand. I open it and start to read. “FOR TABBY this dark chest of wonders.”

“Awakening,” I say.
Hills

The hills to the south were constant change. The seasons played a part, but the entirety of each day cast its shadow too. Leaves swept up the hills in fall. Small burrows marked the terrain. Winter came and the hills grew with compounded snow. Breakup tore the earth apart, rending roots from ground, small mudslides tracked the hills filling in burrows and quietly burying untold lives. The earth dried and cracked in the summer sun, puffs of dust following tiny, shuffling footsteps. The stink of lowbush cranberries marked the passing of time. Time was both absent and omnipotent to the hills. New growth coated the barren sticks of winter, moss bloomed on stony crops. Trees cast new shadows that played across underbrush in shifting patterns. Small mammals died and lived, their busy stories a testament to change. The hills shifted, encouraging tendrils of vine and shoots of aspen to encroach on developed land. The hills had no interest in the ambition of development. One day we noticed the back of the garage was covered in life—moss clung to the summer-moist timbers, vines crept and wound around shingles, aspens pushed through the foundation, fireweed found purchase in the cracks of concrete’s tired expansion.
I entered the inner chamber of the ice maze, noting the way the lights from nearby exhibits raced to and were absorbed by the giant blocks. These blocks of ice, carefully cut from Prudhoe Bay and hauled to Fairbanks every year for this event. The smell of cold and thoughts nearly spoken hung in the air. No breeze. The sound of laughter filtered through the thick ocean ice, distorted and muffled yet somehow still close. I desperately wished for my gloves as I crammed my hands deeper into the pocket of my blue Spitfire sweatshirt. Or my coat, for that matter. Self-conscious of the way my butt looked in my jeans, I adjusted the sweatshirt quickly before any of the guys made it to the little chamber that marked the innermost layer of the maze. I shoved my unwilling tongue between my chattering teeth; the body won’t hurt itself. Diffuse blues and purples and reds pulsed through the ice. Ears nearly numb, I shrugged my shoulders and buried my neck in my sweatshirt offering momentary reprieve from the cold. The heavy scent of bratwurst and nachos wafted into the space reminding my empty stomach that I was hungry. And cold. Tired of waiting for the boys to stumble their way through the maze, I turned and exited through another passage. Slightly alarmed that with the first steps my mind whispered that my feet have disappeared. But there they are. They return with stabbing pain and cracking joints. I pitched forward slightly before finding my toes and regaining my balance. Turning the corner, I am confronted with the smells of thick oily Carhartts and the bitter but familiar stink of soggy wool. James, my mind insists. No, not James. A large man with Carhartt overalls and a red flannel hat with earflaps. He grins a distracted hello before turning his attention to the children running ahead.
Eighth grade youth group. What a joke. The only reason any of us went was because the leader was hot. And the guys showed up because their zealot parents made them. I remember meeting Devin at one of the dances. A Halloween dance. I went because that’s where all of my friends would be. I saw him the second he walked in. He moved around the room, greeting people. Apparently he knew most of my friends, but I had never met him. I stood with Holly and Valerie, watching him make his way toward us. He knew Holly from church, and she introduced us. After a few minutes of yelling to be heard over the thumping bass, he took my hand and led me outside. We sat on the frozen ground, shivering at the feet of the Virgin Mary.

*   *   *

The shed was dark and warm, sunlight edging through dirty windows. I was lying on the couch, my legs draped over Devin. Brandon and Luke sat on weathered canvas lawn chairs that squeaked with every shift and laugh. There were many laughs then. Brandon pulled a joint out of his back pocket. It was thin and drooped at the end. I had told Devin I wanted to smoke pot with him, so he invited Luke who brought Brandon who brought the joint. Nervously I chewed on my thumbnail. I was afraid I’d do something wrong and look incredibly stupid in front of my friends. When the joint was passed to me first, I was horrified—I had counted on watching someone else to see what to do. Devin, who understood me, smiled and took the joint. He lit it and took a drag, making sure I could see exactly what he was doing.

*   *   *

He sat at the table, holding the bottle in his thick hands. I walked over to him, sat down. He looked up with the trademark Devin scowl before returning his attention to the Jack. I put my
head on his shoulder, grasped the bottle. I contemplated it, then put the bottle to my lips. The warming sensation as the liquid traveled down my throat was welcomed in the cold house. The heat and cold mixed on the floor by the door, creating a fine mist. Mesmerizing. When we smoked pot, the back door was always open. For Dusty. He complained it was too hot. I was always cold, but it was his house, his rules. Devin shifted in his chair, gazed at me again. I met his gaze and held it. I always had trouble reading him, but I had no idea what was going on in his mind at the moment. He put his arm around me, and we sat there, lingering in the pot-induced calm. I couldn’t believe this was the last night before he left. I thought that maybe I should cry, but I knew Devin wouldn’t want me to. So I didn’t. I regret that now. I ran my hand over the stubble on his head, so much shorter now. I didn’t like it. Dusty stumbled back into the room, Tequila Sunrise played in the background. The three of us sat there, not moving, not talking. I don’t know how long we sat around the table. That table had been central to our friendship. The video camera positioned behind us on the bar to catch all the dumb shit we did when we were drunk. If you had a brain on each toe, what would they think? The drunk naked guy that always ended up in the bathtub. None of us knew who he was, but he was always there. I suppose each of us was thinking about the past. I don’t know. I fell asleep on Devin’s shoulder, as had happened so many times before. When I woke up, he was gone.

*   *   *

I sat staring at my hands, folded neatly in my lap. Not wanting to think about what he just said, I thought about my shoes. Red. He was with me when I bought them. Keeping my head down, I let my gaze wander to his scuffed brown shoes and his shins. I would have to move my head to see more, but this was a battle of wills and I couldn’t lose. Finally I heard him sigh and turn away. “Juliet, why are you doing this?” Me? I wasn’t doing a damn thing. Just sitting with
my head down, pondering the nature of shoes. “Don’t you have anything to say?” Of course I did. I wanted to tell him so many things, but I was afraid of the words I knew would tumble out. Holding back hurt. But I was too proud to speak. I heard footsteps and the soft click as he shut the door behind him.

* * *

The soft orange light from the sodium vapor lamp masked us in shadow as much as it illuminated us as we smoked weed outside the little white church, curled at the feet of the Virgin Mary. I liked to sit with my back against Mary’s legs where the shadows were deepest. She watched us, the benevolent indulgent smile never wavering. When I moved to Colorado, Devin and Dusty sent me pictures of our spot, a joint hanging haphazardly from Mary’s slightly parted lips, or a bottle of Jack balanced in her outstretched hand. Devin never was able to tell the difference between redemption and whiskey.
We had limited time, but we used it. Strip slug bug was one of the best. Alaskan winters are cold and dark; there was only the muted green light of the console to distinguish naked flesh. In a way, this made it more fun, more alive. Every glimpse of skin held the possibility of being sexy, and so it was. Living in the cold means layers, means the body is always covered. Removing the layers became a slow, delicious process. The game seemed to last forever, and each minute with no loss of clothing heightened the animal electricity in the car. I’ve always been good at laughing at myself, so even when I got stuck in my sweatshirt behind the wheel, it wasn’t a downer. It was still somehow endearing, gasping with laughter as I tried to untangle myself, making Schmidt steer the car as we sped down ice-covered streets. It was reckless. It was dangerous, but it added to the fun. When you live your life in layers, even the glimpse of a bare shoulder can send your imagination racing.
Word Association, Part 2

“Ice,” he says.

My cousin, Heather, bends her head to the four-ton block of ice. She circles, gauging the quality of light that shines through, noting every crease and fold within. The ice so clear it is called “Arctic Diamond.” One block of ten, Heather marks this as the puffer fish and rear wave. She assesses the other nine blocks, assigning their future form: mermaid, lionfish, octopus 1, 2, 3, and 4, clownfish, seahorse, coral. The four-man team has six days to turn the individual blocks into a seascape. Steve uses the crane to move the ice into position. Removing her heavy parka, Heather cranks her chainsaw and sets to work on her first piece, the lionfish. A fine spray of ice flies around her as she gracefully guides the chainsaw around the block. Satisfied with her progress, she pours boiling water over the pared block. The vapor smokes in the cold sunlight. Once again frozen and slippery smooth, Heather uses one of the nearly three hundred tools she and Steve have designed and created specifically for carving ice. As the sun sets, the work lights turn on, their artificial glow bathing the team in fluorescent light. They regroup, pointing fingers, gesturing, discussing how best to capture the glow from within the ice. Six days later, I enter the ice castle gates of the competition grounds. I am surrounded by fantasies and dreams made real in ice that boasts both water fluidity and solid strength. I stop in front of Heather’s exhibit. A cold wind stirs and my breath catches as imagined ocean swells break above my body. I feel I am an intruder to this underwater tableau. The lights cast shadows and suggest movement, the sway of seaweed over coral, the expanding and contracting gills of clownfish. Motion captured and frozen in this space my body believes in.

“Art,” I say.
“Candle,” he says.

My hands are sticky from the oranges at half time. Sweat tugs a stray hair into my eye, and I quickly snag it out with a fingernail. Holly and Jessica weren’t able to score, and the ball is coming back in my direction. I don’t trust my defense, so I know I have to stop the other team’s progress. I switch field position with the other midfielder, and run toward the ball, putting pressure on the weak forward. She panics, kicking the ball as hard as she can. I jump, and head the ball back down the field. I turn to look at my defense, to make sure they’re still where they’re supposed to be, and my head explodes with blazing light. Instead of one sun, I see six and they sear through my brain before I can blink. The after-image blinds me. I can’t see the ball, I can’t see the other players, I can’t even see my own hands. I hear someone running near me, and I make a wild attempt at the ball. The player hip checks me, sending me scrabbling to the grass. The suns are starting to fade from my vision, and I realize I can see if I close my left eye. I play the rest of the game with one eye closed. Slowly my left eye clears and I can see. I don’t tell anyone because it would just be whining. After a shower, I light a candle in my bedroom. Through both eyes the flame is blurred. Through my right eye, it’s normal. Through my left eye, the flame multiplies and slowly dances around the base of the candle. Shit. The doctor tells me I have to open my eye wider, but any wider and I think the skin around my eye will tear open, starting as a small slit in the corner and widening into a jagged gash. The glass magnifier resting against my eyeball is cold, and I see the bright pinpoint of the laser slowly spiraling toward my eye. I can’t look away.

“Weakness,” I say.
“Fish,” he says.

I swing my net into the river and immediately catch three salmon. They wriggle and flap against each other, the noxious air grating across their gills. They stop moving and for a moment I think they’re dead. Then one starts jumping and they all join back in. Jonas’ dad hands me a block of firewood. “You gonna eat ‘em, you gonna kill ‘em.” The idea is both tantalizing and frightening. Keeping my eyes on the fish, I take the block of wood. I raise my arm over my head, hesitate for a beat, and then swing down onto one of the heads. It stops moving. The luster of its silver scales immediately dulls, and I lose my nerve. But these men are watching and I can’t appear weak. I quickly bash the other salmon, involuntarily noticing the silver turn to gray. “Ever gut a fish before?” I shake my head. He grabs his knife and one of the fish, laying the fish on its side. He cuts from tail to just below the head, then reaches in and pulls at its streamlined innards. I watch as he quickly cuts the organs loose and pulls them from the fish’s body. He cuts along the bloodline and uses a spoon to scrape out the blood. As each step is finished, he throws the offal into the river. All along the river men and women, but mostly men, are doing the same. The water runs red downstream of this narrow pass. He dips the fish into the river to clean off the rest of the blood. “We’ll take the gills, bones, and scales when we get back. Whole fish keeps better til then.” He rinses the knife and hands it to me. “You do the other two.” Jonas snorts, thinking I’ll wimp out. To spite him, I take the knife, feeling the weight press into my palm. I grab the second fish, and lay it on its side. I make a halting stab into the vent. I stop when the knife hits the bloodline. I swipe up the belly, stopping just before the head. Using my left hand, I reach into the fish and feel the taut, slippery organs. I pull them partway out of the salmon, cutting into its head like I think I saw Jonas’ dad do. I slice through meat and the organs loosen in my hand. I pull them out and drop them into the river. I resist the urge to plunge my hand into the icy water,
to remove all traces of the life I had claimed. I use the spoon to scrape the blood into the river. I
dip the fish in, running my hand along its meat sides. I pull the salmon from the rushing water,
and it sparkles in the sun.

“Triumph,” I say.
“Green,” he says.

A whisper of resistance as the window screen slides out of its frame, a half-story drop to the ground below, and we creep through half-shadows in the day-lit night. The primer-painted van waits around the corner of the next block; Bernie’s round face peers from the open side door. I jump in as Bernie slides the door shut on its track. There are no seats in the van, just a stained mattress and a milk carton. Valerie climbs into the front seat next to Danny, leaving me alone with Bernie. He exaggerates his clumsiness using every bump and turn in the road as an opportunity to lean into me. He uses one exceptionally deep pothole to rock and slam me back on the mattress. One stinging stolen kiss, the smell of beer on his breath, cheap IPA, before he sits up. My face tickles in the afterwarmth from his beard. Danny’s apartment is small and cluttered, and a guitar leans off-kilter on the couch, as if thrown there in haste. Like that’s not staged. Danny tosses me a beer. I carefully craft an air of aloof disinterest in the night’s proceedings, thinking this would obscure the age difference between fifteen and twenty-one. I sip the bitter beer. Every swallow is forced and unpleasant. Feeling empty and alone, I’m terrified I’ll end up a lifer in this shit town. Valerie sits on Danny’s lap, toying with his fading green hair, greasy in the dim light and smoke-filled room. She jumps up, hold her hand out to Danny, and leads him to the bedroom. I take another sip of beer, another hit from the pipe. Fucking shit town. I know it would be easy to give in, easy to acknowledge Bernie’s hand on my thigh. I drink the rest of the beer and wipe the foam from my lips.

“Choices,” I say.
“Mountain,” he says.

10:30. **Shit. I’m gonna be late. Stupid Saturday biology lab.** I take the turns of Chena Hot Springs Road at reckless speeds, keeping one eye on the dense brush that lines the road. **Was that a moose? No, probably just a shadow. Pay attention.** Civil twilight makes the headlights useless, and shadows creep and contort at the edge of vision. I slow as I fall in line behind a slow-moving vehicle. The beat-up brown VW bus in front of me keeps to its excruciating pace of 40 mph, a safe pace in December on this twisting road. Just as I’m considering passing the VW, a truck barrels around the corner, skidding on black ice. He fishtails into my lane, but overcorrects and careens into the ditch. I round the bend and slow on the bare asphalt of the straightaway. I turn around and head back to the truck, not sure what I’ll find or what I’ll do once I get there. I stop ahead of the truck, pulling my car as far to the side of the road as possible without dipping my tires into the knee-deep snow. My shoes slip on the uneven surface as I crunch and sink my way to the truck. The man is slumped forward over the wheel, his brown knit cap pushed askance, revealing his left temple. A bruise is already collecting blood. I pause, afraid to open the door **(what if he’s dead and he falls out of the truck—what if he falls on me?).** A deep breath and I wrench the door open, its creaking hinges echoing in the still silence of the empty road. The air hangs heavy and smells of promised snow. I grab his left arm, now dangling at his side, and shove my fingers under the grease-stiff cuff of his worn jacket. A pulse. Faint, but steady. My breath frosts the air. I am stillness next to the truck, next to the man, not sure what to do. My cell phone doesn’t get a signal for another two miles. I hear the sound of an engine and the brown VW bus inches around the corner and halts to a stop near my car. A tall, heavyset man gingerly shuffles around the front of his vehicle. “Do you have a cell phone?” I ask. “Yes, I sure do. No signal. Have to get past Nordale for a signal.” “Right. Can you head that way and call 911? I’ll
stay here with him.” “Yes, I’ll do that. Then I’ll come back here, ok?” I nod, and the man folds himself back into his vehicle. As I watch him edge his way onto the road, panic swims to the surface and I wish I had driven to make the call. Here in the silence, the only sound the breath between us, I grip the man’s hand. He smells of motor oil and sweat. The sun breaks the horizon, surprising me with its strength. The ridge of mountains to the south catches the sunrise, burning orange. Denali shifts shade to brilliant pink, fighting back the purple shadows that claim the tundra around it.

“Hope,” I say.
“Bench,” he says.

Valerie steers me into the girls’ locker room before volleyball practice. She twists the thumb bolt behind me, ensuring our privacy. The familiar smells of hard water and evaporated sweat cling to the chipped and marred wooden benches. I trace the etched words “Barbara sux dogs” with my finger. Valerie checks the blue bathroom stalls, the metal doors creaking on their hinges. Empty. She sits across from me on another plank of light wood, the graffiti and splinters captured in varnish. The fluorescent light dulls her features; her olive skin looks pale and lifeless, the dark pits haunting her eyes the only color in her face. Valerie doesn’t look at me. She picks the skin around her cuticles, dropping tiny slivers of flesh onto the cold tile floor. I wait. Her knees are bruised and scraped. She refuses to wear kneepads during practice and games. Instead of the smooth, graceful glide of diving on kneepads, her body skitters and bangs across the floor. Each time I hear the screech of flesh on polished wood, I wonder why she insists on (penance) pain. The dingy plastic shower curtains sway slightly in response to the forced air. A silverfish peeks around the corner of the rubber molding, its antenna trembling the air before scuttling toward the second row of lockers. Valerie raises her Natural Science book over her shoulder, ready to launch it at the insect. Slowly, she returns the book to her backpack. The silverfish, nearly unchanged by three million years of evolution, ducks into a gap between wall and locker. Valerie shifts, glancing at me before quickly looking away. Unease slinks through her eyes. She toes a black scuff mark on the floor, erasing it with her shoe. Sighing, she locks me in her stare. She opens her mouth to speak, but a croaking sob emerges instead.

“Abortion,” I say.
“Metal,” he says,

I’m in the passenger seat of Kelsey’s gold truck. We’re listening to Metallica. Loud. At a stop light, a small, older black car pulls up next to us. The guys in the car try to get our attention, but I pointedly ignore them, turning my head to giggle with Kelsey. She leans toward my window and smiles at the driver. “Hi.” “Hi yourself.” “Nice music. Want to hang out tonight?” “Sure. What do you have in mind?” “Follow us.” The black car peels away as the light turns green. Kelsey guns the engine and follows. I don’t really like the idea of hanging out with these strangers, especially when we pull up outside a dingy white apartment building. But there’s also something electric about it. We go inside, sitting near the door. A pipe is passed, and I take a hit. The driver hands me a beer and I choke it down to stifle the coughing fit threatening to rise from my scorched lungs. I settle into the chair, losing the feeling of my body. *I’m sure it’s there somewhere.* My head feels disconnected, like it’s a balloon on a string trailing behind me. I’m warm, too warm, and I shuffle across the strange living room to the bathroom. *No way I’m this drunk.* I close the toilet lid and sit on it, head in my hands. I can’t think. Nothing in the room is familiar. A big black mold spot grows in the corner near the shower. I slide from the toilet seat to lay on the cold tile floor. I wake up in the grooved bed of Kelsey’s truck, mosquitoes coating my bare legs, a blue flip-flop balanced against my ear. *Didn’t I…Wasn’t I…Pants?* I sit up and my head explodes with pain and blazing lights. I lean over the side of the truck and vomit. The truck is parked in a ditch near Kelsey’s house. Kelsey appears next to the truck and gives me a strange look. She hands me a bloody towel and an ice pack. I don’t reach for it, confused and unable to command my arms. She presses the ice pack against my mouth and uses the towel to wipe away the blood. “I couldn’t find your pants.”

“Buried,” I say.
Ice in the Gearshift

The silence of falling snow presses against me, promises finality. Frozen air spikes my lungs; my escaped breath hangs, suspended. My toes are memory, not fact. My legs heavy with the pain of cold. My balled hands press tighter into my pockets, but there is no relief. Blood spasms through my veins, an unpleasant ache.
It was dark and the streetlight was dim. I drove from one end of town and out the other before I knew I’d been in it at all. I circled back on the empty highway to find a bed. I walked from the two-story motel with defunct pool to the brewery and ordered a chocolate beer. Soon I ordered a second and a third. Soon after that, I was drinking with men in dirty flannel and Carhartts the color to make my breath catch in my throat. Karaoke and the bar was thick with cigarette smoke and spilled beer. I sang Johnny Cash’s “Jackson” with a pair of Carhartts named Chet, the smell of whiskey whispering between us. As contest winners, our tab was paid in full. Closing time ushered us into brisk night air, the sound of the river lulling beneath the drunken shouts and gales of laughter. I stumbled down the stairs in front of the bar laughing, the concrete handrail taking a souvenir of fingernail. I collapsed into Chet’s welcoming smell of tar and dust and warm whiskey, allowing him to lead me to my motel. A drunken kiss and I swung the motel room door shut against Carhartts and possibility.
“So, why can’t you put a urinal in your house?”

“You can.”

“Yeah, we just ran into a code issue.”

“Of course you did! What’s the issue?”

“We have a drain pipe this big, which is okay for three things—the shower, sink, and toilet—to all drain into. But to get a fourth—the urinal—we would need a pipe this big, which we didn’t do.”

“Because they assume you’ll be using all four simultaneously.”

“Right. Because that makes sense to inspectors. So we’re just gonna get the bathroom inspected with the three. Then when it passes, we’ll plumb the urinal. It’s the only thing not up to code, but we won’t need to deal with that until we sell the house. Then we’ll take it out.”

“Or—and hear me out here—or you could just disconnect the plumbing and leave it as a sculptural piece. You could put flowers in it!”

“Or use it as a magazine rack.”

“Or a candy dish!”

“How psychotic are you people?”

“Hey, Chris won’t use it often, so it’ll be mostly clean.”

“Or he’ll use it all the time. The urinal can be part of his exercise routine—going up and down all the stairs.”

“I’ll be sure to tell him that.”
“Yep. Just explain that now his bladder is directly related to his cardiovascular health. Plus he’ll actually use the urinal. Win-win!”

“Remind me why I talk to you two.”

November

“Jesus Christ. I had to teach her to boil water.”

“You must be so proud of your awesomeness.”

“No. I’m angry for her life.”

“Yes. That’s pretty ridiculous. And she has been absolutely failed by everyone. Especially you because I bet she now burns water because you’re horrible.”

“It’s going to be hard. She hates fire and is terrified of getting burned.”

“And I don’t want to know why that is.”

“To be fair, I am too. But not in a crippling fashion.”

“You think she’s being honest?”

“There was a kind of panic when the flames kicked on on the cooktop. In her eyes. And Judy throws spaghetti at cabinets.”

“Hmm.”

“To test if it’s done cooking. Weird.”

“No. My mom did that. So did I, but I stopped.”

“It’s still weird.”

“True. It sticks when it’s ready.”

“Yeah. Or you could just test it. With your mouth.”

“How is that fun, I ask?”

“Uh, because you’re eating pasta. Derp.”

“You’re not to be eating the whole thing. You test it and then eat it. Not shove a whole handful in your mouth to see if it’s done—just one.”
“Even one noodle is enough to bring carby joy. Don’t hate.”

“No one said you couldn’t eat the flung noodle.”

“I said.”

“It’s not, like, flung in the bathroom.”

“Still. Wrong.”

“Time-honored.”

“So was slavery.”

“And well-loved.”

“Yeah. Just look at Paula Dean.”

“She seems to miss it.”

“A lot of white people seem to.”

“I’ve always said we’re one long blackout away from Lord of the Flies.”

“Long blackout? I give it just the slightest hint of impending discomfort.”

January

“Did I tell you I bought a machete?”

“Why…?”

“For the zombie apocalypse. Yeah. For the apocalypse. I’m ready.”

“I don’t own a machete.”

“Oh for shit sakes. I need to take you guys out to buy practical things.”

“Well, I’m also alone.”

“Where is Bart?”

“He’s at home right now. He can’t take care of me after surgery.”

“That’s why you have children.”

“They all have families.”
“So? You’re family.”
“Yeah, but they have kids.”
“You’re like a kid.”
“I got in a fight with Doug last night.”
“Who’s Doug?”
“My boyfriend.”
“You don’t have a boyfriend.”
“Yes. He’s the one with the girlfriend who had gastric bypass. So she obviously won’t cook for him. She won’t even cook for herself.”
“Well, if he has a girlfriend, you don’t need him. What about Bart?”
“Bart? No. Doug thinks Bart and I have a very unusual relationship.”
“You do.”

February

“Hi mom. It’s me.

Kayla. Your daughter.

Ha ha. Very funny. Is now a good time to come get some stuff?”

“Ok. Also, about the food stamps. Apparently that is extremely illegal for you to cash the money when I don’t live there. I—“

“No one! Mom it’s—“

“Mom! It’s not a big deal.”
“Well nothing has happened yet.”

“No. They said it endangers me too. I’m on parole, by the way. So that happened today. Thanks for caring.”

“Whatever. So your breaking the law puts me at risk because I know about it. And now Connie knows I know about it. So I can’t go back to jail for your crime.”

“Connie, mom! My parole officer!”

“What do you mean ‘good luck’? It’s a lie. I haven’t lived with you in over three years. So you’re wrong.”

“Mom! I don’t hate you. Wh—It’s not—Hello?”

March

“I can’t wait to see the finished basement.”

“I can’t wait to see the urinal.”

“Oh God. Now he wants one in every room. He called me over—‘Hey Ames. Come here a sec. What if we get a really narrow sink, move the toilet to the middle, then we could put a urinal right here.’ No! He already got one in the house. How many does he need?”

“Guys just love that they can pee standing up.”

“They can do that with a toilet too. The urinal is probably just some macho dominance thing.”

“I wouldn’t mind being able to pee standing up. It sounds convenient.”

“Do you want me to get the funnel and tubing? Cause, really…”

“No. Then I’d have to wash it, and that sounds like work.”
“Wash it? You run water through it and—bam! Done.”

“Yeah, but I’d have to carry it around, which really undermines the whole convenience thing.”

“We need to finish the basement by October or pay for permit extensions.”

“The building department is ridiculous. They’re always changing regulations to the point it’s actually easier to re-roof your house under cover of night.”

“Yeah… We won’t be doing that. We have to—”

“What kind of urinal is it?”

“It’s a waterless urinal. So Chris is all excited for that. His main argument is that we’ll save money on utilities if we put a urinal in every bathroom.”

“Huh. And resale value? Is the waterless urinal today the bidet of the mid-90s?”

“Gah. Who knows. Not a whole lot of comps out there.”
Faking It

I buy journals because that’s what English majors are supposed to do. We’re supposed to sit in sunlight-dappled shadow and bleed our souls onto paper. The most tortured wear berets and aloof disinterest. I receive journals as gifts, because everyone knows that English majors need more journals. I have a lovely collection of blank pages.
The Moon was Just a Sliver Back Then

The air wheezed in and out of the respirator. I watched its tireless journey, oscillating between never fully deflated and never fully inflated. Up and down, up and down. In algebra, we learned that an oscillating sequence is never-ending—1, 0, 1, 0. Up, down, up, down. I counted the tubes and lines snaking out from under the blanket and hanging limply from his pale (what’s left of it) skin. Fourteen. For a moment I couldn’t tell if they were draining him or supplying him. Both, I realized, slightly embarrassed. My eyes returned to the respirator. I watched until my stomach turned. His heart rate was 119. His blood pressure was 85/50. He coded 6 times in less than 24 hours. I still couldn’t look at his face.

I watched him run, dark hair bouncing and shining in the sun. I wanted to feel the spiraling curls wind around my fingers. I thought that was probably a weird reaction to a new acquaintance, still a stranger, really. I kicked the soccer ball over his head, rainbowing it under the lip of the cave that served as a makeshift goal. He leapt for it and missed, but flashed me a grin anyway.

“You’re pretty good.”

“At kicking anyway. I suck at dribbling. But I can score a goal from the half line, so that counts for something.”

“Mike, my brother, played soccer one year. He was really bad at it. Like, really really bad. I think he played for a total of three minutes all summer.”

“Well, everyone’s good at something.” I paused. “Sometimes I worry I’ll never figure out what I’m really good at. And I’ll spend my life wishing I was someone but me.” It all came out
in a rush, and I knew the words were stuck between us, my naked fear and ambition mingling in
the calm air.

Dave tilted his head to one side, his blue eyes looking straight into mine. “Nah. You’ll be
fine.”

“How do you know?” My subversive mouth ignored the signals from my brain that
demanded immediate silence. “You don’t even know me. We’ve been talking for what, less than
two hours?”

He shrugged. “I just know. Besides. We’re only thirteen. Plenty of time before you need
to worry about being a failure. Now quit whining and pass the ball already.” He smiled then, and
I could see it was going to be alright. Instead of passing the ball, I kicked it as hard as I could,
and it sailed over the top of the gravel pit. I heard it bounce and roll in the brush.

“Your turn to shag,” I said, returning his smile.

His bandaged foot poked out from the bottom of the blanket. The cast started at his ankle,
leaving a thin strip of flesh marred by scrapes and bruises to fend for itself against the cool
hospital air. I gently tugged the thin blanket down and over his ankle. I let my hand linger on the
cast. No warmth emanated from the rigid plaster, and I pulled my hand away before I let my
brain tell me it was (he was) dead. No, he is not dead I told myself. I watched the pulsing heart
icon on the monitor to reassure myself, its pulse both alarming and comforting. Down to 115,
which might be a sign of hope or a minor fluctuation. The respirator kept a terrible, calming
rhythm. I breathed with the respirator, imagined I was pushing the air into his lungs, helping him
breathe. But I wasn’t helping, I was hovering. I knew from movies that I was supposed to hold
his hand, and sit by the bed and cry and eventually fall asleep with my head next to his chest. But
the IV protruding from the back of his left hand scared me. I’d only seen it in stolen glimpses. I
couldn’t bring myself to look for any amount of time above his knees. His knees that popped
when he squatted to look at tracks in the mud. We shared the same affliction. We shared the pain
that brought tears of frustration, cotton fibers stuck in teeth from biting the pillow so hard we
thought our teeth must shatter, the truth of self-inflicted bruises to find a reprieve of sensation.
We knew each other through pain. We knew each other’s limits because they were our own. I
wondered if after the surgeries and physical therapy we would still share that pain.

I scrambled to the top of the gravel pit and pushed up from the ground and sprinted
across the open clearing toward the green horse pasture. My hair streamed behind me, and a
breathless laugh escaped. Then he was next to me, his lips so close to my neck that I shivered at
his hot breath. I reached the edge of the clearing and slowed to a stop. Dave caught me in his
arms and spun me onto the ground. He took off running again. I sat and watched, enjoying the
heat of the dry earth seeping into my thighs. My knees were already beginning to ache, and I
knew tonight would be bad. Tired of running by himself, Dave jogged back and plopped down
next to me. His knees cracked, and he grimaced. I looked into his eyes.

“Too much?”

“Not yet. Tonight’s gonna suck.”

“Yeah. Let’s just sit here for awhile.”

I laid back, a hardened dirt clod poking my kidney. It was uncomfortable, but in a good
way that dulled the ache in my knees. The raw scent of horses whispered on the breeze, and I
closed my eyes. We laid in the sun, greedy for its warmth. I shifted so my head was on his
shoulder. The drone of honeybees in the fireweed soothed me and I dozed. I woke with a start to
the shadow standing over me. Tilting my head back, I looked up the barrel of a bolt-action rifle. The man at the other end of the gun was silent. I poked Dave awake and slowly rolled to a sitting position. With my hands in front of me on the ground, I said, “We were just leaving.”

“Damn right. You the kids who been lettin’ my horses out at night?”

“No, sir. We were just playing and taking a nap.”

“P’raps you better play somewhere else. Don’t let me catch you on my land again.”

I nodded, and pulled Dave up off the ground. We backed up slowly with our hands visible then turned and ran down the steep grade of the gravel pit. I slipped the last ten feet of the wall and fell giggling at the bottom. “Holy shit! Did you see that? What the—Oh my God! Was he gonna shoot us? Does he think we’re horse thieves?!”

Dave started giggling too. “He was actually chewing on a hayseed! And wearing chaps!”

“I know! John freakin’ Wayne!”

We collapsed, laughing so hard we were in tears. The laughter ran dry and we looked at each other. “Do you think he would’ve shot us?” Dave asked.

“If we were older, maybe.” I looked back up the arcing wall of the gravel pit. “Let’s go back to your house. It’s too hot outside anyway.”

The nurse call bell toned down the hall. I moved to close the door and realized my knees were stiff from prolonged standing. The only chair in the room was near the head of the bed. As I sat, the air whooshed out of the vinyl padding. I watched the IV bag slowly expel its contents into Dave’s vein. His arm twitched, followed by a shudder in his torso. I wanted to run, convinced I was about to witness death. But his body settled, the monitors assuring me he was still alive. His right hand had no needles or tubes, and I covered it with mine. His cold flesh
frightened me and I drew my hand back. *Stop being such a wimp.* I slowly and deliberately reached for his hand again, breathing only when his skin warmed and I felt the pulse in his wrist. “Still with me,” I whispered to the machines.

The water swirled and seeped into our shoes with each step. I let my mind wander as we circled the marsh and I slapped mosquitoes off my neck. No amount of repellent would help. Suddenly, Dave retreated a step, backing into me.

“What the heck, man?”

“Shh!”

He pointed over the tall grass, and I parted the rushes with my hands. About 20 feet in front of us was a cow moose lying on her side. Her belly was swollen and she was breathing rapidly. “Is she hurt?” Dave whispered.

“I don’t think so,” I said with a smile. The cow’s ears turned toward the sound of my voice. I ducked down, hoping she wouldn’t see me; I didn’t want to cause her stress or interrupt something I was sure couldn’t be stopped. Dave crouched next to me, and we parted the grass again. The cow’s head lolled on the grass for a moment before she raised it again. Kicking her legs behind her, we watched as she birthed a calf. He was slick with blood and laid in the grass not moving. The cow was still too, and anxiety tugged at me. Then mama stood up, fully expelling the calf’s gangly legs. She circled the calf before once again settling in the grass. She began licking him clean. The calf slowly balanced on his front knees, his hind knees tucked under his belly. He eventually straightened one back leg behind him before falling over. The cow paid no attention to his failed attempt to stand, so I didn’t either. He tried again, this time managing to get both back legs straight out to the side while still balanced on his front knees.
The cow kept cleaning him, nosing him to different positions. I could see that his fur was much lighter than mama’s, and he blended with the dried mud and grass at the edge of the marsh. The calf finally managed to stand, but one strong lick from mama sent him somersaulting into the weeds. He shook his head and stood again, taking two unsteady steps before falling over. He had a mohawk from his head to his tail. Finally satisfied he was clean, the cow laid back on her side, and the calf scooted in next to her. Dave and I watched as mama and the new baby slept in the morning sunlight. Dave’s warm hand slid into mine, and we stayed crouched in the grass together, waiting, watching.

I forced my eyes up to Dave’s neck, covered in bandages. The helmet had probably saved his life, but it hadn’t protected his neck. Beneath the bandages I knew raw meat and muscle were exposed. The skin on 40 percent of his body was gone. He had been dragged 60 feet by a truck traveling 55 mph. Neither Dave nor the driver of the truck had adjusted for the gravel road. Neither had been able to stop.

“We’re moving.”

A ripple of cold snapped through my veins. “Where? When?”

“Soon. We’re already packing.” A brief pause before he quickly added, “But it’s just to North Pole.”

“Oh.” I squeezed the single syllable past the stiffness in my throat.

“Yeah. I asked my dad, and he says it’s less than 15 miles away. So we could still hang out and stuff.”
Silence stretched between us, and I swung my legs out over the emptiness of the gravel pit. I knew Dave was waiting for a response, some reassurance. But in that moment I wanted to punish him. I made him wait. Finally, I said, “Yeah. That’s not too far.” But I knew it was.

The respirator tube kept his lips slightly parted and revealed missing teeth. Three were knocked out when the truck hit him. His chin was purple and swollen. The bruise spread up his right cheek, stopping just below his eye. The other half of his face was unharmed. I stared at the dark curly hair that lay damp and flat on his forehead. I tried to remember what it looked like in sunlight.

I sat on his bed, my feet curled under me. The CDs were last to be packed. He paused and smiled. He held up Matchbox 20. “Remember that one time?”

I nodded. “Yeah. Put it in.”

He turned to put the disc in the CD player. When it started playing, he sat next to me on the bed. I stared straight ahead, not really listening to the music. There was a space between us that I couldn’t name. Sighing, I laid on my side.

“Scoot over.”

I did, and he took up the space between me and the wall. He put his arm around me. We didn’t speak. I was comforted by the movement of his chest with each breath. I let sleep come.

The shadows in the room elongated. As they edged toward the metal hospital bed, I had the sickening thought they were reaching for Dave, trying to steal him away. My stomach tried to crawl out of my throat, and I jumped up to close the blinds. My knees cracked and a moan of
pain escaped my lips. I sat back in the chair and put my hand on his chest. More plaster and the mechanical wheeze of the respirator. “Dammit, Dave. Wake up.”

I stand on the wooden floor of The Fillmore, the purple chandeliers shining above me. Derek is next to me, and I tell myself again that I love him. I have to love him—we share a house and dogs and memories. We are at once together and alone, two faces in a dark sea of strangers. The lights dim and Gregory Alan Isakov takes the stage. Another opener for Devotchka, I don’t expect much from him. He plays two nice, pleasant songs and I think I might buy the CD they’re selling at the merch table. As I listen to him sing “The Stable Song,” I can’t breathe. My heart swells and my mind travels back thirteen years to Dave. Hot tears slide down my cheeks. Derek asks if I’m alright. I nod. I listen to the lyrics, and I understand that I don’t love Derek, and I know this is the end for us.

Wake up wake up wake up was my mantra. I concentrated the words at his forehead, thinking that if I tried hard enough, I could communicate with him telepathically. It worked in Firestarter. I knew how dumb that idea was. “Dammit, Dave, just wake up.” I sat forward and put my head in my hands. I agreed to ignore time if it would ignore me too. Something brushed my left hand, and I jumped. I looked up to see his blue eyes staring straight into me. His right hand touched my fingers again, and I smiled.
Derek

The only time you could be still was when we were together. The silence became permanent, a wall I tried to surreptitiously chip away, like water carving stone. Afraid to be alone with your thoughts, television prattled, constant cacophony, to save you from self-reflection. I don’t know when it happened—I no longer miss you.
The single-haired brush paints eyebrows and lip lines. She stipples depth into flat eyes. Ears become defined with shadow. A warm cast discerns cheekbones, highlights soft contours of porcelain cheeks. She lays the brush down. “She’s beautiful.” “She’s terrifying.” “Are the two mutually exclusive?” Outside, brittle leaves cling to branches and rattle in the wind.
Because Dinosaurs

and the blue lights of the screen play amoeba patterns across his skin, his shirt, green turned black in the contrasting light, and his beard absorbs the light, but I see one white hair reflecting it back like a beacon, and the skin of his arm is soft and warm on the armrest between our seats as we tiptoe the delicate balance of sharing an armrest with someone at the movie theater, and I’m painfully aware of every shift and the slightest movement of air between us sends a flash of electric sensation up my arm and down into my breast, and I want him to touch me in the same way I don’t, in the same way I’m not sure if we can ever come back from a first touch or ever move forward or if one fumbling graze of a finger will be the last touch we share and the memory will be the only thing to savor or revile in the future, and I lean toward him as he says something, his breath hot on my neck, tickling the hair that falls forward when I lean in, and I close my eyes and wait for the pounding of my heart to stop reverberating in my ears, and I try to listen to him but all I can think about is the way the light flashes from his pupils and he has the most gorgeous eyes, hazel flecked with gold that I know is sun damage but it’s beautiful, and I can’t look away even after the movie starts, and his arm is touching mine as we share the armrest, and I wonder what it would be like to have his arms around me and feel my breasts pressed against him as he runs his hands through my hair, and I want him to touch me and it’s almost a need to soothe my sensory nerves that send imagined information to my brain and I will myself to be still, to not react, to not initiate, to not, and I make myself still inside my breath and watch the lights and the slow rise of his chest and wait, and I know this moment won’t last and we will either touch or we won’t and touching or not touching will move us in a direction incomprehensible in possibility and I wait, but the movie ends and the lights turn up and we walk to the car, but we’re not ready to decide and so we sit in the car of the parking lot for one, two,
six hours interrupted once by the security guard making his rounds, and we giggle and he
touches me and I snuggle into him and take my first deep breath in eight hours, and I know I
should wait, it’s only been four months, but we talked about marriage and I buy my dress before
he proposes because I know he will except I beat him to it and it just happens, there’s no
proposal but there doesn’t need to be, and we get married at the courthouse in October and I
wonder if he thinks about the night we first touched, if he thinks about the armrest and how, in
the space between breaths, we brokered a future.