*Miscellany* is the College of Charleston’s student produced literary and art journal, founded by Paul Allen, a poet and his student, John Aiello, in 1980. *Miscellany* is dedicated to showcasing the creative writing and visual art of the College of Charleston’s undergraduates. *Miscellany*’s staff of students invites all undergraduates to submit their work for consideration each year. Aiming to create a platform on which students may share their talents, *Miscellany* strives to be a publication of tolerance and integrity.

All submissions are read and reviewed anonymously. The ideas and opinions expressed therein do not necessarily reflect those of *Miscellany* or the College of Charleston.

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Persephone’s son can be a handful. His pediatrician, Dr. Asklepios, wants to put him on medication, but Persephone doesn’t believe in it. She thinks Zakary needs love and attention, more than she alone can give.

He’s quietly destructive. Persephone finds new bruises every day, teeth marks, scratches, indents of fingernails under his knees. She’s pulled him out of school because she fears he’ll be a danger to the other children. He falls into fits where he pulls at his hair and clothes, drenched in sweat, and he writhes until he’s sprawled out on the rug wearing nothing but his socks. Persephone is forced to live off of her husband’s disability checks. He was in an accident at work and has lain in a coma for 6 months.

Zakary speaks in fragments. He won’t say where the marks came from. Even though his mother has taken him to Dr. Asklepios numerous times, each time confirming Zakary as the assailant, Persephone secretly thinks her husband wakes up at night and attacks their son. She imagines his bandaged fingers closing around Zakary’s tiny wrists, his white lips nearing his arm and biting deep enough into the skin to draw blood. But Zakary is still, and when she wakes up, heaving, from a dream and goes to check, they are both sleeping.

Zakary has pulled out all his eyelashes. He used to have such long and beautiful ones. He brings them to Persephone and sticks them between their thumbs, and whosever it sticks to makes a wish. Persephone always wishes for no more wishes. He picks his lips and bites his nails. They bleed regularly. His fingertips are swollen and red. Persephone thinks her son is eating himself alive. They had a dog once, and Zakary’s father ran over his tail. They didn’t have the money to take him to the veterinarian, so to halt the pain, the dog ate away his tail down to the black bone underneath. He kept going until he gnawed his way into his guts and died. Persephone can’t stop seeing Zakary’s fingers eaten down to the knuckles, all raw and the yellow bone showing.

It is the beginning of winter, and they go outside to gather up the leaves from the crepe myrtles in the front yard. Persephone wields a rake while Zakary scoops up little piles with his arms. It has rained, and the leaves are heavy, making it difficult to make large piles. When she has half the yard finished, he has only a small circle uncovered in front of the porch. He is squatting in the center, hunched over. Persephone drops her rake on a half-finished mound.

“No!” She jerks Zakary back by the shoulder, and he falls backward, his hand muddy, an ant bed spread over the grass.

“You’re allergic,” she says as she cleans his hands with her shirt. “You know that!” She wipes them in the wet grass. “You know you’re not supposed to play in ant beds, Zakary. You can die!”

“They’re not there,” he says.

“What?”

“I was looking for them.”

“What are you talking about?” She looks at her son’s arm. There is nothing but black dirt. She runs her fingers through the grass. No ants. Persephone pulls her son close.

“You scared me,” she says. “I’m sorry.”

“Mom, where do ants go in the winter?”

She doesn’t know. “They go to the underworld. And they sleep in the hearts of pomegranates until spring.”

“Can I sleep until spring?”

“No,” she says and laughs. “We have to finish the yard. It’s getting cold.”
s n o w b a l l s i n s u m m e r.

maybe death looks like melting snow
packed around a knot of dogwood
branches, the light on our skin falling in
and in the third grade my favorite word
was diminishing. which is exactly what
this is.
The night is close. The birds above must think it a strange sight these cars, facing each other from across the river, headlights cutting on the road that points toward the sky.

The sun is drooping red. The trees drop shadows on the tenement as if they have something to hide. The cicadas begin to beg for black tonight, the porch lights click on.

There was a time when I could see a redwood in Autumn and not feel like I have somewhere to be. When I could hear a cardinal and not think about the time I shot one with a pellet gun. When I'd see a sunset and not worry about my insomnia.

The bridge has flattened out, lampposts follow the asphalt streets which run like a river, mirroring the coming night sky. Outside, women stand on the porches shaking their rugs clean. The birds are in the trees, hoping for a quiet night.

My brother was not the type of man to keep secrets from family, and said he could live without sipping whiskey in the evenings after work. Still used the cheap glasses mother bought him when he moved to the city. Financial district. One World Trade Center.

He said he had found home sharing subway rides with performers who asked for too many donations. There was something about the city that the streets of horse piss back south didn't have. He could be himself here, busy streets and bright lights, where workers shoveled snow to melt on salted sidewalks with the black garbage bags of pizza boxes and beer cases, famous pretended they were superheroes and troubled souls in front of black and expensive cameras and waxed sports cars. Didn't have that back home, he said.

But he couldn't hide his love of marsh grass. Hated the way the sand on Brooklyn beach was rough. The cold numbed his fingers to the point where he couldn't play the guitar as well as he used to. He swore more now when people walked too slow or their metrocard didn't work. For Christmas last year he said he would be alright. He looked at Vanessa's swollen belly and said they'd be alright.

And how is the city, ayong? Like wearing suit and ties? It's too big, and it smells like shit when the wind blows. We opened presents and he sat drinking whiskey on the rock-
ing chair. Took his glasses off and smiled. Listened to the laughter of family, the stale Christian radio station dad put on every morning. No snow outside. No concrete blocking the sun or clouds. He finished his drink and went out to the yard to watch the dogs run free. Saw home in greener grass.

September in Rome

September is lost to late afternoon, after some weeks in foreign lands of aching souls both ancient and new. The sinking sun pours gold over olive branches and too ripe figs, as a path of white leads to nowhere.

The sinking sun illuminates decay, crushed and piled in poor form on streets long forgotten. Wet and matted from morning rains, dust swirls and clings to every surface exposing the bones of history fallen.

Cracked columns and stone gardens hint of heroic gods and the goddesses who lay in wait, among the flowers. Blue-veined marble against brown fields offers testimony of the artist and his canvas, only now an interrupted story.

Echoes whisper and cascade down walls that will never reach heaven. The fading sun changes deep shades of red to less distinguishable blues only to become consumed by regretful shadow. September fades in mind.
Divinity a mere memory in the set sun
of a heart cold from time and reason. A last
look back on what was or what never was
allows a world both rich and strange.
Beauty turns her back in shame, unable to
witness silence capture a moment's death.
I wish I could say that I fell in love that fourth of July, but what happened instead wasn’t so pretty. Sometimes I pretend that it was all a dream, that I’m still dreaming, that I’m going to wake up on that same day all those years ago and live it all again. Here’s what happened: Taylor and I went down to our creek that afternoon. I asked my mom for fireworks, but she shook her head and gave me a boxful of sparklers instead. “These will do until you’re older,” she told me. Taylor didn’t seem as disappointed in me as I’d expected and I didn’t admit to her that I’d been relieved when my mother said no to the fireworks that Taylor wanted so badly.

That summer, I learned the best way to scare away minnows. I eventually forgot the way that Taylor exhaled smoke through her mouth and what she said about getting boys. Most of the clothes I wore that summer I could never wear again. The only white t-shirt that I’d saved from creek water and sweat stains had to be thrown away due to the round holes left by the cigarettes I smoked on the creek bank. Taylor always laughed and I’d say again that all I wanted was a minnow in a mason jar to sit on my shelf.

I didn’t seem as disappointed in me as I’d expected and I didn’t admit to her that I wasn’t too good for anyone.

Taylor and I didn’t become friends because we had a lot in common. Taylor’s birthday wasn’t until August, but she lied and called herself fourteen all summer anyway. Taylor loved my home. She loved that we had two cats and a library and that we took our shoes off when we came inside. She loved the food my mother cooked for her when she visited. I find it hard to believe—but it was true—that she never eaten pot roast, she said her family didn’t own a crock pot. My mother always sent her home with leftovers.

My father wasn’t thrilled about Taylor. In the late evenings, after she’d gone home, he’d prop his feet on our kitchen table like he always did while my mother cleaned, and remind me of his distaste for Taylor.

"Why is that redneck girl always coming around here?" he’d ask. "How many times do I have to tell you that we don’t need head lice?"

Taylor and I spent that summer together anyway. As much as Taylor loved my house, though, she wasn’t content to spend her days there. She eventually stopped taking off her shoes and started begging me to follow her outside. Unlike her, I was not a restless child—I was happy to play checkers indoors day after day. She wasn’t. After a while, I got tired of hearing her complain and agreed to go outside with her.

Taylor started taking me to a creek every day. She told me that she’d found it the summer before, but never wanted to go alone. She always stripped down to her underwear and swam in what was almost three feet of water. I often took off my shoes and tried to scoop minnows into my hands. When I did manage to catch them, they slipped through my fingers like the water they swam in. Taylor always laughed and I’d say again that all I wanted was a minnow in a mason jar to sit on my shelf.

I hadn’t given up on my minnow dream by the time the fourth of July rolled around. Taylor wanted fireworks. She said she wanted to watch them from a rooftop, to kiss a boy beneath red, white and blue sparks. I didn’t say so, but I didn’t know how to kiss and I’d always been too afraid to try it, even when a boy named Jerry McQueen grabbed my belt loop one day behind our school’s gym.

When I told Taylor about Jerry, she’d laughed the same laugh that she always did when we were alone. She admitted to kissing six different boys, though she could only recall the names of four. She said the first boy she’d kissed, Johnson, smelled like ketchup though she’d never seen him eat the stuff. When she asked me what Jerry looked like I lied and said he had the greenest eyes I’d ever seen, but in truth I’d forgotten his face.

I noticed Taylor acting strangely before we went down to the creek on the Fourth of July. We took sandwiches down to the creek, and she told me that we had to make five PB&J’s instead of two like we usually did. She insisted that she was hungry enough to eat them all, and I helped, though I didn’t believe her. She didn’t take off her clothes like she always did when we got there either, or even get into the water, but instead sat on the creek bank and watched as I scooped up handful after handful of minnowless creek water.

I was about to ask her if she was upset about the fireworks when the boys came. The high school boys that pulled up in what would have been a red truck if it hadn’t been so scratched. The front bumper fell off when the truck came to a stop next to our creek, and not one of the three boys seemed to notice as they pulled themselves out of the small front seat to come meet us.

Taylor smiled like she’d been expecting them and stood up, not caring that her white shorts were covered in creek mud. She embraced all three of the boys, greeting them by names that I’d never heard her mention before. The third boy lifted her feet off the ground when she hugged him.

The boys grabbed ratty towels from the truck bed before following Taylor to the creek and I knew that this was something that Taylor had
planned. I stood up from the crouching position I'd been in as the third boy laid a towel down for Taylor and himself to sit on. His friends laid down their own towels.

"Hey Sylvie, come here," Taylor said, after she'd settled herself on the ground. I approached them, and walking through the creek water felt more difficult than sleeping through the brightest hours of the day.

She smiled a too sweet smile when I reached the bank, but made no room for me on the towel. "This is Josh," she said, pointing to the boy on her left. I'd seen him sitting in the side of the truck when they arrived. Josh had a round face, large brown eyes and acne scars on his cheeks. He waved at me before placing his hand on the inside of Taylor's thigh. "This is Lon," she said, touching the elbow to the boy on her right, the third one she'd hugged. I can't deny that Lon was the most beautiful boy I'd ever seen, a rugged handsome than Brando. I do know that Lon said nothing—he couldn't take his eyes off Taylor.

Whatever we did, though, the time passed. My stomach started to growl when I noticed the trees in the distance brushing the afternoon sun. Taylor dug the sandwiches out of the grocery bag we'd brought. The boys ate and so did I. Taylor left her sandwich in the bottom of the bag. I then realized why she'd wanted to make them, and walking through the creek water felt more difficult than sleeping through the brightest hours of the day.

I looked back at Taylor and saw as she raised her eyebrows at me and tilted her head slightly. "I'm going swimming," she said, and pulled off her shirt and shorts. I then realized why she'd left them on all afternoon. She'd wanted to make him, but I didn't say anything. I figured I had no hope of finding space to sit next to Taylor, though, and instead sat on the end of the row that they'd formed, right next to Travis.

I don't remember what we talked about, or if we talked at all. I imagine that we discussed the things we hated. I imagine that Taylor said, "I can't deal with dirt under my fingernails," and I didn't counter her, even though she was lying. I imagine that Travis said that he hated his Algebra teacher, even though when she bent over to retrieve dropped pencils, you could see right down her shirt. Josh might have said he hated his father's dog that chased after his truck tires. I do know that Lon said nothing—he couldn't take his eyes off Taylor.

I was startled off by all the splashing. I could still see Taylor laughing and flipping her wet hair around her face, large brown eyes and acne scars on his cheeks. The boys gulped their sandwiches down like their father's dog that chased after his truck tires. I do know that Lon said nothing—he couldn't take his eyes off Taylor.

Whatever we did, though, the time passed. My stomach started to growl when I noticed the trees in the distance brushing the afternoon sun. Taylor dug the sandwiches out of the grocery bag we'd brought. The boys ate and so did I. Taylor left her sandwich in the bottom of the bag. The boys gulped their sandwiches down like their mothers couldn't cook and when they were finished, Taylor stood up.

"I'm going swimming," she said, and pulled off her shirt and shorts. I then realized why she'd left them on all afternoon. She'd wanted to make a show of herself.

I almost caught one. The minnows were harder and harder to see in the fading light, but I held my face close to the water's surface and strained my eyes. I scooped water into my cupped hands again and again, each failed attempt made me press my palms closer together, hoping to seal any chance of escape. If I waited long enough after an attempt, the little fish would begin circling my legs again, unaware of any danger that I might've posed.

In the distance, I could hear noises, the sound of Taylor squealing, and the white headlike poppers being thrown at rocks. I ignored the sounds and concentrated on the fish, my fish. I could almost see the mason jar that waited on my shelf at home and I remembered the used sandwich bag that I'd stuffed in my pocket. I pulled out the Ziploc bag and smoothed it against my stomach. I pulled the opening as wide as I could and lowered it into the water, pulling the bag behind my hand so that it looked like a sail filled with wind.

When I pulled the bag out of the water, I could see the minnows, two of them in the right corner of the Ziploc. I know I smiled. I might've started crying if I'd had time. Then what I thought was an explosion happened a few feet away from me, a bang and then a splash. I dropped the still open plastic bag and could not find it again. The sun was gone. Everything was black. Only some kind of miracle allowed me to see Taylor, Josh, Lon and Travis when I looked up. They were all laughing, all of them dripping. Taylor's body was pressed up against Lon's chest. When I looked down, I could see the bag in the creek, and when I looked to my side, I could see smoke hovering over the water like a ghost of the firecracker and the pieces of paper that were left floating in the water like the loneliest of driftwood.

I made my way back to the group and to Taylor's side. I watched as Josh lit another one of Travis's firecrackers and hung it back to where
I would never want anything from that water. Travis, I could see the calm creek and I knew the smoke dispersed, before I turned back to turn my head as I exhaled the smoke. When I handed it back to Travis, he flicked what was left into the creek and removed the fresh one from between his fingers and inhaled again. He took it between my fingers and inhaled all wrong. When I asked him to tear off the sleeves, too, he answered the stub to me. I took it between my fingers and inhaled all wrong. When I handed it back to Travis, he flicked what was left into the creek and removed the fresh one from behind his ear.

I hate it when my old man buys this kind,” he said. “He only buys them ‘cause my mama used to like them.” And he offered the stub to me. “You should tear off the sleeves, too,” he told me. “You’ve got nice shoulders, and you’ll look way more like a badass that way.” I don’t know if I ever took his advice. I do remember the flash of his white teeth as he leaned in and the sound of Taylor’s laughter when she saw us together.

We fell asleep after all the sparklers, poppers and fireworks crackers had been used up. The remnants of that Independence Day turned my creek into something dark that seemed to ooze rather than flow like it had the day Taylor revealed it to me. When I woke in the growing light of morning all of the surrounding neighbors had finished with their own fireworks and the Fourth of July was over. I’d fallen asleep on Travis’s chest, but I woke to find my hair caked with dirt. The boys only left tread marks behind. I sat up, looking to my stomach and lower back must not have changed anything. He kissed me that night, I think, but I couldn’t see too well through all the smoke we exhaled into each other. True be told, I’m not even sure I knew how to inhale because I didn’t cough much. Those stolen cigarettes took every other taste from my mouth. After kissing me, Travis touched some of his cigarettes to my once white shirt and burned dark round holes into the fabric.

“Something dark that seemed to ooze rather than flow like it had the day Taylor revealed it to me.”
stray

& the summer a hurricane emptied itself into the neighborhood lake like a selfish boy, left a lattice of salted gills & buoyant bellies. the storm offered rebirth to a stray dog, fishing out the dead to stash in the foundation of our house. he stripped them of skin, kissed open their spine like this & ate nothing. here: he found rebirth & resolve—a last breath in his pomegranate paws, a blanket of fish beneath the floorboards.
There are pink atoms in black space and they stay still but move faster than anything I know. There are people outlined in atoms giving birth to little atom babies, telling me, “it’s okay to have babies, it won’t kill the planet and you’ll be a good mom.” There are stars in the atoms and stars made of atoms. It’s all the same. There are layers that I can’t remember and knowledge that I knew but don’t know anymore. There are pink atoms becoming water particles and rivers becoming pink atoms. There is a Rolling Stone magazine on the floor, by my head. There is a cat scratching on the door up stairs. For some reason the word “stairs” is weird. You stare. There are people in pink atoms and pink atoms in people and the people break when they’re finally happy and millions of invisible pink atoms burst out into babies and trees and rivers. And the River says Om. And the River screams Om. But the River didn’t make a noise at all. There is a boy lying on the floor next to me. Then I realize the boy is you. It feels like every atom in my body is bursting when you touch me and I don’t know if it’s on purpose or not. I want you to lay me down, I mean to say, “let’s dance lying down,” but I can’t speak. There is a smile on my face because I know the Ideal but I can’t explain it as more than love, but it wasn’t love so I call it “Strahl.” Funny, because in German, Strahl means something with stars or electrons, I think. It all reminds me of my first time on the laundry room floor; they left me alone outside—left with a talking face outlined in pink stars and a coffin in a pool and a glimmer of a belief I lost when my Sunday school teacher told me I couldn’t look up to pray and my pastor told me no one goes to heaven until Judgment Day. There is a record player skipping and "Rivers and Roads" is lasting longer than my whole life and this moment is lasting longer than time itself. Then, there was a cringe. You cringed when I touched your back. You didn’t laugh at me and your breath smelled of cigarettes. I don’t know what to believe.
Preservation Potential

If natural selection were the captain of my fate,
or rather, my 7th grade dodge-ball team, would she
pick me, composed of orange-peel skin? or see in me
the cotton candy veins that change from blue to pink
with each daily dose of that one boy's dimples?
It's those damn soft spots of mine that will never fossilize.

But my hard parts, oh they will certainly make a profit.
Eternity will trade rocks for my bones, and soon enough
I'll be next-door neighbors with a Tyrannosaurus, living
an all-inclusive Smithsonian lifestyle. In fine print:
excludes privacy. Eyes followed by more gaping eyes projecting
imagination at what was, what could have been, what's left.

And when it's all said and done they are simply staring at nothing,
basing their assumptions on a traceable spine that I never did have.
Jo

The cat lady from across the street was becoming a nuisance. I regretted ever having lent her my cell phone, because now it seemed she was coming over every other day asking to borrow it. But what could I do? She was old and alone and didn’t seem to have family close by. I was scared of what would happen if I told her to lay off.

Christ knew Bobby wouldn’t be the one to say it, even though he was the one who had gotten us into this mess in the first place.

“Yoo hoo, anybody home? I am Minnie Mouse today!” She was at the screen door again, knocking and wearing the God damn pitiful mouse ears I had seen her dig out of a neighbor’s garbage a few days after Halloween. I peeked my head out from behind the kitchen to get a better view of the front door and contemplated sneaking out the back, but decided against it after realizing there was no point. She was going to let herself in anyway.

“I see you, lady! I see you! I’m coming in!”

I swallowed the door open and I silently cursed myself for not having locked it.

She marched toward me and adjusted her ears, which in turn shifted her wig. Calling it a wig was generous; it was so matted and stiff with use that it actually resembled a hairy hat. Her navy sweatpants were covered in brown and gray scuffmarks and there was a slight tear in the right knee. A wrinkled kneecap poked through, and for a split second I considered giving her a pair of pants. Then I thought about the granola bar incident and remembered she didn’t always take kindly to charity.

“What time is it?” She looked at me with small, milky eyes, suffocating in the weathered layers of her thick red skin. “I need exact time.”

“10:23 AM,” I replied, emphasizing the AM and hoping she would get the hint that it was too early for her to be here.

“I need to borrow your cell-phone, lady. I have to call some people.” She held out her hand expectantly.

“Sorry, Jo. I lost my cell phone. I can’t find it anywhere.” I shrugged and attempted to mime crying by slowly turning my fists in front of my face. I often found that I acted out emotions anywhere. “I shrugged and attempted to mime crying by slowly turning my fists in front of my face. I often found that I acted out emotions in front of her as if she couldn’t understand English.

“Bobby said I could use his cell phone. He said it to me yesterday at 5:06 PM.” She inched closer to me and started rocking back and forth. She smelled like cat litter and wet wool.

Bobby left early this morning to go to work, he’ll be back later.” I smiled. Let him deal with her bullshit. His was the only name she remembered anyway.

“That’s not gonna work.” She shook her head and raised the stretch of skin where her eyebrows should have been.

“Oh, well I’ll tell Bobby you came by. I have to go to work now.” A lie. I didn’t have work, but I wanted her out. She was like a pigeon, you fed her once and then she never left you alone.

“Can I have toilet paper?” She smiled with her childlike gums.

“Sure,” I signaled I would be right back and walked to the bathroom near the kitchen. I grabbed a roll, then figured, hell why not give her two. Seconds later I came back, but she was already gone, and all that remained was a lonesome trail of muddy footprints.

Jo hadn’t always been such a pain in the ass. When Bobby and I had first moved into the neighborhood a few weeks after college graduation, she had been harmless. Sure the cats were a little annoying, unfriendly and surprisingly fat, but some of them had leashes and neither of us minded walking them back to Jo’s house when they got out. She never thanked us, but we didn’t care. Eventually she became a conversation topic, a twisted source of entertainment. Have you seen Jo, today? We fantasized about her past and wondered if others in the neighborhood were as fascinated by her as we were. We knew we could always find her perched upon her rocking chair on her decrepit porch like a villain from Scooby Doo asking various passersby what time it was. I need exact time! Some days there was a half eaten cake at her feet and Bobby would say that she had a sweet tooth somewhere in that toothless mouth of hers.

Things took a turn when we started to give her things. Walking back from dinner one night, we passed her house and Bobby asked Jo if she wanted his leftovers. I warned him maybe she would take offense to the gesture, but Bobby was right. He did it anyway, because he thought it was the right thing to do, and at first, I admired him for that. When she accepted his offering, I was surprised. She told us her name and then mumbled something about one of her cats.

Bobby introduced himself, then introduced me, and before we knew it visiting her became a sort of routine. Bobby stopped by her house on his way home from work and sometimes brought her leftovers or toilet paper, which she always seemed to be out of. She would accept everything he gave her with a toothless smile and a nod of her wrinkled head. We assumed she was just another one of the neighborhood staples, a crazy old lady looking for some company.

The granola bar incident shed a new light on Jo. A much harsher light that changed the way we, or more so, I, viewed her. I went to her house one evening after cleaning out our kitchen thinking maybe she would want some of the foods we were never going to eat. They were unopened of course, just a medley of chocolate frostedings, soups and chips. I approached her porch with a smile
I was a slippery slope, covered in cat piss and shit. I was sick of feeling like I owed her anything. It annoyed by it all. She had no boundaries and I whenever she needed. I found myself getting hating vibe. “

I knew we had gotten ourselves into a mess. You must have done something else to piss her off. You must have given off a cat

balding scalp.

A few hours after Jo left, Bobby came home from work. He was a bartender at the same restaurant I served at, though these days it seemed we never had the same shifts anymore.

“Jo stopped by earlier today.” I handed him a beer then leaned against the kitchen counter, folding my arms across my chest.

“She came inside?” He sat down and took a sip from his beer. He ran his hands through his hair. Slumped over by the table, he looked exhausted.

“Yes, she asked to borrow my cell phone.” I decided not to mention that she had gotten the idea from him.

“ Weird.” He took another sip and stretched.

“Not really.” I started, “it happens all the time. She never remembers my name either, only asks for you.” I meant it to be a joke, but his sudden change in demeanor told me he took it the wrong way.

“Alright Ruby,” he said, narrowing his eyes and wrinkling his forehead, “I get it, I should have never introduced myself to her or whatever the hell it is you want me to admit to.”

I uncrossed my arms and walked over to where he sat. I placed my hand on his shoulder and felt him flinch.

“Hey, listen, I’m not trying to blame you for whatever is going on here. I just said she came by, that’s all. I’m not starting a fight”

Bobby stared back at me and said nothing, which worried me. I looked down at my feet, unsure of what to say, and reasoned maybe it was best to just leave him alone. I walked to the fridge and grabbed a beer, then made my way to the front porch where I sat and sipped. I half expected Bobby to join me. I wanted to just sit in silence beside him and come to the mutual understanding that everything was fine. He might crack a joke about a customer he had dealt with at work, and we would move on. But the door never opened and he never came out. So I sat and drank and stared across the street at Jo. She sat on her rocking chair, oblivious to the circle of bugs that buzzed around her porch light. Her cats lay at her feet beside a frosted cake, and I could see she was still wearing the Minnie Mouse ears.

The following day, I worked in the morning and Bobby worked at night so we didn’t see each other. When I got home from work, I sat down in the kitchen and attempted to ease the pain in my feet and lower back. I realized too late that I had forgotten to lock the damn door again, and when Jo came in shouting something about a customer she had taken about a dozen pictures of herself. All of them were zoomed in, blurry and sideways. We had laughed for a while, then had made ourselves burgers and talked about how much we hated our bosses.

When Bobby came home that night, there was something off. I tried to ask him about his day, and even offered to grab some more of the beer he liked from the corner store. He wasn’t interested.

“Ruby,” he started, then stopped.

“What?”

“I can’t do this right now.” He looked up at me and scratched his head.

“Can’t do what right now?” I wiped my phone, defeated. She took it and did a sort of hokey pokey dance, then curtseyed and opened the door to stand on my porch. She dialed a number. I held my breath and prayed it wasn’t 911, and then breathed a sigh of relief when I realized she was just speaking to herself.

“’I’m Jo. Jo, Jo.” she laughed, “my cats are meowing and I got some chocolate cake on the porch. Stupendous.”

I left her alone for a while; I knew she couldn’t go very far. When Jo’s fake conversation ended, she came back in and handed me the phone. She didn’t say anything, just smiled with a closed mouth and then winked at me. I took the phone and waited until she left before wiping it off with a Clorox wipe. I felt a little guilty after that, but justified it by telling myself I had to clean it anyway. I thought about the time Bobby had lent her his phone, only to find afterwards that she had taken about a dozen pictures of herself. All of them were zoomed in, blurry and sideways. We had laughed for a while, then had made ourselves burgers and talked about how much we hated our bosses.

Bobby stopped buying the beer I liked. I stopped calling him Bobby McGee. But Jo still remained. An unwelcome bitter little cherry on top of the sweet ice cream sundaes.

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“What?”

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“Can’t do what right now?” I wiped my
He stared at me with droopy eyes and tried to hug me but I shrugged it off. I needed to sleep. I needed to get the hell away from him. I walked up the stairs and entered our, now my, bedroom and buried my heavy head into the pillow. I willed my heart to stop beating so quickly. When I finally fell asleep, I dreamt of cats on leashes and cake.

Two days later, Bobby left to live with his brother in Wyoming and I kissed him on the cheek and told him I still loved him. He drove off anyway, and I stood on the porch feeling like an idiot from some crappy romantic comedy, minus the comedy. I went back inside and locked the door, then slumped down and cried big heaving sobs. I told myself that these kinds of tears were therapeutic and that once it was all over I’d feel lighter, maybe even happier.

Ten minutes later, I heard a knock on the door. My heart did a little jump when I imagined that it was Bobby on the other side of the door, maybe holding flowers and definitely scratching his head. I imagined he would look at me and I would look back and he would crack an awkward joke and I would take the flowers from his hands and throw them dramatically in the air and give him a big hug and a kiss. The comedic ending to the romantic comedy that I wished was my life.

I wiped my eyes, stood up, and unlocked the door. It was Jo. Holding one of her cats. Smiling. “Right now is not a good time, Jo,” I said. “I found my cat!” She held up the mangy creature and moved his paws up and down to make it look like he was dancing. “Congratulations. I’m glad he’s okay. Now I have to go, alright?” She frowned. “Do you need something?” I asked. “Bobby said I could use his phone.” She placed the cat down and put her hands on her hips. “Ok, I’ll let him know when he comes back from work.” I said it to make her leave, but a part of me said it because I wanted to believe he was actually at work and would be coming home soon.

She smiled, scooped the cat back up and turned to go. She waved one last time and I gave her a thumbs up. I locked the door again, went into the kitchen and grabbed a beer. Then I figured hell, why not, and grabbed two. I needed it.
Homage to an Ass

It's raining on a Saturday when I begin to write
The tenderest sonnet about love's delight.
But the words are stopped when I hear
My coital-embraced neighbors, the Booty Buccaneers.
Through our shared bedroom wall comes the grunted sound
Of sweet Ruby's voice, a girl who enjoys a rough pound.
And then there's crude Crystal, who's only there for Ruby,
Because Sterling has a gut and the hairiest man boobies.
Sterling goes spelunking in Ruby's nutty-brown crock
While telling Crystal he'll release his white rocks
Across her neck, her face, in her hair and eyes,
And Crystal implies that she'll have Sterling's testes incised.
They carve the lyrical railway, milk the tightfisted brass,
While I write my tender love sonnet, an homage to an ass.
This Week’s Down and Dirty:
Fourteen Pounds of Weed, Sixteen Snakes Found

Jozie Konczal

Sometime this week, that is, the third week of September in 2010, the respectable police officers of the city of Piedmont busted who they believe to be a major pot distributor to teenage neighborhood's pool with a lifeguard named Reagan, who actually disguises a bunch of meth labs and gangstas. Anyway, I guess the respectable and safety-maintaining cops of this area got a tip from someone who shouldn't be called a snitch because they aim only to help the community, and so they headed over to the home of Mr. David Southwell, whose name I am legally allowed to say because of that amendment or bill or official law, and presented to him a warrant that said they could go through the house. From what I heard about the happenings from the Southwell's neighbors who saw the police cars and stepped outside like any true, loving southerner would to inquire what all the fuss was about out of genuine concern, Mr. Southwell didn't put up much of a fight. He let them right in and offered them a slice of pizza and a cup of coffee. I believe this of Mr. Southwell, considering I met him once when he offered me a slice of his car. It looked nice on the outside, but I asked if I could see it and he let me. The inside sure smelled funky.

Anyway, so they came in like they'd been invited, and after they each ate a slice of veggie pizza they began to search the house "politely" probably according the official report, even though all the neighbors said they could hear Mrs. Southwell crying, which hurts my heart because I bet she's a nice lady. The strangest part about all this is that everyone always thought of the Southwells as perfectly good standing members of the community. Anyway, they found the door to the basement and down there is where I guess they found it all. According to Lisa Stoiser, the daughter of the Police Captain, there was fourteen pounds of weed right out in the open. According to my calculations, that's about one hundred and twenty seven thousand dollars' worth of weed right there, not that my boyfriend or I smoke weed or that I know the price of weed off the top of my head or anything, that's just what I learned after conducting research.

I guess I lied about the strangest part because the actual strangest part is that, in addition to all that marijuana (which is what Ms. Coffrin says I should be calling it in an official news reporter report), the police also started going through all the other drawers down there, expecting to find more stashed marijuana or maybe some crack cocaine, they found an entire dresser full of snakes. That's right snakes. Not just from around here snakes either, but colorful ethnic snakes that must have come from a jungle or the like. That's really why this whole story was on the news in the first place, it's not so irrelevant to bust a marijuana dealer in these parts but not many of them keep a bunch of snakes near their stash, right?

I thought an interesting way to put a spin on this story would be to interview students around the school about why they think is going on here. Ms. Coffrin also wanted to insist that I achieved a level of student interest with this story, in order for all of my summer school time to be revoked, and I figured what better way to make people read the paper than putting their names in it. First I asked Chad Colbert, a star athlete who graduated two years ago and now works at Dunkin Donuts, seeing as everyone loves him and likes to read the things that he says. Or at least they did like to read the things he said, before he hurt his knee and couldn't play college ball anymore. I heard he lost his girlfriend too. He's still cut though, even in the donut hat. On the record, he said, "I'm happy this change could be brought to our community. Now fewer weed addicts will be on the streets and will come closer to being clean."

Off the books, he said, "Sure [fudging] sucks for the Southwells. I just hope my dealer wasn't supplied by the arrestee. Not too [butt]hurt though, because the little [poop] son of his did a number on my car when I graduated. That was the beginning of the end."

I asked if I could sit in it and he let me. The inside sure smelled funky.

I wanted to interview the little [poop] in question, whose name I'm not allowed to say even though I have freedom of speech because he's not an adult yet, but I couldn't find him. I did find his friend, whose name I'm also not allowed to say but we all know, and off the books she said, ["Fudge" off], and on the books she said, ["Fudge" the [fudge] off].

So I interviewed Lisa Stoiser, because she seemed to have the most information concerning
about all this it's that there really is a lesson in this story. There are a few, actually. One of those is that you can't trust any man who buys you lunch or lives in a nice neighborhood. Two is that you should always have back-up drug supplies because your main could get caught at any second, and that's not something that my boyfriend said. Three is that you shouldn't try to talk to Tegan Sawyer. Four, Chad Colbert is single and ready to mingle (ladies). Five, not all drug dealers are terrifying. Six, our cops here are still respectable. Seven, don't keep your snakes and marijuana together, because then maybe an officer will get bit and you'll be in more trouble even though you served them pizza.

the incident. When asked what he father had to say about it, her on the record answer was, "No comment." Her off the record answer was, "My daddy said that he's never seen anything like this, that he didn't even think those snakes were real or what to do with him. He said that the pizza was [dang] well-made and he didn't want to arrest the man who made it. He said there was not getting around it. He said he wish there was at least some crack or meth so that he could have felt real accomplished but there wasn't a lick." I've decided to not be a reporter who respects people's wishes for what they say to be left "off the books" because then there would be no story. Anyway if you want to know what I think

Note: This story was omitted from publication the in the Eastside Eagle Times due to conflict with the subject of the story and a student of Eastside High, who would meet humiliation upon publication. As well as the fact the Student Editor Tegan Sawyer just didn't like it. Looks like Ms. Stacey Chapman will be missing her Mission Cruise after all.

Orbit
Ryan Tully

She is a slow death waiting for an iron-eyed alibi to burn out, orbiting some dull wet planet out there, somewhere near the frail intricacies of a gravitational collapse. Singing Wormwood songs in all bitterness, she makes the waters to become absinthine.

Not afflicted by the palsy dreams of one fixated with the navel, she rattles spider fingers through matted hair while I (still clinging to the power of mythopoesis) build careful ontologies from the bones of dead gods.

She is death-drive in glitter, exploding in slow motion—downward-forward—nowhere near the watchful Parmenidean stasis of a neurotic navel-gazer who bathes in lithium pools.
A voice calls out from the glowing window above my eye. In my warm brow-a garish hot coal I rub. The auspicious, furry birthmark of the Buddha above my eyelids. The congregation around me prays. In my pew, silently I stroke the spot. A chili red bindi. A tingle of spice. The feathery lashes of my third eye flutter. Its light shines from a holy cave. My parents beside me sing a Lutheran hymn translated from German. It is known by heart and I sing too. “Beautiful Savior, King of Creation, Son of God and Son of Man! Truly I’d love Thee, Truly I’d serve Thee, Light of my soul, my Joy, my Crown.” The Luther rose in my mind with white petals pillowing the red heart holding the dark cross. The white rose like the Carolina Dogwood tree of childhood. Hindus and citizens of Santa Cruz say the anja chakra appears as two white petals blooming behind the eyebrows. “Fair are the meadows, Fair are the woodlands, Robed in flowers of blooming spring, Jesus is fairer, Jesus is purer, He makes our sorrowing spirit sing,” Kabbalists tell of Chokmah and Binah, wisdom and understanding, living there. Justin read that that all humans have a pineal gland. Descartes thought it the seat of the soul. Justin says that the parietal eye, a spot on frog foreheads, can sense the light. He says it even looks like an eye, just closed for a nap. My fingers dip in the cool water of the baptismal font. They draw the cross on my forehead. But the spot- hot, un-chilled, spinning around, whirling into my skin. Frida’s magnificent eyebrows are there. Dark and intelligent. About to kiss in the middle. Will Frida be in Heaven? Bisexual like me, and a Communist. Is there heaven? Frida said famously, “Me encantan tus ojos. Esos que todavía no me han visto.” “I love your eyes. The ones yet to be seen.” The church sings, “Fair is the sunshine, Fair is the moonlight, Bright the sparkling stars on high; Jesus is brighter, Jesus is purer, Than all the angels in the sky.” The urge comes to cover myself in gold jewelry and paint and powder and spices. Glitter and flowers and leaves and shiny things. To build a nest out of clay and twine and ribbon and magazines and mirrors and silks. Will the sensation stay? Is my third eye something of which I can be proud? Something at which others will stare? May I be of compassion? If I shade it and speak sweetly to it will it wink open like my eyes when, as a baby, my parents covered them from the sun?
Some mornings Gerrit would wake up and it would be one of the good days. Some mornings he would get out of bed determined to turn his life around. On those mornings he would take all of his worries, self doubt, and obsessive thoughts, seal all of that in a box in his mind and push it to the side. He would clean. He would wash. He would take out the trash.

This was not one of those days.

He lay on the bare mattress in the middle of the living room floor staring at the ceiling. He was still wearing his faded jeans and old plain black t-shirt from yesterday. His dingy, now mostly gray socks were still on his feet, but he saw that he had pulled his shoes off. Trash from just about every restaurant that would deliver to his one bedroom apartment littered the floor around him. At least this time he had brushed the bed off before passing out at three in the morning.

The kitchen was relatively clean and essentially of Vodka in the freezer.

A whole year since his medical discharge and he still thought of so many things in military terms. Fortunately a maintenance cart had tipped over and crushed his ankle two months before his final out from the Air Force. Fortunate because he had just been demoted and was looking at not being able to reenlist. That would have meant getting a real job and he was sure he would have sucked that up as well. Just like he had ruined the accomplishments he had made in his first three years in the Air Force.

First Sergeant was right, you are a worthless piece of shit.

That day in the maintenance shop saved him from having to go through the final two months of his enlistment at the same rank as people just coming into the shop. It had saved him from being looked down on or pitied by his peers. It had saved him from the First Sergeant constantly breathing down his neck, waiting for him to fuck up again.

You deserved it.

Instead he had been medically discharged and put on disability. The checks weren't much but they paid the rent, plus utilities for his shitty one bedroom apartment. He even had enough left over to buy food for the month, if he didn't spend it all on alcohol. Then he would have to rely on food stamps, but he would usually go a day or two without eating first. The shame would overwhelm the hunger for awhile.

He threw the blanket off to the other side of the mattress. He rolled over onto his stomach and pushed down with his hands. He braced himself for the pain as he pulled his legs underneath himself and prepared to put weight on his feet.

He made sure to put weight on the left foot first.

He stepped off his mattress and shuffled toward the kitchen. He kicked trash out of his way as necessary. He didn't pick his feet up, because he knew that somewhere in this mess were plastic utensils and a television remote. Neither of which he was particularly keen to step on. He put his hands out and grabbed onto the threshold to the kitchen. His stomach clenched and he put his right hand on it in an attempt to calm the pending eruption.

Guess that will teach you not to ask for the fried egg on the double cheeseburger.

The kitchen was relatively clean and essentially a hallway furnished with cabinets, sink, oven, and fridge. The reason for its cleanness (minus the pile of empty beer cans in the sink) probably had to do with the fact he owned approximately two cups and three plates. That and the closest that he came to food in the house were the two cans of Guinness in the fridge and half bottle of Vodka in the freezer.

He lumbered over to the fridge. His limp was still tight. He eased open the door and grabbed two cups and three plates. That and the closest good stuff at the red dot, huh?

He turned around and opened the freezer. His hand closed on the neck of the clear bottle of Grey Goose covered with a thin rind of frost. He unscrewed the blue cap and took one, two, three swigs. He closed the freezer with a solid thump and set the bottle on the counter. He tossed the cap down next to it and picked up the can of Guinness and cracked it open. He took a sip and shuffled into the dining room.

Can't remember to get your prescription filled or make sure you have enough money for food every month, but you can make sure you buy the good stuff at the red dot, huh?

He listed into the bathroom, the vodka from the four pack. He closed the door and turned to the counter opposite where he kept his pain meds. He picked up his bottle and shook it. The lack of rattle made him sigh. He slammed the can of Guinness down and threw the bottle against the wall in front of him.

"Jesus, Gerrit. What the fuck is wrong with you?" he said.

He pressed his palms against his closed eyes and took a deep breath. He dropped his hands down to his sides.

“Well, I guess it’s time for my other medicine,” he said.

He turned around and opened the freezer. His hand closed on the neck of the clear bottle of Grey Goose covered with a thin rind of frost. He unscrewed the blue cap and took one, two, three swigs. He closed the freezer with a solid thump and set the bottle on the counter. He tossed the cap down next to it and picked up the can of Guinness and cracked it open. He took a sip and shuffled into the dining room.

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already starting to take effect. He scratched his neck under the wild black hair that had grown in since he had stopped shaving two months ago. He took a big chug of the thick bread-like liquid and set the can on the back of the sink. He sidled past the sink to the toilet and bumped his heels against the tub behind him when he bent to lift the toilet seat.

After he relieved himself, he flushed and pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it on the floor by the door. He side stepped back in front of the sink and picked up the can. He slapped his belly and watched it jiggle. He guessed he’d put on twenty or thirty pounds since he had stopped going to the VA for physical rehab.

He looked at his reflection accusations plain, the dull blue eyes stared back at him. He came to attention and snapped a salute with his free right hand. He didn’t even notice the beer that sloshed against the tub behind him when he bent to lift the toilet seat.

He turned on the faucet marked ‘H’ full blast and waited for it to get hot. He moved his hand under the water to test the temperature and then flipped the switch to close the drain. He waited until there was just enough water in the tub to cover his ankles and then put the cold on full.

He put his weight on his hands and slowly turned himself until both feet were in the tub. He turned on the faucet marked ‘H’ full blast and waited for it to get hot. He moved his hand under the water to test the temperature and then flipped the switch to close the drain. He waited until there was just enough water in the tub to cover his ankles and then put the cold on full.

The physical therapist had told him to use ice water to start the healing process, but right now he didn’t care. He made the pain stop and he was not in the mood for freezing his balls off. He turned both faucets off and prepared to lower his body. His right hand braced against the wall and his left hand gripped the side of the tub. He made sure he held his right ankle up out of harm’s way and slid down until just his nose and his knees were out of the water.

He could feel the muscles in his ankle loosen and the pain lessen. His heart rate lowered and the ache in his head subsided. The hot water plus alcohol reacted together to induce a feeling almost as good as an actual pain killer. He could tell that he was drunk and just lay there and enjoyed it. He blew bubbles with his mouth and hummed Elton John’s “Tiny Dancer.”

The song made him think of times when Sergeant Danforth played classic rock in the maintenance shop. He smiled. They had come to respect and appreciate each other. It had killed him the way Sergeant Danforth had looked at him after the demotion. One mistake in the military and you are a pariah. One DUI and all of a sudden you are the scum of the earth.

He frowned. He did not want to think about that. He closed his eyes and sank down until his head was completely submerged and held his breath. He knew he could not do it. He knew he would always panic and push himself back above the water before his air would run out. He was too weak to even do this right.

His lungs began to burn and he could feel his chest tight. He held out and fought the urge to resurface. He forced the remaining air from his lungs until both feet were in the water before his air would run out. He was too weak to even do this right.

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Today’s another day. You can do this, “ he said. His eyes started to tear up and he could feel a sob begin somewhere deep down inside of him.

“Alright, time to pull yourself together. Today’s another day. You can do this,” he said. His eyes started to tear up and he could feel a sob begin somewhere deep down inside of him.

Stop crying, you fucking pussy.

He clenched his jaw and took a deep breath. He lifted his head up and focused his eyes straight ahead on the tile wall in front of him.

“You can do this,” he said, his voice steady and calm. The voice of an unshattered man with his whole life ahead of him. The voice of any normal 25 year old man.

He reached out and his right hand closed on the bottle of body wash set in the soap holder. He used his thumb to pop open the cap and squirted soap into his left hand. He returned the bottle to its place next to the shampoo.

He washed himself. He started at his face and when he finished with his feet he reached for the shampoo. Today he was going to wash everything. He poured shampoo into his hand and lathered up his hair. He reached for the shampoo again and squirted more into his hand. This time he really scrubbed, down to the scalp. He rinsed his hair and felt almost clean.

He reached for the shampoo again and squirted more into his hair. He set the shampoo back in its place on the soap holder. This time he used his fingernails. He dunked his head to rinse. He reached for the shampoo again.

“No, stop. You’re losing control. Get a grip.”

He squeezed the shampoo bottle over his head and tears formed in his eyes as he started to wash again. He only washed his hair two more
times before he felt clean enough to stop. When he was done his hair was stripped, his scalp raw. He maneuvered his body up out of the water, careful of that right ankle. He lowered himself onto the side of the tub and flipped the switch to let the tub drain. He sat there, most of his weight on his left foot, and towed himself off while the water drained.

He spent half an hour on the toilet voiding the mistakes of last night’s meal selection. He thought about brushing his teeth, but the thought of toothpaste made him nauseated. And he did not want to have to face the mirror again today.

He hobbled into the hallway with his dirty clothes. He passed the can on the floor without picking it up, though it made him itch to leave it there. He went into his bedroom and dropped his clothes in the dirty clothes pile against the left wall. Then he went to the smaller clean clothes pile on the opposite wall and picked out clean clothes.

There was a war inside him between the OCD and the depression. He had never been diagnosed, but he had read enough online for self-diagnosis. He did not know what he was more afraid of: that they would look at him with horror when he told them what went on his mind or that they would say there was nothing wrong with him.

Most of the time he was too tired (or too numb to care what was on it. He just needed something to keep him from thinking too much. Inside his own head was the last place he wanted to be. He looked over at the alarm clock on the floor next to the mattress. It read 0748.

“Not exactly an appropriate time to be this drunk. An inauspicious start to the day,” he said. He shrugged. He leaned out and grabbed hold of the vodka bottle. He brought the bottle up to his mouth and took two quick swallows. He cradled the bottle close to his body and started to hum “Tiny Dancer” again.

“Hold me closer, Tiny Dancer,” he sang. His voice cracked and he sobbed. His eyes welled up and his vision blurred. He set the bottle on the floor and stood up. He stumbled in the direction of his mattress. His left foot hit the side of the mattress and he fell down onto it on all fours. The room spun and his stomach turned. He took a couple deep breaths to steady himself and lay down.

He pulled the blanket over himself and settled his head on the pillow. Tears ran down his cheeks and he sobbed. His eyes welled up and his vision blurred. He set the bottle on the floor and stood up. He stumbled in the direction of his mattress. His left foot hit the side of the mattress and he fell down onto it on all fours. The room spun and his stomach turned. He took a couple deep breaths to steady himself and lay down.

He turned his back to the weight bench and only putting weight on his left foot. He made himself as comfortable as he could. He bent toward the windowsill and plucked the beer can from its perch. He cracked it open with practiced ease and tilted the can up to his mouth.

At least you’re good at something.

Guinness always reminded him of coffee, chocolate, and beer all rolled into one. Two swallows and he took the can from his mouth and dangled it between his legs. He looked at the TV for the first time and saw that a woman was telling him about the savings he could get at his local dealer during Toyotathon. He raised his can in recognition of her desire to save him money on his automobile purchases.

“Toyotathon,” he said and gunned the rest of the contents of the can. He crushed the middle of the can with his hand. He burped and chucked the empty against the wall next to the TV.

“Got to drink to something,” he said.

He sat there and stared at the television, too numb to think about that. He dressed himself. Clean underwear, different pair of faded jeans, and a green shirt with the words “SOMETHING FUNNY” written on it in bold, white lettering. He thought about putting on socks, but decided he did not have the energy.

He wobbled over to the dirty clothes pile and fished his keys, wallet, and iPhone out of some pants. He put his keys and iPhone in his left front pocket and his wallet into his right. He looked up and his eyes lingered on the white closet door. Then, he shuffled out into the hallway.

This time he picked up the empty Guinness can, in deference to the OCD. He was careful not to put weight on his right foot when he bent over. He shuffled through the dining room and back into the kitchen. He lobbed the beer can onto the pile in the sink. It crashed onto the mountain of cans and started a minor avalanche. He watched the cans tumble over each other until they came to rest in their new positions. He grabbed the last can of Guinness from the fridge and the open bottle of vodka from the counter.

He went into the living room and stopped at the TV to turn it on. The small flat screen sprang to life, diodes behind the glass blasting light into the dim room. He turned away from the TV and shuffled across the room to the weight bench that sat next to the front window.

He used the bottle of vodka to push the dark blue blackout curtain in and set it on the windowsill next to the weight bench. He set the beer can down next to its cousin and gestured with his hands that they should stay.

He turned his back to the weight bench and used his hands to lower himself onto the bench, only putting weight on his left foot. He made himself as comfortable as he could. He bent toward the windowsill and plucked the beer can from its perch. He cracked it open with practiced ease and tilted the can up to his mouth.

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“Got to drink to something,” he said.

He sat there and stared at the television, too
Father, when I was younger you told me that you wanted to make the moon your home. You would point up at the city sky, darkened and cloudy, name the constellations and orbits of the planets you could not see with your own eyes. I remember your coffee stained teeth, grinning, saying we'd leave the city one day, we would see the sky like paintings from ancient artists in Rome and Greece -- but it does not matter now. You are with hair swept by sweat and blood, wrinkled lips and a heart that clots far too often. Your eyes are glossy like the glimmer of moonlit oceans, and they watch over the dead sky. You lay wrapped in white sheets under a fluorescent ceiling, uncomfortable, staring at an aged window where the dust and dirt specks are your stars -- You are trying to remember Orion and Cassiopeia, trying to connect the dust dots on the window pane to match the constellations you once could recite like I could my poetry. You raised a naked, trembling finger to the moon on the glass, watch your tattered reflection struggle to breathe without wheezing.

The machine beside you begins to beep. It hums and whines, the green lines climbing mountains slower. And slower. And soon it drones on like you did about the stars when we were younger.

You don't see it coming, the tray, because you close your eyes when the preacher starts to talk of the body and blood; it makes you a little queasy. You hate grape juice. Eyes squeezed tight you feel your father pushing the tray against your arm, but you don't take it until he whispers your name with some kind of force like God. You open your eyes and take a tiny cup of purple and pass the rest to your mother who is crying with half-squint eyes and mouthing words in her own world like maybe Jesus is dying bloody right there on the chair in front of her. You don't listen to the preacher, but you drink the juice when your mother does and dribble some onto the collar frills of the white Easter dress she picked out for you. You think of your friend who is Catholic and gets to drink real wine and dip little pieces of bread into it. Your preacher is into science and once said hell was a black hole in space. Almost certainly. You watch for the tray of little dry wafers, eager to get the grape taste out of your mouth. You think you know what eternity feels like. You grab the tray from your father and take two and eat one before the preacher manages to say into his microphone, “This is my body given for you.” Your father gives you a look. Your fingers are sweating on the other wafer, making it soggy, and you wait for your mother to swallow hers; her face is shining with the look she gets when she prays, and somehow you know she is praying for you. One day you’ll ask her not to, and she’ll tell you never to reject a mother’s prayer. But, now, you shut your eyes and tell God you’re sorry in advance, for everything, and your father squeezes your knee and almost smiles.
At practice I run through a field of green blades. There, I hear them—the shaking of plastic strings, a few high pitched cheers, six flying ponytailed rockets falling back from where they launched. The girls don't earn my glare—no, for my eyes lay on a swirling ball; I'll catch this one like I've caught them all. Skinny legs strain to catch up to me, frantic eyes stare in astonishment.

At home my father speaks at me with his drunken hodgepodge language. I say, "Coach says he's gonna let me start Friday, he says I'm the best quarterback since Christopher Jenkins in '82." My father upchucks a "just like your old man," speaking over the static of the television and the constant, hollow impact of a whisky bottle against his rocking chair. The alcohol will take him out. He'll be out all night yet still my parents' bed will be squeaking. My mother will moan and my father will snore and I will go for a run.
At church, my voice doesn't carry during the songs and my eyes merely close out of obligation when the preacher audibly conjures the Spirit. There's a Biggie song stuck in my head, but I'd like to think that God listens to Biggie Smalls so I let “Everyday Struggle” serve as my prayer. I don't know if God smiles or vomits when he thinks of me, but he surely looks alright in those rainbow-colored windows.

In his white parachute sheets I come alive though I will never tell. The pricking of his face soothes me, entices me, and it leads me to those ripe lips, which I suckle upon like sweet fruit. The mere circumference of his arms stuns my muscles, and for a moment we clench onto one another like a raft in our sea of sweat and lubricant. I grab that unreasonably smooth ass and fuck it and finish and get the hell out.

At school, I call him a faggot.

As I run back home, a man who I do not know is departing along our gravel-studded driveway, following hundreds of other strangers who had gone before him. My mother sits on the porch, eyes glimmering like the ring on her finger. She embraces me and, with self-assuredness, speaks to me. “We're very proud of you, your father and I. We want your life to be better than ours.” She has no idea. I leave her to lock myself in my bedroom of darkness. I lay in a naked bed and listen to my prayer in a cheap pair of headphones. “I don't wanna live no mo', sometimes I hear death knocking at my front do’” and then I see God head banging to the beat as he lights up a joint, puts on his shades, and raises Lucifer a billion souls.
there were gifts: strawberry pies, succulents, a snake for easter. that night, i held tequila beneath my tongue like venom, & only after did i notice the shot glass weeping in sudden emptiness, the snake watching me from her glass box—eyes a streak of rose gold or fire, spreading from her to south africa in a second. where warmth squeezed trees like lemons, seared spear grass from the underbellies of shrews, smoke rings spinning in the heavens like records on repeat, the melody and motion of revival. when jackson talks bible, she wants to know Am I not an apostle, too? why not, she is robed in herself like wildfire—oxygen folding against itself and back again like blooms of ash. jesus all magic like embers. blow, they come alive, rise.
Miss Jackson

McKayla Conahan

had a FourLoko at four pm and
I watched her and her blood condition get altered
before my eyes. at four am I would find myself
sitting on the sidewalk watching the only kind
of four-am-car round the corner, all four–
passengers and driver– with their left arms
out the windows reaching and singing to me
as they passed. I would tell my roommate-in-law
about the blonde girl at the frat party
sitting on the counter sucking
from the bag of straight red alcohol and sugar
like a teat like it was oxygen and she–
outer space. and I’ve never been to West Ashley
but I was there when Miss Jackson threw it up
sometime between four and four
lying in the circle of a streetlight
that seemed to have fallen when she had fallen
light all around her, with him, another altered,
on the left in his blurry red shirt
and borrowed denim vest

and four shots, like steam in his bloodstream
and almost three times that in her and
me wanting to hit him, o lord
holy fucking ghost I know
this is not how you treat your friends
but my fist gave the wall a talking to
and my lips gave him
a most terrified kiss
–but all only after four medical students we don’t know
help bring Miss Jackson to her feet,
only after we negotiate who would ride
in the ambulance, only after we watch her sway
between us like she was being thrown
through the ocean wild-eyed and doe-eyed like
her brain and her body
didn’t belong to each other
but maybe to the memory of the fawn
that crossed the street
and put its nose in her hand.
Their first outdoor job once the snow thawed was to drag fifty felled trees up a densely forested slope that was four football fields tall. These trees were cut by a two-bit oaf of a man, who had taken up residence in the woodshop loft and didn't know right from left. His name was Mr. Trent but he asked that they call him Senior Vagabundo, which he said meant wanderer in Spanish. The boys called him Saggy for short.

When he showed up on the first of May, he only had a small black duffel bag and a no-name Newfoundland water dog of the same hair color as his single eyebrow that stretched thick and joined his left and right temples. He was confident in his ugliness though. Brash and bold and smiled with yellowed teeth that matched the dulled whites of his eyes.

He said he held the world record for most sunflower seeds eaten in a minute. He said his wife had left him because she couldn't stand his smell. He said a lot of other things that I don't remember. I only remember those two because he was holding a bag of sunflower seeds and he smelled like cat piss the day I met him. I knew everything else because Phil wrote me a letter about the eyebrow and the dog and the Senior and the woodshop and the trees.

The day I met Saggy it was cool and the wind was dry. Colorado in late September is usually cool and dry, Phil said after I stepped on the small porch. I knew that already because I had stayed the first two weeks of September in Boulder my freshman, sophomore, and junior years in high school for a horse show with the rest of the girls at barn. But he didn't remember that. And I didn't expect him to.

“How you doin?” I said.

He turned his profile out to look at the needle-stitched mountains. His beard had grown in almost completely since I’d seen him six months ago. He reached one hand up and scratched under his right jaw. He put his hand back in his pocket. He turned his head to me.

“Not too bad.”

I smiled. “Good.”

He stood still, his hands in the chapped pockets of his chinos. The air was dry and I wished it heavy and humid so I could feel some tension to explain our distance, but it was the empty-bottle dry that held the hug I felt obliged to give him.

He didn’t raise his eyebrows at me or shoot his thumb over his shoulder. There was no casualness in his eyes. “Ready to go inside? Everyone else is already here.”

I knew he’d felt awkward when I pulled up in the Jeep. I could tell from his stagnant feet and pocketed hands. He’d been in constant motion since, well, Maria said. He had kicked day and night and swelled her ankles. I had sat perfectly still and she would have to poke her belly until I
and smelled like cat piss. He shifted the bag to his left hand and extended his right. “Pleasure to meet ya, lady.” I placed my hand in his. It felt like the dashboard in the Jeep and was just as cold. “Hi,” I said. He just kept smiling at me. It freaked me out. I looked at Phil. “Let’s sit down,” I said. “Okay,” he said. He walked towards two chairs between the balding father who sat silently and a short blonde boy who wore a vintage Nirvana t-shirt and nodded to Phil when we walked up. Phil sat next to the boy. I sat next to the shiny head. I put my bag under my seat. Saggy sat down in the only available chair, to the left of a man who said hello, I’m Clark, I run this place, your sons are in good hands. They’re progressing well. I know how happy you must all be to see them after so long. Six months is a long time. Don’t worry, they’ve been in good hands. Time for introductions! Oh, we want to get to know everybody so well, we’re all family here, circle of trust and all. Meet the, the, the parents! Get it? Introduce me, introduce us! We’re family, and all.

The boys started to talk about the wrinkled adults beside them counterclockwise and then it reeled and it was Phil’s turn. His nose stopped. His bottom lip stoppéd. His jaws and his earlobes stopped to his neck that stopped. He was melting in Colorado in the dry air and it seemed inappropriate. I walked over to Phil and the ugly man. “Rachel,” Phil said, “This is Saggy.” Saggy held a half empty sunflower seed bag and smelled like cat piss. He shifted the bag to his right hand and extended his right. “Hi Rachel,” eleven other voices said. I’d never been to an AA meeting, but then I understood why alcoholics stay alcoholics. I waved to the voices and gave a close-lipped smile. We were done with introductions. Wait, wait, me! I’m Clark and I’m a recovering alcoholic, twenty-four years, yes, it’s been a long road but I am feeling good. Feeling good, feeling good today to be here to help you all with similar struggles. It was hard, you know? There at first, it’s not an easy journey, but we’re here to hold your hand every step of the way. And my, what a way it was for me. But what are we, today? We are ready, we are willing, we are taking responsibility. Because, what is this? It’s a journey. All together, Recovery Is A Journey, Not A Destination. One more, okay? Recovery Is A Journey, Not A Destination. Oh, and I almost forgot. This is Mr. Trent, our groundskeeper. Mr. Trent, would you like to say a few words about yourself?

Saggy looked at Clark and reached his hand up to tug at the bun on top of his head. He wiped his hand on his pants and smiled. “You can call me Saggy, all the boys do.” I could feel Phil cross his legs beside me and I looked over at his nose that was straighter than mine and his cheeks that were smoother and I wanted to cry. Phil hadn’t called me Rach since he was fourteen and I was ten. I turned my head back to Saggy. “My wife left me cause of the smell, I suppose.” That got a few laughs from the boys and a chin quiver from the woman with the Styrofoam cup. Saggy looked at Clark and reached his hand to tug at the bun on top of his head. He wiped his hand on his pants and smiled. “You can call me Saggy, all the boys do.” I could feel Phil cross his legs beside me and I looked over at his nose that was straighter than mine and his cheeks that were smoother and I wanted to cry. Phil hadn’t called me Rach since he was fourteen and I was ten. I turned my head back to Saggy. “My wife left me cause of the smell, I suppose.” That got a few laughs from the boys and a chin quiver from the woman with the Styrofoam cup and the wool skirt. I looked down at her legs. The skin stretched nauseous cream over the ridged fat, and I could see the dimples in her skin under the wool of the hem that bunched. I crossed my own legs, and I was glad I had worn jeans. I wasn’t fat, at all, but still. I was glad she hadn’t thought. She made it easier to hate this place.

“I write and I read and I like both a lot, so I think I’m pretty well educated an’ the boys and I like to write and read some together, when we get the time and they’re not dragging trees up the mountains that I cut while I read Matthew Arnold,” Saggy said.

I could see Phil laugh out of my peripheral vision but I didn’t look at him. Okay, Clark said, okay, here’s what addiction is and here’s why they can’t stop and here’s what you did right, and here’s what you need to stop doing. And this is why they are the way they are, this is why they’re sub-human. This is why we can talk about them like they’re not sitting right in front of us.

I stared at the window above Saggy’s head and tried to count all the leaves on the tree, but they kept shaking in the cool dry air.

Heroin has many side effects, including but not limited to, dry mouth, constricted pupils, excess sleeping, slurred speech, loss of motivation, towards future goals, and an eating disorder. That last one was mine, but it was still Phil’s fault. So was the fact that Maria and Robert didn’t talk to each other anymore. Not that he cared.

The Nookweet Rehabilitation Center in Colorado specialized in the rehabilitation of cocaine, prescriptiondrug, methamphetamine, and heroine addicts and alcoholics. It was a
Saggy produced a small silver lighter from behind his back. "Here ya go, Phil." He said like one would say "son" or "bub". Phil reached over and took the lighter. He flicked it open and touched the flame to the tip hanging in the dry air. He brought the lighter down and clicked it shut and handed it back to Saggy. The red tip ached crimson and then matte and I was scared of it.

Saggy looked at my face and laughed again. "It's better than the alternative, yeah?"

I hated Saggy.

"Oh come on little lady. It wouldn't hurt you to smile, would it?" he said.

I hated Saggy but I didn't want him to know that I hated him. It was counter-efficient to whatever it was that I had been sent here to do. So I did. Then I turned my head back and walked down the stairs with the meeting, the codes, the tours, and the plaques. Once Maria had trained me, they didn't have to bother with it anymore. Phil had four diplomas, but not one was from an academic institution of higher learning.

Then Clark was done talking about it and I wanted to thank whoever made him stop. Stations, we'll have stations today. First, let's start with Rachel and Phil. Saggy will take you on a tour of the grounds. Saggy, you can handle that, can't you old boy? Show them the grounds, yeah? Saggy grunted at Clark and nodded in our direction. He set the bag of sunflower seeds under the chair then stood up. Phil and I followed Saggy to the door. He opened it for us and once I was outside I realized the room had smelt like burnt coffee and wet cigarettes. I glanced over my shoulder at Phil who was following me on the porch. "Do you smoke now?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes." I could tell he was angry that I scrunch

my nose when he said that. He stopped on the porch, reached in his back pocket, and pulled out a cigarette. "Saggy, you got a light?" he said. His eyes never left my nose. He knew that I knew that he knew what those had done to Grandaddy. To Richard's father. Richard would be furious. Which almost made it okay.

I could hear the locust-footed crunch of greasy snarled hair. Then a dog walked out of the shed. It was big and ugly and matched the hair that Saggy had on his head and brow and stomach. Its eyes drooped and it moved slowly. "This is my dog," Saggy said. "The dog walked over to me and sniffed one of my shoes. I reached down and patted it on the head. The poor thing had to live in there. It deserved some pity.

"What's his name?" I said.

"He doesn't have one," Saggy said.

"What?"

Saggy whistled. The dog turned its head and walked over to stand by his leg.

"He doesn't have a name," Saggy said. "I never gave him one."

"Then how do you call him?" I said.

"Oh, he pretty much knows when he's needed and when he's not." The dog looked like a Duke or a Butch or hell, a Stonewall, but it didn't have name.

"What if he runs away and you can't find him?" I said.

"Well, a whistle will do if I really need it, but I usually don't. Well, except for just then, 'suppose. But he's getting a little old, so you've got to be kind."

I looked over at Phil. He pulled the cigarette stub from his lips and dropped it to the ground. He rubbed his boot over it. The butt stuck out of the dirt next to a tapered stalk of a flower whose petals were probably once purple and oblong. The butt, the dirt, the petals, the stalk were all monotone sepia, or close enough to it.

"You ready?" Saggy said.

Phil nodded and Saggy started to walk down a hill to the right so I followed him and I guess Phil followed me because we were on a path that was cut left then right then left and more left and then Phil said, "this is the hill I wrote you about in the letter." It was an ugly path.

Saggy laughed. "Oh yes, the Arnold hill, that's what I call it cause that's what I was reading that day. Do you read lady?" I stepped over a tree branch that had become solidified in the red dirt. "Yes."

"Good."

The brown dog stopped to sniffle a fern, but we kept walking.

"Do you know Matthew Arnold?"

"No. I wanted to go back, but I could still smell Phil behind me and I didn't want to admit that I didn't want to go further. I also didn't want to go back to the smell of wet cigarettes."

"Oh, that's a shame. He's a very intelligent man, or was, I suppose," Saggy said.

I only grunted in response.

"What about the book, River of a Road?"

"No," I said. I wanted Saggy to stop talking, or Phil to start talking, but I didn't want to get my hopes up too high in case either actually happened.

"Shame, shame."

I looked up and saw Saggy shake his head and touch his bun and my stomach turned at the thought of the flakes of scalp that collected at the corners of his nail beds.
“Do you mind if I recite an expert that’s to my liking, lady?”
If he knew my name, why the hell did he keep calling me lady? I wanted to wonder out loud if his smell wasn’t the only reason his wife had left. But that would be counter-productive.

The ground we walked on slowly started to level out until we reached a small clearing and behind it sat another shack, better kept, but it was still ugly.

Between us and the shack was a pond, until the brown dog ran from behind us towards the shack and through the pond and the pond became a puddle two inches deep.

Despite the clearing and the unnamed shack and dog, Saggy kept walking and talking.

Phil said nothing.

“Okay, so there’s this man and this girl talking and the man sits down, and the girl says: ‘Aren’t you going to keep going?’

And the man says: ‘No.’

‘But you must finish what you started,’ says the girl.

‘I can’t,’ says the man.

‘Why not?’ says the girl.

Then the man says, ‘Why do you ask so many questions?’

And the girl says, ‘Besides the fact that I want to know the answer? Because you refuse to answer them.’

Get a load of that, can you imagine that goat? Sheesh.

So the man says, ‘You’re stubborn.’
And the girl says, ‘And the sun will rise tomorrow morning.’
And the man sits speechless.

So the girl says, ‘What?’

And the man says, ‘Do you know anything about Matthew Arnold?’

And the girl says, ‘Of course!’

‘Good. He’ll tell you the rest,’ says the man.

What a rich old bastard, yeah?

‘But he’s dead,’ says the girl.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes.’

‘Funny, I thought he’d just been quiet for some time now,’ says the man.

And the girl says, ‘No. Definitely dead. As a doorknob.’

And the man says, ‘That’s not the expression.’

So then the girl, she says, ‘Then why did you make me correct myself?’

So the man says, ‘Because you have to know what to hate what.
Can you believe that shit, little lady?’

Here I was walking up a mountain with a crazy talking about Matthew Arnold from a book that made no sense and his no-name dog and a brother who wouldn’t speak. And it was cool and dry. And I wasn’t wearing tennis shoes, so I sat down in the middle of the red dirt and waited.

I couldn’t tell whether I wanted to scream or cry, so I sat there waiting for one to win. It’s always the lesser emotion that’s extroverted, so I sat there and put my head on my knees and waited and said nothing.

Saggy didn’t notice I’d stopped. He kept on talking and walking. I had no idea how a fat man could still keep talking at high-altitudinal exercise.

‘So then he sees she’s pissed right? So he says, ‘You are frustrated.’

And she says, ‘And the sun will set tomorrow evening.’

So he says, ‘And Matthew Arnold will be one hundred and eighty eight years old.’

‘So you know his age,’ she says.

‘Of course! Everyone knows Matthew Arnold,’ he says.

So she says, ‘Well I know that.’

And he says, ‘You know a good deal of things.’

And she says, ‘And I’m not sure you do, anymore.’

And he says, ‘Yes. But I once did.’

Then Saggy’s voice was gone And the brown dog was gone. And I felt like I had to throw up, so I tried to take deep breaths like Maria used to tell me when she would rub my back when I was small, and Phil would stand at the doorway asking if I was going to blow chunks and if he could see when I did. The last time I tried to stop I was thirteen. After that, I welcomed the elasticity that covered my throat and the expulsion of the sweat and sticky bile.

But I didn’t want to throw up in the woods while Phil watched. I couldn’t smell Phil anymore, but I knew he was still there because after a minute, I heard a soft grunt and then the scrape of his pants on the dirt.

He didn’t rub my back, but he did say, “Maria called me yesterday.”

I kept my forehead pressed to my denim-coated knees and breathed. I didn’t want to ask but I knew I had to.

“What did she say?” I asked.

“She told me not to fuck this up for you.”

I raised my head and looked over my shoulder. “What?” I asked.

I couldn’t see his face though, so I put my hands in the dirt and scooted till I was turned around, facing him.

He sat with his legs crisscross, while mine were still drawn into my chest. I wrapped my arms around my legs and rested my chin on top of the denim.

“Yeah,” he said, “She said that you didn’t want to come in the first place, so not to upset you.”

If Maria had actually meant it in care for me, I would have loved her for it. I knew she only said it as a shot at Phil. Nevertheless, I wasn’t the object of her disapproval, and it created a hollowed version of something like gratefulness. I had become accustomed to this partisan devotion: love forged from relief.

He lifted his eyebrows. “Guess I fucked this up.”

I looked at his face and this time I did cry. I couldn’t help it. But I didn’t cry for him, like I should have. I cried for myself and for that dumb brown dog and the ass of my jeans that were coated in terracotta dust.

“You did,” I said.

He looked at me, then down at the dirt and at his boots and then up at the sky for a cloud
Maybe Maria would call me tonight. Maybe there wouldn't be a number six.

Phil reached in his back pocket and took out another cigarette and the lighter. He held them out to me. I took them.

The paper was rough between my lips, but my hands didn't shake when I tried once, twice, to catch the flame. And I raised it to the tip that blurred to two tips with two lighters and two flames and I lit both simultaneously and inhaled as the two fireflies danced. I clicked the lighter shut and handed it back to him, then took four steps back and leaned against the opposite railing.

We didn't look at each other. It wasn't my first, but he knew that. I could smell him, but then maybe it was me. This is what he wanted, what he'd accept. One cigarette. I exhaled and watched as the dryness choked the smoke into air.

"Clark is your brother?" I looked at Phil for denial. He just shrugged.

"Yeah," I said. "I think you will too."

He let me sit there and cry and didn't say anything else. I was more thankful to him in that moment than I'd ever been all the times he'd bought my friends and me vodka, or let me hang out with him and his older friends, or even before that when things like the first turn on the swings and getting the blue jump-rope were important. He'd always let me go first. He'd always taken the green jump rope. But here he was, twenty-four with scars all over his arms and half a college education and I couldn't feel sorry for him. I wanted to, fuck I wanted to. But he'd never let me. And despite the apathy I felt towards him, there was respect behind it. He refused pity, when that's all I'd ever wanted.

We sat there long enough for me to realize that Saggy wasn't coming back. We got up and Phil led the way back to the room with the little porch. I realized I'd have to make up a story about his living quarters when Maria called me tomorrow and asked. Then I realized I actually wouldn't.

Phil opened the door for me, and I walked into the room. Saggy sat in the chair with the bag of sunflower seeds in his lap. The brown dog was gone.

"Where did you two run off to?" he said.

"Rach wanted to see the bunks," Phil said. I noticed the nickname. But I wasn't sure if I liked it anymore, the pity.

Saggy raised his eyebrows. "Oh yeah? Pretty nice, aren't they lady? Then again, anything's pretty nice compared to where I shack up at night."

It took me a minute to remember the woodshop loft. The shed.

"Yeah," I said.

Phil and I stood in the middle of the room. He had his hands in his pockets.

"The brother's at lunch with all the rest of 'em," Saggy said.

Phil nodded.

"What?" I said.

"They're at lunch," Saggy said.

"Whose brother?" I said.

"Clark."

"Whose brother is Clark?"

"Mine," Saggy said.

"What?" I said. Clark was so small. He was so angular. But Saggy, Saggy oozed. He was cloudy and made no sense.

"How the hell else do you think I'd get a job here?" Saggy said.

The thought hadn't even crossed my mind. He seemed like a part of the mountain. Like one day he'd seen the sun and stood up from the puddle outside the shack. Then he'd pulled the brown dog up after him. He was dirt and gristle and weeds and I couldn't imagine a mother or a high school that would fit him, and I began to wonder if Matthew Arnold was a real person.

"Clark is your brother?" I looked at Phil for denial. He just shrugged.

"Yep," Saggy said. "He's not too bad. Didn't see each other for pert near ten years, but I guess that's what family's for."

I looked at Phil.

"Saggy, can I borrow your lighter again?" Phil said.

"Yeah, sure." Saggy dug into his back pocket. Phil walked over, took the silver, and walked to the door. I followed. The door opened and shut, and the wet and cat piss were gone.

Phil leaned on the railing of the small porch and pulled a cigarette from his back pocket and stuck it in his mouth. He flicked the lighter and brought the small flame to the tip. It caught and he brought it back down. He inhaled and released and the smoke billowed in the cool air.

Maybe the next time I saw Phil his beard would be gone. Maybe his hair would be longer.

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i imagine my mother best at sixteen, when the drought reached illinois—
left the earth stretch marked, emptiness in the field behind

her house where corn came so easy to steal. she is still finding their silks
beneath her heels. she is still speaking long-distance

to the father that left during the briefness of childhood.
something to do with running from the cops. something to do with running.

my mother and i make a game of this because we can, knowing abandon
means nothing if there is always return. lately,

i've been finding history in the husks of her cheeks: shattered jelly jars,
a family tree of rednecks, that man followed her home

once. some days, she lifts her shirt and becomes the world,
all oceans and mountains and creamed corn. some days, she could

eat the sun alive, i swear.

There's something
about your mother
when she's fifty and you're
twenty-five. It's been there
all this time: why is it that she
can offer you something—
perfume, soup, to brush
your hair—and you
find it the most annoying
and line crossing thing
in the world? It's overwhelming
when you're sitting across
from her and she's drinking
wine and then gin and taking
a pill and you think: here
she is, hiding when she knows
I can see her. It's not from
me she's pulling herself in
it's the rest. And she's teaching me
how to be strong or appear
so but lie in wait for other's
decisions to be made, first
to attack last. And when she
starts at you with I can't believe
you didn't, and you say I did
Mom, I did, and you realize
on her birthday when she's
turning fifty and you're twenty-five
you've lived half her life.
The puddle outside is daunting like thin ice.
Thin ice as slippery as those shoes I wear to work,
The ones without traction. My shoes
on the wet tile floor are like trying to run in oversized slippers.

I did that one time.

Now my toes are crooked like the way a sailboat tacks,
A bend, hard-a-lee.
Especially my second toe that's uneven like the crosshatching of an amateur artist
Who wishes for money.
But Excess money is the friend telling me buying a twelve dollar drink is worth it,
After all-you get a plastic shark souvenir.

The shark collects dust on my desk,
the plastic sticking to the particles like the grenadine.
It sits and waits like a forgotten child at a schools carpool lane.

Everything is plastic. It stares at my door.

My creaking door whines like a baby every morning and night when I
open and close it.
I find myself tip toeing around it so that I don't wake it up.
The creak of my door is like an unwanted alarm
Clock that rings throughout the house.
Anna Jo listened to birds screech in an oak tree above her head. She sat with her back against the chain-link fence and waited for Olive and propped the weight of her fists, both full of hatless green acorns, on the caps of her scraped knees; she could fit ten acorns in each muddied hand.

Dropping a handful of acorns, she swatted a mosquito against her arm and wiped away the blood and bits of wings with a piece of grass. She squinted up at the face of the sun whose forehead was hidden behind a tree. When she crawled through the metal-toothed opening. It seemed to take them further. As she crouched to crawl through, one at a time. The fence was not wide enough for both of them then, so we don’t miss it. “Wait no, then, so we don’t miss it. “She walked to the hole in the fence that was big enough for both of them to crawl through, Jo, one at a time. She bit the corner of her thumbnail and looked away from the house into the trees. “Wait no, then, so we don’t miss it. “She walked to the hole in the fence that was big enough for both of them to crawl through, one at a time. The fence was not wide enough for both of them then, so we don’t miss it. “Wait no, then, so we don’t miss it.

Anna Jo knew she was grown, at least a little, because she could go down to play in the woods without her mom watching her from the screened porch. The woods lined just one side of Dogwood without her mom watching her from the screened porch, because she could go down to play in the woods and no shoes, not in the summer, even in the stained cut-offs she always insisted on wearing.

Anna Jo dug a piece of stick into the ground, avoiding a mad little yellow jacket next to a dandelion. She thought about going into the woods but decided to wait on Olive. A long, dark curl of knotted hair caught in a link of the fence. Unable to untangle it, she ripped it in half and stood up to stretch her legs.

A horn honked twice, and Anna Jo saw Olive standing on the driveway at the top of the hill. She had on those knee length black stretch shorts spotted with ladybugs; she never wore jeans. She was small and the color of milk and her brown hair stopped in a line below her chin, straight as sticks. Anna Jo wore the same grass-stained cut-offs she always insisted on wearing and no shoes, not in the summer, even in the woods. She would wear them outside for her mother’s sake, slide them off without undoing the laces, and hide them behind a tree, shoving her socks under the shoes’ tongues. Her face was sunburnt pink. Olive said something lost to the squawks of a few birds. “What?” Anna Jo said.

“Just said hi. Did you get some acorns already?” Olive walked through the backyard gate and down the hill toward the fence and Anna Jo.

“I got them, but I dropped some,” Anna Jo said, “but they’re right here. Can you come help me?”

“I brought the other stuff, too,” Olive said, her eyes bright as she held out a lumpy plastic bag with the words ‘Thank You, Thank You, Thank You’ on it for Anna Jo to see. “Look inside to see if you think it will all work, Jo.” She squatted to help Anna Jo pick up the acorns.

“Oh, okay,” said Anna Jo. She picked up the bag that Olive had placed on the ground so that she could look inside. A package of peppermint dental floss in the shape of a circle, an unopened bag of red glitter, a full water bottle, a bald and naked baby doll with blue eyes, and a cleanser paint can with no label. “These will work,” she said. She made her voice low and serious, looking into Olive’s round frogeyes. She knew that even though Olive wanted her approval, Olive was the one who told the stories, who could find some use for all these things that she found around her house. Anna Jo liked Olive’s stories, because she wasn’t good at make believe.

“Good,” said Olive. She put the acorns she had been picking up into the plastic bag, and Anna Jo dumped her left handful of palm-sweaty acorns into the bag as well. “We’ll do the ceremony today,” Olive said. She drew out the ‘ss’ of ‘ceremony,’ as though it were some new musical note she had just learned how to play. She bit the corner of her thumbnail and looked away from the house into the trees. “Wait no, when it’s just almost dark. At sunset.”

“But we’re not allowed to go outside by ourselves after supper, and you’ll go home before then,” said Anna Jo. She tried to follow Olive’s eyes into the woods but didn’t see anything special.

Still staring toward the brown and green toothpick trees, Olive said, “But forests have different sunsets, Jo. We should probably go ahead so we don’t miss it. Everything happens in the forest world first. See, the sun has these thousands of little mouths. In the daytime, those are the brightest parts. Sun lips are so, so bright.

The sun never opens her mouths in the daytime, because the sun doesn’t have to breathe like we do. She just kisses parts of the ground with her closed lips. That’s where the most trees grow, the places the sun kisses. Those are where the woods are, like these woods.” She paused to bite her other thumbnail, eyes never breaking from the trees. “But when it’s close to nighttime and the sun starts to get tired from being bright all day, her mouths begin to yaw. And the sun’s throat is such a dark red it looks black, so you just see dark when the sun yawns. And she yawns and yawns until she falls asleep, and then it’s all dark.

That’s why it’s nighttime in the woods first. You’ve probably noticed it, Jo, that it’s darker in there than out here sometimes.” Olive looked at Anna Jo and picked up the plastic bag, which Anna Jo had placed on the ground.

“Oh, yeah,” said Anna Jo, “true. We should go then, so we don’t miss it.” She walked to the hole in the fence that was big enough for both of them to crawl through, one at a time. The fence was not wide enough for both of them then, so we don’t miss it. “Wait no, then, so we don’t miss it. “She walked to the hole in the fence that was big enough for both of them to crawl through, one at a time. The fence was not wide enough for both of them then, so we don’t miss it.

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Anna Jo knew she was grown, at least a little, because she could go down to play in the woods without her mom watching her from the screened porch. The woods lined just one side of Dogwood Road, the side where she and Olive both lived. Olive’s house, another one made of bricks, was a ten-minute walk, across from the blue water tower. Anna Jo dug a piece of stick into the ground, avoiding a mad little yellow jacket next to a dandelion. She thought about going into the woods but decided to wait on Olive. A long, dark curl of knotted hair caught in a link of the fence. Unable to untangle it, she ripped it in half and stood up to stretch her legs.

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She ignored the blood and looked back to Olive, who was still crawling through the hole, avoiding the pointed edges around her and holding the plastic bag in front of her.

The trees came to life when they crossed into the woods, waving their limbs into clouds in celebration of the sun. The fence that surrounded the yard became a frame. The grass looked painted, the leaves like little strokes of brown and green. Anna Jo could feel the woods falling on top of her and pushing up beneath her bare feet. Old leaves crunched under their steps and held an almost unbearable loudness when Olive's canvas shoes flattened them. They poked their little brown stems between Anna Jo's toes. Birds quarreled in screeches over berries, and branches scooped them up, wings and all, promising berries for each of them if only they would sing instead of screech. Squirrels chattered and threw green acorns down at the heads of the two girls, and thorns pricked Anna Jo's ankles. The air smelled the way only summer air did, like sweet and woody breath. "Today is special," Olive said.

"Okay, sure," Anna Jo said. She sat cross-legged beside Olive and wiped the blood from the cut on her leg on the towel carpet. "Do you want some honeysuckle?"

Olive was picking little green burrs from her shorts. "No thanks." A tangled and blooming honeysuckle bush grew as one side of the twisting dome. "That's what the fairies drink, you know," she said. She had a book about mythical creatures, Anna Jo knew, because Olive would often bring it into the yard when she was thinking about life in the woods. It was a little dome of stooped old people, waving their limbs into clouds in celebration of the sun, surrounded by petals of brown and green. "That's what the fairies drink, you know."

"Today is special," Olive said, looking at Anna Jo. "They do," Anna Jo said, looking at Olive, who was still crawling through the hole, avoiding the pointed edges around her and holding the plastic bag in front of her.

"Let's sit for a minute," Olive said. She hung the plastic bag on a branch that jutted inside the leafy room above the shoe box where they kept the interesting things they found in their explorations: bits of broken glass, smooth rocks, blue eggshells.

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Anna Jo scrunched half of her face into a wink, as she thought maybe a nymph would have a bottle of juice from them, and fill little acorn hats with it. That's why when we collect acorns we should never take the acorn hats. We don't need them anymore.

"Yeah, I know. You've told me. But I have a rubber band over my eyes. And there are a million flowers anyway," Anna Jo said as she plucked a yellow flower from the bush. "Maybe I'm just a giant fairy queen. And I would live in a tree house. I would." Olive scrunched half of her face into a wink, as she thought maybe a nymph would.

Olive laughed. "If anybody I know is a fairy, it's you," she said. Anna Jo pinched the end of the flower, pulling its center out slowly, and sucked the sweet liquid that appeared in a droplet. As she threw the flower to the ground, she heard something. It wasn't loud; it almost faded into the usual birdcalls that spattered the air, but this sound had an unshakable note of helplessness inside of it.

"Do you hear that?" Anna Jo said, though it wasn't necessary, because Olive was already staring in the direction of the noise.

"Let's go find it," Olive said. They both crawled out of their domed place and stood up. With swift steps they hurried toward the noise. Anna Jo usually saw in her yard. "I think it fell from the nest. Maybe it doesn't have a mom or dad." Olive's voice was a whisper, as though the little bird might hear her talking about its parents.

"Well, we've got to save it, then," said Anna Jo, but neither she nor Olive moved. They watched the little black bird stumble in circles and push shirril air from its lungs, crying for its mom. "Pulling her eyes away, Anna Jo said, "I'll make a nest in that box we have." Not waiting for Olive to reply, she ran the few steps to their place, ducking under the branches and grabbing the shoebox. She dumped the forest treasures it held onto the towel and picked some leaves and wispy twigs to line the bottom of the box. She rejoined Olive with her nest. The little crow was still crying underneath the tree, but it had stopped moving in circles. Olive never looked away from the bird.

Anna Jo dropped to her knees and shuffled toward the crow, rustling the leaves as little as she could. Its cries became louder; it seemed to be trying to stretch its mouth wider and wider, but it didn't move. The little black eyes stopped looking up and looked at her. When she got closer, she could see that one of its wings drooped nearer to the ground than the other. She placed the shoebox in front of her and lifted the crow. She reached her hands out a little and then a little more, trying not to move the air around the bird. She looked back at Olive, who was still standing in the same spot. Olive nodded.

Anna Jo grasped the bird around its wings and body. It bit her arm when she picked it up; she flinched but didn't drop it. She placed the crow in the center of her shoebox nest. It looked up at
chose a spot near their place, squatted down, and but her wing still looked a little crooked. Anna Jo at Olive. She had not tried to jump out of the box, Blackberry had stopped crying and was looking hungry, "she said. "I think birds eat worms. I'll have to talk to everyone. "They remember the faces of all the animals in the woods. That's why they are so loud, because they crows remember faces, so she'll be our friend.

"Well don't eat her, " Olive said. She giggled, reached out her hand, and this time touched the back of the bird, who turned around and cawed at her. "We can call her Blackberry, though. She should have a name. My mama told me that crows remember faces, so she'll be our friend. They remember the faces of all the animals in the woods. Why you're so loud, because they have to talk to everyone."

Anna Jo nodded. "Blackberry is probably hungry," she said. "I think birds eat worms. I'll go digging for some, if you'll stay here with her. " Anna Jo and Olive both heard the double "Okay," said Anna Jo, "but what's it for, again?" Still smiling, Olive sighed at Anna Jo. "It's an off-er-ing. It's even better now that Blackberry's here," she said, holding up one of Blackberry's feathers that had fallen into the box. "Feathers make it work better. We have to do it every year to make the trees happy, so they'll keep us safe when we come to the woods, and now so they'll keep Blackberry safe, too." She emptied the plastic bag that had been hanging on a branch onto the towel beside Blackberry's box.

Olive poured the water from the water bottle into the empty paint bucket. She picked three leaves from their roof, and the feather, and dropped them so that they floated on top of the water. She then pinched some red glitter from the bag and told Anna Jo to do the same. "We have to sprinkle it in at the same time," she said. After they had sprinkled the glitter in with the leaves, Olive sprinkled a little on Blackberry's head. Blackberry cawed, disappointed that the glitter wasn't food. "For good luck," Olive said. "I don't think we need anything else besides the sacrifice." She said the word sacrifice as if she had known it all her life. She picked up the plastic baby doll, slow and with purpose, placing it head first into the paint can. The doll bobbed in the water. Anna Jo watched the plastic feet and wondered where Olive had read about sacrifices. Blackberry cried for their attention, moving her head from side to side. "It's done," Olive said. She put another leaf in Blackberry's nest.

Anna Jo and Olive both heard the double honk that meant that Olive had to go home. Usually Anna Jo went up to the house right when Olive left, but that day, she said, "You go ahead. I want to make sure Blackberry's alright before I leave."

"Alright," Olive said, "see you tomorrow." "See you." After Olive left, Anna Jo knew she would have to be inside the house soon or her mama would be mad. She looked at Blackberry, who was looking at her as if to say, what now? She was afraid that this baby bird would jump out of her box and wander into the woods. She couldn't even fly. The woods were dangerous at night, full of shadowy things. That's why she and Olive weren't aloud to cross the fence after supper. Sometimes, Anna Jo heard howls through the screens in her window before she went to bed. Her mama said they were coyotes; Olive said they were werewolves. Blackberry had to stay in their place, under the crooked branch arms, where it was safe, and where Anna Jo and Olive would be able to come back to take care of her. Anna Jo unrolled some of the dental floss that Olive had brought in the plastic bag and tore off a piece as long as her thigh. Carefully, and to protesting nibbles and squawks, she tied one end around Blackberry's leg and the other around a branch near the ground. That would keep her safe in their place, until Anna Jo and Olive could come back to make sure she was alright. "Bye little Blackberry, be good," she said. Blackberry looked back to make sure she was alright. "Bye little Blackberry, be good," she said. Blackberry watched her, picked up the leg attached to the floss, and put the leg down again. Anna Jo hurried back through the hole in the fence and up the hill of her yard to her house, forgetting her shoes.
Olive wasn’t there, but she wanted to check on Blackberry and feed her some more worms. She dug for the worms in her yard, finding three long ones and a few roly polies which curled themselves into tight balls in her fist. Anna Jo crawled through the hole in the fence holding the handful of food for Blackberry out in front of her and scraping her leg on the metal again, reopening her cut. Wind made the trees whistle around her. She followed the path, watching her bare toenails as she walked. When she got to their place, her eyes looked down at the empty shoebox for minutes. She dropped her handful of food for Blackberry onto the towel carpet. The worms lay pink and still where she dropped them, and the roly polies uncurled themselves and scurried away.

Anna Jo dropped to her knees, turning the shoebox over and emptying it of leaves and twigs, as if Blackberry were hiding flat against the cardboard. She lifted her eyes and followed the thin white line to something dark in the corner, almost hidden by honeysuckle. It was a thin, squished shadow, gaping—purple, red, and black—wet, like the juice from blackberries.

She felt her face, and it was wet. Anna Jo dug her dirty fingernails into her palms. She piled leaves on top of the wet spot. She pulled until the dental floss snapped the small branch to which she had tied it. She looked at her hands, expecting them to be stained purple and red with blackberry, and rubbed them against a tree trunk until they were rough as bark. She heard the beginnings of thunder and walked back toward her house.

Anna Jo and Olive sat in the tree dome. “I wonder how Blackberry managed to fly away. Her wing did droop a lot,” Olive said. She was placing acorns in a red plastic bowl she had brought to the woods that day.

“I don’t know,” said Anna Jo. She looked at her palms, half-expecting them to be purple and red.

“Oh, also, did you know that you can eat acorns? That’s why we have to keep them. In case of an emergency.”

“Really?” Anna Jo asked. She imagined raindrops carrying Blackbird up into the sky, and somehow she knew it must be true what Olive said. She took an acorn from the bowl and bit it. Olive watched her, but didn’t take one, and said, “I didn’t mean you had to eat it now. It’s not an emergency.”
if i reach back far enough the black boy who chased me around the playground in first grade is my cousin or brother or something the sun carried out of the ocean years ago and warmed to the color of fresh bread and my feet in my shoes touching the earth touching those loblolly pines touch the sky and that airplane way overhead carrying my father back to mauritius
We have the same shoes. I mean the exact same. Dark, beeswax-coated leather with storied creases, thin laces, and oversized stitching at the sole. I want to say you got yours after I'd had mine a while, but the more I think about it, the more I can't be sure. Isn't that the way it goes? My feet aren't small and yours aren't large; they're close enough that, when feetless, our shoes look about the same. It's like how we're the same height. Easy to kiss standing up.

I slept with a guy the other night who told me they were nice shoes, and he would like to get a pair himself. I made my fingers tiptoe along his spine, and I said, "You totally should. I love them. They're great. Kind of expensive, but they're supposed to last forever." I wanted to say he HAD NO RIGHT TO WANT THOSE SHOES, but it seemed like the wrong thing to say when we were both drunk and still naked and his hands were all tangled up in my hair. That was the second time I slept with him. The first time was short and I don't remember what even started it all and I cried after and told him about how my love for you still bloomed faster than I could pluck its petals, though I didn't say it in so many words. The old childhood daisy game: he loves me, he loves me not. Jake was very gracious about it all. I mumbled, I wish I had wings on my feet so I could fly out of here. My indifference toward him didn't seem to bother him much. I didn't cry the second time, but I wouldn't sleep over.

After I got back to my apartment from one of the nights with Jake, my shoelaces got knotted, and I had to use two pairs of tweezers to get the knot out. I sat there, shoe still on my foot propped up on the kitchen table, and thought about the pictures we took of our feet together, some real cute "his and hers" kind of shit, and about how maybe I should get some foot powder because my foot smelled bad. At least thank Jesus we never got around to those matching tattoos. Sprawled out on my bed drawing obscenities and flowers on each other's bare skin with ballpoint pens. I remember you like that and the way it felt permanent until our wet breaths fogged the ink unreadable. I never thought about it much before.

I wanted to write him a letter after it was all over. I smoothed a bright white piece of printer paper on my desk. I picked out a blue ballpoint pen. Blue seemed like the right color for that sort of thing. I chewed on the pen's plastic cap with my molars, shifting it from one side of my mouth to the other. I looked at that paper until it filled my eyes right up to the brim. I was sure words could carry the weight of anything, but I couldn't decide how to begin. Should I use "dear" or just his name? His whole name? My nickname for him? His initials? I never did decide and that too-bright, lineless paper was just daring me to
screw it all up, so I folded it into a tiny square, blank like that, and put it in the drawer under my socks with all the little bits of things he’d ever made for me.

I called my mother and told her that story, how I couldn’t even write a letter. I’ve got a good mother, and good mothers will listen to their kids say the same things over and over again and tell them about how time makes it hurt less and also that they haven’t really seen anything yet. I kept recycling the same details about him because I didn’t have any new ones. It was that kind of in-between period where maybe I wanted to talk to him or maybe I just wanted to talk about him.

The way it ended was unceremonious, at best. I’ve tried several times to tell it better, but it’s harder to rework endings than it is

“Yo...
to bed. Your cigarette was still glowing a little between your fingers. I said I wanted to die in an accident. Bleed out or fall off a cliff or get caught in a crossfire that didn’t concern me. I cried. I said I was sorry for being alive. The alcohol made the backs of my eyelids do somersaults. I think you listened; you were drunk and quiet.

When you looked at me, squinting at me to measure me up in the darkness, I said that made me sadder. Stop looking at me like that. You said I was impossible.

I went to the bathroom and sat on the toilet feeling dizzy, panties pooled at my ankles. I felt sick and threw up on my bathroom wall. It sobered me up to see the evening all fanned out in brown specks against the wallpaper. I felt bad for telling you I wanted to die. If I had wanted to die in any kind of active way, I probably wouldn’t have told you. It was just one of those things. When I came back from the bathroom, the porch door was closed and my front door was swinging open, and you were halfway to your stair.

I listened; you were drunk and quiet.

The whole first ‘I love you’ thing was quiet. It just kind of slipped out after we’d both been thinking it for a while.

But the first time he cried in front of me was Halloween night. It’s the crying that made me sure I’d love him for a long time, really. A cold Halloween. We’d gone out as Calvin and Hobbes. I had Hobbes, dressed in a fleece tiger onesie I’d found online, and he was Calvin in a striped red t-shirt and jeans. Our favorite childhood cartoon. It was late, and we’d already been to a couple of parties, and I had a half-empty flask of whiskey tucked in my bra to prove it. We walked down the sidewalk with both his arms wrapped around me.

“To keep you warmmm, ” he said with the most endearing slur I’d ever heard.

“I know a better way to keep warmmm later. ” I giggled and tried to look and him and wink, and my foot caught on an uneven brick. He squeezed tighter and pulled me upright.

“What would you ever do without me? ” He laughed.

“Oh darling, don’t ever leave me, ” I said in my best Gone With the Wind voice.

“Never, ” he said in a high-pitched imitation of my impression. A gaggle of costumed guys passed us loudly. A batman whistled at me. “Nice bat ears, ” I yelled at him. Calvin laughed and hoisted me on his back.

“Close your eyes, ” he said.

“Whyrrrr? ” I said and buried my face in his shoulder.

“Just because. ” He carried me piggyback and I listened to a cadence of shouts, muted music, and car engines in between his footsteps. I heard him go up several flights stairs and breathing heavier—I’m not exactly a waif. When he let me slide off of his back, we were in the place I’d dragged him after our first date to kiss him senseless. Parking garage rooftop. We had it to ourselves. He knew I had an affinity for vantage points. He kept a list of things I liked in a notedown page on his phone titled with my name. I saw it once. Parking garage St. Philip St. was above ‘yellow mustard’ and underneath ‘library smell. ’ I felt a little bad for not having a written-down note about him.

“Come sit, ” he said. We sat close to each other on the concrete in a corner. He put his head on my shoulder. I pulled the flask out of my bra, swilled some of the whiskey around with my tongue, and grimace-swallowed. He passed on the offer when I made to pass it to him. I rested my ear against the top of his head. “I love you. ”

“I love you, too. ” He wrapped a big hand around the side of my face and pressed his lips hard to mine and said, “You taste like whiskey. ”

“Wonder why. ” I laughed. We were quiet and let sounds of Halloween night slip around us. I rubbed my thumb over his knee. I don’t know how to explain it. My affection for him was almost violent. I wanted to punch a wall I liked him so much in that second. But I just kissed the top of his head. Good silence like that does something to a person. We talked for a while about bits of things and moments.

“I’m scared, ” he said and breathed heavy, like he’d wanted to tell me all along. His voice crackled. I circled my arms around him.

“Me too, ” I said. Then I thought to ask, “What are you scared of? ” And he told me. It doesn’t matter what he said; I keep that for me. His breathing got shaky and loud, and I pulled his head to my chest. We shared most everything after that: fears, dinners, beds, stories.

The second time he cried in front of me was the first time I’d cried in front of him. We sat on the couch, and I cried into my hands. I was five days late, and I thought I might be pregnant. He walked to the drug store and brought me back a pregnancy test and a chocolate bar. When I opened the bathroom door, he looked at my red blotchy eyes from all the crying I’d done earlier. I wasn’t pregnant. I smiled and laughed a gurgled laugh. He tried to hide the shiny drop that made its way out of his eye before I could see. We split the chocolate bar, and ate it with spoonfuls of peanut butter off the same spoon.

I was sick on our first date. Stomach sick, not anything romantic like a headache or a cute little sniffle.

This first date was about a week after I’d told him I would never love him. I had been in love once before, when I was sixteen and in high
have fakes. We got there, and I said excuse me and headed straight for the bathroom, which was painted mostly black and plastered with hand-drawn band posters. I stayed in there for a while looking at my face in the mirror and trying to decide if I looked pretty.

When I came out of the bathroom, he was right there outside looking concerned. "You okay?"

"Yeah, just feeling a little sick. Nothing too bad." I blushed and I felt a bit dizzy, but I wanted to stick it out. He grabbed onto my hand, and we found a place to stand in the middle of the crowd. The music was nice, folksy and happy. Someone played a clarinet. He kissed me during a love song. He never let go of my hand once for the whole two hours, even when both of our palms started to sweat. I still wasn't too sure about it all, but I thought the handholding was nice. We stood so that the sides of our bodies touched. He looked at me when he thought I wasn't looking. I wondered what the other people in the crowd thought of us, if they could tell it was a first date. That's when I realized it was our first date, and I didn't mind.

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The first New Year's that I loved you, we were a state apart. We only ever had one New Year's kiss, you know, and it wasn't that time but that first New Year's is still my favorite. Just goes to show you. It didn't really make sense, but one part said, "You are like a forest full of secret flowers that I can whisper to." I remember the way it ended with that "to" and felt incomplete. Maybe it sounds stupid, now, but I loved you for writing me anything. Anything you said just for me at that time was perfect and right and lifted my heart up into my throat. I don't even know what you meant by half of it, but I remember it.

You sent me a close-up picture of your face smiling. I sent you a fuzzy picture of my hand around a glass of juice and the glittery ball dropping in New York on the TV screen. You called me just to hear me talk. You said, "Next year we need to spend New Year's Eve together." I said, "We could start our own tradition." You said, "We will."
Remember the Days (remember me)

Abbay McCandless

Save me from an untameable imagination.

Wild, creative, free. I can remember the days when we sat together. Before the signs for “fast to end abortion” divided us like the flat lands separate the east from the west. Back in those days you didn't know much but you believed what I said and in that tiny town we used to live in we were the same. But youth fades to the background and change has a way of elbowing innocence out of the frame. We left that small town with hills and rivers for flat fields full of nothing but corn. Funny thing, corn. No nutrition, hardly a vegetable.

The fields go on for miles.

Bible belting values have a way of corrupting young minds. Do you even know how to speak to God? Or does it come out in formulas and diagrams like our new lesson plans? Walk on eggshells white like the light. Follow the rules that you never knew existed. Maybe you found yourself in that Chapel room, away from me and my glare. That book that your boyfriend told you to read seemed to make perfect sense. Glory glory, hallelujah! Another one is saved—! From sin (from me).

We've grown up now. There's some distance. Away from the east, I'm further from the (mid)west. We have our own paths now, and I guess that's okay. Those flat fields may be home to you now, but I'll remember when we sat together in church where the witches used to live, coloring on pages of hymnals.
My legs, parentheses,

holding your mouth,
shushing reason against
the side of a bed.
The most painful word:
“please”
a dried up river and its embarrassed
boats
**APPENDIX:**

**Visual Art Materials Used**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
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<tr>
<td>Contemplation</td>
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<td>Gelatin Silver Print</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspective</td>
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<td>Emma Dingler</td>
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