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## A Bruised Sky Falling

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A Bruised Sky Falling

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts  
Creative Writing

by

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B.S. University of North Alabama, 2003

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## Abstract

The following thesis is a memoir in essays. The narrative is a reflection of memory as a chaotic system. Each essay stands alone as a single memory but also is part of the larger story of the writer's life. The fragmentation of the story lends itself to what Roland Barthes called a readerly text. That is, a reader may enter the text at any point and read the chapters in an order, and by doing this, the reader creates his/her own version of the author's life. The overall narrative arch is one of self-discovery and self-destruction.

Key Words: Creative Non-fiction; Memoir; Memoir in Vignettes; Memoir in Essays; Literary Essays; Memory; Chaos Theory.

## Preface

A strange thing happened to Edward Lorenz one day in 1961. He was a meteorologist, and in 1960, he began working on the problem of weather prediction. He wasn't recording real weather, pouring over the measurements of thermometers, barometers, psychrometers, and anemometers. He wasn't launching weather balloons. He was in a lab with a computer and twelve equations that produced algorithms. These algorithms created sequences of numbers that reflected what the might be according to certain variables, like air temperature, air pressure, relative humidity, wind speed and the like. Lorenz thought that if he studied the pattern created by this weather model, he would discover a way to use the model in predicting real weather.

The strange thing happened when Lorenz took a short cut. He wanted to see a particular sequence again, but because he wanted to save time, he started with a number in the middle. And to save paper, he only typed in the first three decimals of the six decimal sequence—0.506 instead of 0.506127. According to conventional science and mathematics, the shortened sequence should have looked just like the original. The sequences didn't vary greatly from the beginning to the end. He had run other sequences from the middle using the entire six decimals, and nothing strange had happened. According to standards in classical science and mathematics, measurements with accuracy to three decimal points are more than precise. It shouldn't have mattered whether he used three or six decimals, but it did. After he entered the number, he left and was gone for an hour. Maybe he called his mother. Maybe he picked up his dry cleaning. Maybe he bought a cup of coffee or spent the hour napping at his desk. It doesn't matter, what matters it what happened when he returned. He anticipated finding the same pattern of numbers as before, but when he returned, the pattern had changed drastically. He ran the sequence again

and got the same thing. Again. The same. Again. He concluded what people have known for years: humans can't predict the weather.

This wasn't a profound finding in the world of meteorology. Because Lorenz was working with algorithms, his findings had more to do with mathematics and physics, but he was a meteorologist and not a mathematician or a physicist, and the only journal that would publish his paper was a meteorological journal. Mathematicians and physicists don't tend to read meteorological journals, so the strange thing that happened to Mr. Lorenz went unnoticed by the greater scientific community for over a decade. But his findings perplexed him so much that he did more experiments, and that research led to other discoveries. These discoveries became the foundation for what came to be known as chaos theory.

According to many scientists and mathematicians, there have been three revolutionary discoveries in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: the theory of relativity, quantum theory, and chaos theory. As any scientist will tell you, relativity and quantum physics are hard to define; chaos, or complexity, is also a slippery idea. It isn't easily pinned in place. However, basically, chaos theory begins where classical science and mathematics end. For centuries, scientists and mathematicians have busied themselves only with objects and events, seen or unseen, that could be measured. They created formulas. They could input certain data, and through a series of operations and changes, different data would pop out. Input=output. However, for as long as these physicists, chemists, biologists, cosmologists, statisticians, and topologists have been creating formulas to study our world, there have been common, natural phenomenon that have left them perplexed. The irregular side of nature, such as the irregularity in cloud shapes and tree branches, the disorder in the atmosphere, or the fluctuations in wildlife populations, cannot be

measured because they do not adhere to any formal. Any given input does not produce a given output.

Classical sciences and mathematics are ruled by three simple principles: 1) simple systems behave in simple ways, 2) complex systems behave in complex ways, and 3) different systems behave in different ways. Chaos theory proves that this isn't always true. Simple systems can give rise to complex behavior, complex systems can give rise to simple behavior and the laws of complexity, of chaos, are universal.

For instance, outside my house is a small ginkgo tree. Compared to a bustling manufacturing plant, the tree appears simple. Let's say that I wanted to measure the surface of the tree. I could measure the height, from the longest root to the tallest branch, but that wouldn't give me the surface. I would have to measure the length of the trunk and the circumference of the trunk and the length and circumference of each of the large branches large roots that diverge from the trunk and each of the smaller branches and smaller roots that split from the larger branches and larger roots and measure the spaces where the large branches and roots grow from the trunk and the spaces where the smaller branches and roots connect to the larger branches and roots. But even if I could measure all of these, I still wouldn't have a correct number. I would have to measure the area of each leaf and the length of each leaf stem. Still, if I did all that, I wouldn't have a finite measurement because there are tiny crevices in the leaves. There are fissures in the bark and nicks in the roots. There are small splotches of moss and rocks, that having grown at the base of the tree and become entangled in the root system, have become a part of the tree's surface. And so on. And so on. The tree is a system. Its surface is diverse and infinite.

Chaos theory is the study of pattern formation. According to James Gleick, “Nature forms patterns. Some are orderly in space and disorderly in time, others orderly in time and disorderly in space. Some patterns are fractal, exhibiting structures self-similar in scale. Others give rise to steady states or oscillating ones.” Of all of nature’s patterns, snowflake formation is the best example of how chaos theory works. For years, scientists knew how snowflakes were formed. They could even create snowflakes in a laboratory, but just like Lorenz looking at the weather, they could not figure out why each snowflake was different because they were approaching the phenomenon from the wrong angle. They were trying to apply formulas to particular situations in the creation process instead of looking at the whole system of in which the process occurred.

In my refrigerator, I have three ice trays full of square ice cubes. The ice in the trays was formed by water freezing from the outside in. The process is easily explained. In an ice tray, water changes from a liquid to a solid under stable conditions. The speed of solidification is controlled by the walls of ice. The center solidifies slowly as the walls draw away the heat. However, when water freezes from a seed point, from a single molecule, from the inside out, as with snowflakes, it follows a different process. It forms crystals.

For generations, scientists have known that the diffusion of heat that occurs when water freezes causes it to grow irregular tips and dendrites. Snowflakes are created in turbulent air. A single molecule of water solidifies and then falls, grabbing other water molecules and impurities. As the water crystals fall and become larger, the boundary becomes unstable. One side of the snowflake might pick up more moisture than the other. Therefore, that side grows a bit larger, and in turn is at an advantage to pick up more molecules than its neighbors. Based on this, snowflakes should be tiny outcrops of ice. But there are many other physical forces involved in



creating snowflakes. For years, scientist overlooked a seemingly unimportant force—surface tension. Substances prefer smooth boundaries like the wall of a soap bubble because making rough surfaces costs energy. The surface of a substance is constantly pulling into flat smooth shapes. Like all substances, snowflakes have surface tension.

The essence of chaos lies in the heart of a snowflake. Heat diffusion creates instability. Surface tension creates stability. Heat diffusion is usually a large-scale system. Surface tension occurs best on microscopic scales. When a snowflake is formed, these two processes take place simultaneously. And some how, while this constant struggle between forces is taking place in an ever changing environment—as water falls through the air, being pulled by gravity and pushed by wind, a snowflake is formed, with six beautifully equal sides that magnify the naturally occurring built-in preference for water molecules to form in six directions of growth. Since the path of any given snowflake will vary from another, no two snowflakes are alike. Each is a record of all the changing weather conditions it experienced in its path to earth.

When I was little, my mother said, “People are like snowflakes—every one is special. Each one is different.” People are like snowflakes. Our identities form as a result of a struggle between the cause and effect of reality and the instability of memory.

## Dirt

Uncle Ed had opaque, blue-gray eyes—the kind that milky fish living in the dark waters of caves have. He said the only use he had for them was to keep his eye sockets full of something so he wouldn't scare the neighbors. As a child, I never knew why he couldn't see. When I asked, he said it was because he guessed he didn't need to.

Uncle Ed was actually my great-uncle, my father's father's brother. He lived with his mother, my Great-granny, in an avocado green, single wide, two bedroom trailer at the end of a red dirt road in Alcorn County outside Corinth, Mississippi. During the summers when I was a girl—four or five years old, I'd visit Uncle Ed and Great-granny every weeksometimes twice. My parent's made sure of it—not many children had the opportunity to know a great-grandparent. I never complained. I wanted to go. I went for the same reason people go in glass-bottom boats to see the cavefish I was fascinated.

Uncle Ed knew how many steps it took to get from the kitchen to his faded tweed recliner in the living room, the exact place where the family-sized bag of M&Ms was in the refrigerator door, and the distance from the floor to the top of the kitchen table, where he would lift me so I could tap dance for him on the hard oak surface. I kept my black patent Sunday shoes in the glove box of my mother's car so I would always have them ready. After he placed me on the table, Uncle Ed would sit in the metal kitchen chair with the yellow plastic seat and listen to my shoes beat against the wood. I danced. He listened. When I was through, I got a handful of cold M&Ms and a cup of decaffeinated instant coffee with real cream and three spoonfuls of sugar.

He was the first person who taught me how to wait. "Important things take longer," he said as I sat in the kitchen with the heat laying on me like a pregnant cat. I closed my eyes and

waited for Uncle Ed to find the cups that made that certain click on the countertop. I listened for the jingle of teaspoons, the wisps of instant coffee grounds, and the tapping of spoons against the cup rims. Then came the sound of water from the faucet. And I waited in the dark heat for what felt like three forevers. Then the whistle of the peccator. His footsteps. The gulp of water. The squeak of the floorboards by the refrigerator and whine of the door. A splash of cream. I waited for the clank of metal against ceramic, and when I smelled the coffee, I opened my eyes.

“Where are you?”

“Second chair by the window”

He never spilled the coffee.

\*

I thought that my life followed some predictable order. If I planned and followed certain steps, I knew that there was a reasonable probability that I would obtain a predictable outcome, like Uncle Ed’s coffee. So for two years, I drove from Corinth, MS to Florence, AL. Back and forth. Back and forth. I drove the Natchez Trace Parkway and county roads because in my mind my life was an equation:

(4 hours a day in a white-washed classroom + 2 hours a day on the road - 6 hours of my children’s lives) X (five days a week) = 1 bachelor’s of science degree in English and Professional Writing from the University of North Alabama.

Simple. Straight-forward. Orderly. Theoretically, all the classes and driving worked together to produce a diploma just like dancing on the table and waiting in the dark heat produced a cup of coffee. Theoretically, the only reason I drove the Trace was to get to school. But life is not that simple. Life is a complex system of intertwining variables. There is no formula.

\*

Great-granny kept a garden every year. During my visits, after I had danced on the kitchen table, she worked outside, and I followed barefoot if the weather permitted. Uncle Ed made his way through the backyard in even steps to his wooden chair, which sat under the shade of an oak tree. He sat for hours listening to the seasons change.

I learned the seasons by the work we did. If we spent our time tilling the garden patch and planting seeds in evenly spaced rows, I knew spring had arrived. I would go home with blisters between my thumbs and forefingers from gripping the hoe and black grit under my fingernails and toenails from digging without one. Watering and weeding marked early summer with days of endless sun and heat that clutched so tightly it made my clothes stick to my skin. By late summer the harvest began with a deep windless heat that forced us to pick and gather in the morning when the cool light fell silent on the garden or in the evening when the setting sun morphed the sky until I couldn't tell where the red earth ended and the red sky began.

I picked purple-hull peas. Sitting on a small wooden stool that Great-granny brought from the house, I pulled the beans that hung in amethyst clumps from the lower parts of the vine; then, I stood to reach the middle, stretching, standing on tip-toes with the okra leaves—broad and itchy—at my back, rubbing my thighs and arms like a dry cat tongue. By the time the sun set, I had filled the ten-gallon tin basin, and the purple pods turned my fingers the color of soreness.

In her garden, I learned that all things were temporary. Each season had its own work, but the work passed when the season ended. Everything changed. Everything passed. Everything returned again. But we never visited the same garden twice, and there was always new work to do.

\*

There were two ways to get to Florence from Corinth. I could have stayed on Highway 72 all the way to Muscle Shoals and then to Sheffield, passing through towns and counties whose Native American names were bigger than they were and blurring past the gas stations, truck stops, and mom and pop diners, which lined the highway until Tuscumbia, where the long procession of stop lights began. Or I could have exited off of 72—onto the Trace, which led to badly paved back roads full of twists and right angle turns, where after what seemed like a journey into the realms of backcountry nothingness, the yellow and rose brick buildings on UNA's campus emerged out of nowhere. Two possibilities like flipping a coin.

I thought of the Trace as one of the variables in my equation for a degree and my driving it as a deliberate controlled choice. Even though the 45 mile-an-hour speed limit and lack of gas stations deterred most people from the route, I thought I chose it because I wanted to. It was the day to day reality of my habitual life. But I drove the Trace because it called to something deep within me. Something I didn't understand because I chose not to listen to it.

Along the Trace, a ceaseless expansion of the land displayed the curvature of the earth, and the rise and fall gave way to endless stretches of cotton fields which continued along the county roads, bordered by ditches that overflowed when it rained and clumps of trees whose branches made shadowed canopies. Every mile or so a little country church stood alone against the open sky or faced the road situated among a grove of trees. By choosing the Trace, I was reconnected to that part of me that belonged to Uncle Ed and Great-granny. Driving the Trace allowed me to listen to the seasons change.

Spring always arrived without any great announcement—appeared quietly in the bright buds of tree branches. But soon after the first sight of green, the landscape became boisterous with the sound of mechanical cultivators tilling the ground, and the air was thick with clouds of

dust. The farmers plowed the fields, mixing the remains of rotten plants from last year's crop into the soil and ripping out weeds and grass that might compete with the cotton or attract pests that might harm it. The smell of freshly broken ground entered my car. There wasn't anything much better than the smell of fresh dirt. As they stirred life from death, I listened to the earnest purr of diesel engines and watched the ghosts rise in the wake.

\*

"You'll never learn if you don't watch, and watch close," Great-granny said as I sat next to her at the old woman's sewing machine in the living room. Uncle Ed sat silently in his recliner listening to the T.V., and I watched her hands feed the lilac cloth under the needle. Watched the two pieces of lilac become the front of my Easter dress. Watched the needle moving a thousand miles an hour—Great-granny's hands moving steady, keeping the line straight. I watched, but not because I wanted to learn. Her hands weren't like my mama's. Great-granny's hands were a foreign country with valleys of dark spotted skin and rivers of mounded pink flesh. She was the oldest person alive. The oldest person that ever lived.

The sewing machine stopped whining. Great-granny scooted her chair back and motioned for me to sit with her between her legs. Once in her lap, she placed my hands on the fabric and hers on top of mine. The soft cotton material was smooth and cool under my fingertips. Great-granny's hands were rough and warm over my knuckles. I closed my eyes. A whirling began that vibrated through my fingers and up my arms. Together we guided the fabric under the whizzing needle. Then she removed her hands and I panicked, opened my eyes, and quickly pulled my hands away, causing the fabric to reel and the seam to zigzag. Great-granny abruptly stopped the machine, and scooted the chair away from the sewing cabinet. I stood—the vibration in my arms replaced by a nervous twitch just below my breastbone.

“Okay. You’ve got to pick this out now,” she said in even tones. “That’s how it’s done. You mess up. You fix it, and start again,” she continued, snipping the threads with a pair of shiny metal scissors. Her hands reached into the deep top drawer of the sewing cabinet and pulled out a seam ripper, which she handed me along with the fouled bodice.

“Are you learning?” Uncle Ed asked.

“Yes sir.”

“Well, if you learn good, I’ll give you some M&Ms.”

\*

Early summer brought a temporary silence to the Trace. It didn’t take long for the cotton plants to grow. Seedlings emerged within five or seven days, and after only about 11 days a full stand of cotton appeared. As I continued my back and forth journey from home to school, the sun began to rise earlier, and by late May, a quiet stale heat had replaced the spring air thick with the sweet hypnotizing hum of tractors. With the planting done, the farmers ceased their to and fro twisting along the invisible mazes in the fields surrounding the road. They had done all they could. It was not in their power to make the cotton grow. It was the spring rains and summer sun that had turned the countryside into an endless green. Like magic.

In this orderly life that I had created, habit blinded me from the outside world. By mid-summer the cotton had bloomed without me noticing. Flower buds, or squares, began to form about six weeks after the seedlings appeared, and it took about three weeks for the buds to mature. Then in a swift, enchanting sequence the buds burst into creamy yellow flowers, which turned pink, then red, and then fell off. All in just three days. I’d heard that the whole thing was a beautiful, gently-scented event. But the brief blossoms came and went, and I never smelled them. The rising heat and humidity created the requirement for closed windows and a scentless

artificial cool.

It took 55 to 80 days for the cotton to mature. Cotton is an annual. It must be replanted each year. The plants I saw on the roadside grew, produced seeds for the next generation of plants, and then died. As the bolls ripened, moist fibers pushed the seeds for the next year's crop outward. In a sense, they lived so that the next plants could live as well.

Expanding under the warm sun, the wooly fibers grew longer and thicker, and the fields slowly and quietly transformed from green to white as the bolls split open. The change was so subtle that I didn't notice it until after the plants had been defoliated by swooping crop dusters that sprayed veils of chemicals on the fields, aging them into old men with white hair. The whitening fields marked the beginning of the end for these plants. They had fulfilled their purpose and soon they would be stripped and broken.

\*

Great-granny and I spent the fall months indoors in the kitchen surrounded by bushels of fresh vegetables, gleaming Mason jars, whistling pressure cookers, and pots of boiling water. Sometimes she allowed me to shell peas or snap green beans, but the canning was her job. When I asked if I could help, she said I wasn't ready quite yet. Each day I sat with Uncle Ed at the kitchen table listening in the dark as she canned a different vegetable. We listened as her hard work transformed the tomatoes into red globes and the squash and cucumbers into yellow and green wheels, floating in their glass encasements—a taste of summer preserved like memory. By the end of fall, the bushel baskets were empty and hundreds of jars lined the pantry shelves and countertops.

\*

Late summer marked the harvest when the Trace once again came alive with noisy



tractors that awoke the dust ghosts. The farmers gathered the hope they planted in the spring with loud picking machines that used wind and guides to pull the fibrous fruit from the plant. The cotton was then bundled it into large white blocks wrapped in heavy twine. Not all cotton matured at the same time so some sections were harvested earlier than others, and the second and third waves of harvesting lasted well into fringes of late summer.

By fall, after weeks of working from early morning until night—from dew dry to dew fall, hundreds of bales of cotton sat along the roadside and dotted the fields, silent as sheep. They would rest there until all the cotton was harvested and then loaded onto to large trucks and driven away to gins. After the harvest, the road was lined with rolling hills of sparse cotton, clinging to black stalks, standing straight and sideways in tan dirt. Rolling hills of salt and pepper beards.

\*

Uncle Ed became sick in the middle of canning season. He started sleeping in and taking long naps in the middle of the day. And Great-granny became more fervent. I could no longer listen in the dark from my seat at the kitchen table.

“Now you stand over here close so you’ll know how this is done. If you learn right the first time, you won’t need a second time to get it right.”

She was standing at her big sink full of hot sudsy water. I scooted closer to watch her sort jar lids, screw bands, and glass jars from a box on the counter. If a band was rusty and bent, she threw it in the trash next to the sink. She held up each jar in the light, inspecting the rim for nicks or sharp edges. If she found the slightest imperfection she placed the jar in a box at her feet.

“These’ll keep the jar from sealing. You have a go at it.” She pointed to the box on the

counter next to the sink. I pulled over my step stool and started inspecting, handing each jar to her. If the lids and bands were shiny and the jars were solid, she placed them into the hot dishwater. I helped her scrub the good canning supplies and place them into a bucket of hot water. Then we moved to the stove where a big pot of boiling water sat on the back burner, and she carefully placed the jars, lids and rims into the bubbling water, set the timer for ten minutes, and returned to the sink to place the canner rack into the canner and fill it with water.

After the timer went off, she set the pot aside and from above the stove, she got another one into which she poured a quart of cider vinegar and six pounds of sugar. Then, she placed spices in a small cheese cloth bag, added the pouch to the vinegar and sugar, and brought the mixture to a boil.

“Are you a witch?”

“Child you are not watching close. Do witches use cinnamon and cloves? Do witches make tasty pears?” She went to the refrigerator and grabbed a huge speckled pot of whole, peeled Sickle pears. She dropped them into the vinegar and sugar. I pulled my stool closer to the pot and stirred and stirred until the pears turned soft and translucent.

“Are these for Uncle Ed?”

“Yes.”

“Will they make him feel better?”

“I don’t know. You’re not paying attention.” She shooed me from the stove.

At the kitchen table, I watched her place the pears in the jars. I stood when, she poured in the syrup, and by the time she was running a narrow spatula around the inside of each jar, I was back at my step stool, leaning close to see how it was done. Finally, she used rubber-tipped tongs to place the Mason Jars filled with pickled pears onto the rack in the canning kettle and

closed the lid.

Every day we canned a different vegetable. Every day she allowed me to do more and more work. To me it was part of the cycle. It was the work for that season. Canning followed harvest. But for Great-granny, it was part of her lesson plan. She was teaching me what she called survival skills—the things one needed to know in order to get by in life.

“You got to know how to do things in life. No one’s going to learn for you. You understand?”

By the time we finished the pears and the corn and the tomatoes and the peas, Uncle Ed was staying in bed all day. He didn’t feel like listening to me tap dance, so I spent all my time learning how to can. The day we started on the okra, he went to the hospital.

The veteran’s hospital was red brick—the color of the dirt in Great-granny’s yard, but on the inside it was cold, white, and sterile. Sitting silently in a chair that didn’t look like the chairs in Great-granny’s kitchen, I waited like Uncle Ed taught me. I waited in a cold chair with metal arms linked to other cold chairs with metal arms. But the waiting was the same when I closed my eyes. Different sounds—clicking footsteps, hard soles on sterile tile; quiet voices, echoes off white walls; taping on the window, raindrops against cool glass. Different sounds, but the waiting was the same.

I didn’t know why Uncle Ed was blind, but I knew the cause of his blindness was the same cause of him being in the hospital. I knew he could see before. He told me about St. Louis during the 1950s. He told me about the tall buildings and how he made the lights work in them. He told me about dancing with beautiful women. But he never told me how he lost his sight or why he had to wait with his eyes closed, and I never asked. I sat in the darkness thinking about buildings that danced with clouds and women wearing white gloves and tea-length gowns until

the nurses wheeled Uncle Ed from the operating room. He had a beard. I never saw him with white and black stubble on his chin. The bed was flat where his right leg was supposed to be, but I didn't ask why. Instead, I asked why the nurses put whiskers on his face. He told my daddy to buy me some M&Ms.

\*

During the winter, the fields along the Trace were flat and barren. A heavy silent sadness embraced the landscape as if all that remained was all that would ever remain. Looking at the windswept land, it appeared that nothing would ever grow there again. But Great-granny taught me that come spring, life would stir. She knew that the next crops would grow because these gave themselves to the future. Late in the fall, the farmers had plowed the fields one last time before retiring until the next spring. The tractors' cultivators turned the earth over in clumps, chopping up the remains of that year's crop, burying the dead cotton plants to fertilize the soil for the coming spring, and leaving the land flat and lonely.

\*

Uncle Ed didn't come home from the hospital. It had been a year or more. I had turned six and outgrown my dancing shoes. It had been over a year since I danced on the kitchen table. Over a year since I ate cold M&Ms. Uncle Ed's lawn chair sat in the shadows—empty and moss-covered. Great-granny and I were pulling up turnips from the garden.

“It takes courage to live,” she said.

My mama told me that Uncle Ed went to heaven where everybody sees and has two legs, but Great-granny never spoke of him again. Not to me.

“It takes courage to live,” the old woman said again. “You hear me?”

Standing next to her, I looked up in the August heat with sweat dripping from my nose

and said nothing. I didn't know what she meant. Did Uncle Ed not have courage? Is that why he died?

All I knew was that Uncle Ed was dead, and I didn't dance anymore. I knew the dirt felt good on my face. I knew it felt good between my toes. And when I closed my eyes and took a deep breath through my nose, the gritty scent lingered in my nostrils, and I could taste it in the back of my throat.

"You hear me? It takes courage to live. Now you listen up. That's how it was done in my time." She struggled with a stubborn turnip. The root finally gave and dirt flung around our heads and fell in whispers at our feet. "Didn't have no proper schooling—just that of common sense. And lessons life wanted to throw in there. But it takes courage to live; remember that. Takes courage."

I didn't answer, stood still and silent like the chair under the oak. "Oh well," she continued, "what's the use in changing things, when you got accustomed to them? No use in stirring the mill unless you going to make cornbread. And no use in making cornbread if you ain't hunger." It was the same thing she told me when I fell and skinned my knee or my brother stole the last cookie from the tin canister on the counter in her kitchen. It never made any sense no matter what the situation she used it for. But she was old.

When I still didn't answer, she changed the subject. "The earth is something to be honored. The Good Lord gave us this dirt, and we need to be thankful. Even though ours is full of red clay."

\*

For no apparent reason, I pulled my car over and got out. Parking my car next to a cotton field was not part of my equation. A cold drizzle fell, giving a gray sparkle to the barren-

branched trees and furrowed fields. A steep, narrow ditch separated the roadside from the field. I scaled down one slippery side and up the other. Standing on the edge in a tractor tire track, I bent down and grabbed a chunk of cold soil, crumbled it between my fingers, and watched it fall at my feet. The damp aroma rose in soft floating whispers, and I sucked in through my nose and let it linger in the back of my throat—the ancient flavor of labor and harvest. There wasn't anything much better than the smell of fresh dirt.

I knew the value of dirt. It was a conductor for life—for the process that took place in Great-granny's garden. And I knew that her garden was only a part of the process; I was a part of the cycle as well. I could plot my entire life in a never-ending ring of actions and consequences—the things that happened and my response to them. Simple. Straight-forward. Orderly. Safe. Being a part of the process meant I had some knowledge of the future. Life was about being in control, planning, doing, and pushing on to the next goal. But it was never that simple. I didn't take into account the phenomenon of memory or the surprising ways in which it randomly influenced my life. Everything changed. Everything passed. Everything returned again. But only through memory could I make sense of what returned to me in the cycle of changing, passing, and returning. Being a part of the cycle also meant that I was changed by it. In denying the importance of memory, I had lost entire parts of myself, and I was trying to find an identity in someone else's dirt on the side of the road.

It takes courage to live—to labor and toil despite disease and affliction, to remain after losing others and ourselves, to glean hope from the remnants of memory, to wait for the return of something familiar. It's much easier to run. Habit is bred in order. Life is bred in chaos. And insanity is bred when one tries to turn life into a habit—to control the uncontrollable.

## Eloping in Eleusis

Maranatha Independent Fundamental Baptist Church had a children's church, so three times a week, hair rolled, dress pressed, black patent shoes strapped tightly, I marched in the fellowship hall, a metal framed building beside the red brick church house. There were rules in children's church, and they were painted on a poster that hung on the wall by the door: No pants on girls; No shorts or long hair on boys; No standing when not asked; No talking unless spoken to. But the chairs were always warm and soft. Often, there were puppet shows and plays. And I had two wonderful teachers. Mrs. Deason and Mrs. McCoy kept a constant smile, and every time I walked in they told me they were glad I had come. They said I was pretty and smart. And after the service would brag to my mother about how sweet I was. But most importantly, in children's church, I could get tokens—one for attendance, one for bringing my King James Version Bible, one for saying my memory verse (word for word from the King James Version), and an extra two if I sang when I was supposed to and sat quietly in the front row next to the preacher's kid, Leah Beth. The Twenty-third Psalms, the Lord's Prayer, and the Beatitudes brought 25 tokens a pop. I could get tokens, and tokens meant: 1) that I was right, and 2) that I could get candy from the treasure chest, or if I saved them up from week to week, patiently hoarding them, I could get toys bought just for me from Wal-Mart because no other kid in children's church saved like I did. I was one of Creation's pampered favorites. I was right. I was smart. If I died right then and there in my warm comfy chair, my eternal soul would spend forever and ever with all the other righteous souls in a bliss similar to children's church where being right was rewarded with Easy Bake Ovens and Cabbage Patch Kids.

But when I turned 12, I had to go to the big church and sit straight-backed next to my

mother, who sat straight-backed on a hard wooded pew in the front of that hard brick building. In big church, there were no puppet shows. There wasn't a treasure chest of candy and toys. There were serious-faced adults. And it seemed that with all the adults, every angel was petrifying. During the sermons about sin and the resulting conviction to hell, I felt that my heart, beating faster and faster, harder and harder, would surely beat me to death, and I would go to meet Jesus right there from the church pew, condemned to spend all eternity in a scratchy dress and cable knit tights. I knew I was going to heaven, and that's what scared me the most because Jesus wasn't the only one in heaven. I would also go to be with all those ghastly angels. And those terrible things would tell on me.

Now, Jesus saved my eternal soul from the horrifying depths of hell when I was five and placed under me a safety net of sorts—I had learned the truth and memorized it in children's church. And I continued to pay for my sin insurance in the big church, on the same installment plan—three times a week. I sang from the pew. I sang from the choir loft. I sang solos in front of the congregation. The adults said that I was smart and my voice was pretty, and after the service they would brag to my mother about how sweet I was. But something had changed. I was no longer a pampered favorite. I had somehow found a hole in Jesus' net and slipped right through to something dreadful. I had secrets. A part of me had died, and being dead was hard work in a place where everyone drank living water.

Maranatha Independent Fundamental Baptist Church's truth was the only truth. Their truth was absolute, cut and dry, black and white. There were no grey areas. The truth was authoritarian. It wasn't freely given to me either. It wasn't mine. It was loaned to me by the church like a library book. I was able to look at it, but I couldn't write my name in the front, or doodle on the cover, or scribble remarks in the margins. And since it was a loan from the



church, if I disagreed with the church, they could take it away from me. I disagreed.

Questions weren't allowed at Maranatha Independent Fundamental Baptist Church. According to what I was taught in children's church, I could never lose my salvation, but just the simple act of questioning in my mind meant that I was rebelling against God. I didn't even have to say those questions out loud to be separated from Him. I had questions.

In children's church, knowing the truth meant that I was right, being right meant that I was rewarded, and being rewarded kept my questions at bay, but in big church, since I was no longer being paid to recite the truth, those questions became more and more important to me. As I grew older, I had more questions. I disagreed with more and more of what I had learned as a child. And I was presented with more and more little divisions within myself. Until I came to the point where all those little internal fractions had created a chasm and I was presented with a dilemma—my belief system did not match what I believed.

Being dead had filled me beyond fulfillment. I felt pregnant and swollen with doctrine and dogma, and I longed to come into a new virginity. I wanted to be spiritual. I wanted to be free. I wanted to open my mind and let things fall out and other things fall in. I knew little about the truth, but from the little I knew and for my significant needs, I deduced and assumed that spirituality was a purple cloud floating above my head, and if I did enough dope, if I got high enough, I would float right up.

\*

Eleusis, Greece is fifteen miles northwest of Athens in the middle of the wheat and barley growing region. Somewhere outside the city, carved into a hillside, a sanctuary sits to honor the goddess, Demeter, and her daughter, Persephone. Demeter was the goddess of harvest. According to the Greeks, long ago, there were no seasons on earth—humans lived in a never-

ending summer, and crops grew and bloomed eternally—all because of the gracious Demeter. Persephone, on the other hand didn't do much of anything. She was an eternal child condemned to live day in and day out in her childish body, thinking her childish thoughts, doing her childish things. But she and her mother lived happily enough. While Demeter was busy with the work of splitting seed coats and stretching root tendrils and peeling flower petals, Persephone carelessly gathered her mother's handiwork into bouquets and danced in spinning circles nearly twirling herself mad amongst the waist deep beauty of her mother's achievement.

One day, while Persephone was playing with friends in her mother's field of wildflowers, the earth shook and split wide open. All of Persephone's friends fled, but she kept dancing. A gloomy chariot rushed out of the fault, and Persephone stopped in mid-pirouette and bowed, dropping her mother's black-eye-susans to the ground. She had never seen a man the color of shadows. He was beautifully threatening. When the other girls returned, Persephone was gone. All that remained were the black-eyed-susans and two sets of footprints.

Demeter was broken. She left Olympus. She became old in her sorrow. The wildflowers died first. Followed by the vegetables and the grain. Then the bushes and trees. The ground grew hard. The air became frigid. Lakes dried up. Seeds turned to dust. Within a week, the earth was brittle. Entire countries died for lack of food. Ruined with grief, Demeter roamed the broken land. She vowed to mourn until her daughter was returned to her. Finally, after many months of travel, she came to Eleusis.

Fearing that humankind would become extinct without food, Zeus ordered Hades to return Persephone to her mother so that Demeter would stop mourning, return Olympus, and life would return to earth. But Hades refused. Persephone had become his bride. In the dusk of their wedding bed, she had sucked the juice off of three pomegranate seeds, and these seeds had

given her the wisdom of the dead. Her returning to the living would destroy the natural order of things. A deal was struck. Hades had to return Persephone to Demeter at once. Persephone had to vow to never speak the secrets of the underworld to anyone—not even her mother, and since Persephone had willingly tasted the fruit of the underworld, she must return to Hades for a portion of the year.

Demeter returned to Olympus to meet her daughter, but before she left Eleusis, to demonstrate her gratitude to the city, she founded a temple just outside its gates, and she imparted to Eleusis's king the secrets of her rites. The secret rituals acted out the experiences of Demeter and Persephone. They represented life and death, the joy that the goddesses felt while together, the sorrow of Demeter while Persephone was missing, and the elation of their reunion.

\*

Lysergic Acid Diethylamide-25, also known as Acid, Bart Simpson, Barrels, Blotter, 'Cid, Heavenly blue, Hits, L, LSD, Liquid, Liquid A, Lucy in the sky with diamonds, Microdots, Mind detergent, Orange cubes, Orange micro, Owsley, Paper, Sacrament, Sandoz, Skid-sid, Sugar, Sugar lumps, Sunshine, Tabs, Ticket, Twenty-five, Wedding bells, or Windowpanes, was first made in 1938 by Dr. Albert Hofmann, and discovered to be psychoactive in 1943. But ergot, a naturally occurring form found as a fungus that grows on barley, was thought to be used as the psychoactive component of kykeon, a sacred potion made of barley and mint, which was administered in a mass religious event over 3000 years ago in Greece. The ritual was known as the Eleusinian Mysteries.

\*

With any drug, part of the high came from the satisfaction of actually getting the drug into my possession—knowing I had it in my pocket made me somehow feel better about myself.

I had an antidote for being me. An out of the ordinary remedy for the ordinary that plagued. An exclusive ticket to my anywhere bliss. But the process of getting it usually included hours of calling people whom I only knew by nicknames like “Fat Boy” and “Glass Man,” driving to empty parking lots or graveyards, and waiting. There was always waiting. And while waiting something grew inside of me, pulling and scratching like a clowder of cats with their tails tied. The only cure for such a feeling—the only cure—was the drug, freshly wrapped like a Christmas present in the cellophane of a cigarette pack or folded up neatly into a square of tinfoil.

Corey was my best friend’s boyfriend, and the father of her baby. Corey was also one of my dealers. He was nice enough—he usually gave me free drugs, but he lacked something. One time he took my friend and me to his dope dealer’s double-wide at the end of a long dirt driveway somewhere between Corinth and Pickwick, Tennessee—no phone, no running water, no one there with more than four teeth in the front of their mouths. The porch was a couple of 2x4s nailed to the tops of beer kegs. We had only been there a moment when Corey said, “Yeah, I remember the time my dad and I...” and then he jumped up, ran out of the house, slamming the door, got in his truck, and left. Just left us there. For thirty minutes. Standing on the porch with my friend, I wondered if the 2x4s and kegs would hold up long enough for us to jump. I tried to remember how to get back to the highway, hoping the guys inside had forgotten we went out to “get some fresh air.” But Corey came back. He was nice enough, and whatever he lacked, he made up for with acid. He always had acid.

Corey lived in the back of a Jr. Food Mart gas station in a huge square room that used to act as storage for beer, cigarettes, soft drinks, and other gas station goods. To get to Corey, I had to go through the front of the store and talk to Tracy, the storeowner, a thirty-something with a medium build, puff of brown hair, and permanently blood-shot eyes. And to get to Tracy, I had

to pass the store's usuals—the high school kids, who gathered in clucking flocks, celebrating their weekend freedom, and the worn, old men, who leaned against the store front, talking about the latest Ole Miss game as they munched on jo-jo potatoes and burritos. At this point in my life, I defined myself by what I wasn't. After my one year in college, I had crossed the strange ravine wedged between the young and younger. I felt that I had made a safe passage across the invisible gulf which divides high school and college—that I had made it out of the clutches of adolescent awkwardness, and I feared that the cumbersome self-consciousness would rub off on me if I got too close to them, as if this unease was some how air-borne or transmitted through physical contact. Tracy and the retirees posed no threat. Whatever they had, I was at no risk of getting it. But they interrupted my quest. All I wanted was to get high.

“This is the best acid I've had since that last shipment I got from that chemist dude in Nashville,” Corey said after he closed the door behind me. “It real clean. A super mellow trip.”

He never said hello. As he walked straight to a refrigerator that sat in one corner of the room, he turned his head from side to side, like he was looking for someone or something to break through the paper-covered glass front. He was a short guy with a thick neck and boxy frame, and with his head going from shoulder to shoulder, he reminded me of a giant owl. And who better to serve me up a dose of alternative wisdom than owl? He never said hello. And I didn't ask if he was okay or if he was expecting someone. I took the rectangle of tinfoil he handed me from his freezer, stuck it in the band of my underwear, thanked him, and left before someone did bust through the glass front.

\*

Preparing for a trip took an hour and a half. I did the same thing every time. Body—scrubbed three times with Dial antibacterial body wash. Legs—washed, shaved, and rubbed with

Bath and Body Works Moisture-Rich Body Lotion, cucumber scent. Arm pits—washed, shaved, and rubbed with Degree Invisible Solid, shower fresh scent. Scalp—lathered, rinsed, and repeated with Panteen Pro-V shampoo. Hair—conditioned for exactly two minutes with Panteen Pro-V conditioner and pulled into a ponytail. Teeth—brushed twice. Face—washed with Noxema, no make-up. Clothes—(chosen for comfort, feel, and visual effect) paper-thin Banana Republic jeans with frayed hole in right knee, circa 1996, tie-dyed Grateful Dead t-shirt, circa 1972, vintage navy blue Gap hoodie, circa 1969.

\*

“Do you think we should go ahead and eat this or wait until we get the drinks?”

“It’ll get dark in about three hours,” Gent said, “We want to be peaking by sunset.”

I don’t know how long my boyfriend and I had been in Central Mini-Mart. Time was now foreign. I had become an almond, self-enclosed and growing sweet. I knew the bottles and cans looked like spaceships—lined neatly in the mother ship, waiting to spring out when I opened the door. I knew I couldn’t make up my mind about what to drink. Each small decision was crucial. The entire outcome of the rest of night rested on this one choice: orange juice, Diet Coke, or Mt. Dew. Orange juice in glass bottles. Diet Coke in plastic bottles. Mt. Dew in aluminum cans.

*What was glass really made of?* Careful not to disturb the others and cause a mass exodus of orange juice, I opened the cooler door gradually, inch by inch, slowly bent to my knees, and little by little, lifted one of the bottles from the bottom row of the display case, ensuring that if there was a mass departure, it would happen overhead. I bumped my teeth against the ridges of the orange juice bottle. I put the cool, sweating surface against my face. Melted sand. Strange stuff, but sand was from the earth, so when I drank the orange juice whose

ions had been bumping up against the ions of melted sand, I would be getting a clean drink. Real juice from orange trees in Florida. It was certain the Diet Coke was out of the question because the ions of the Diet Coke had been bumping against the chemical ions of the plastic, and I would be drinking chemicals mixed with artificial sweeteners. *The Mt. Dew, or the orange juice?*

They looked solid. The Mt. Dew cans. Solid as logs. If I squeezed one, I was sure it would feel like a brick. *I should buy the whole refrigerator case full and build a dwelling. I could insulate with coffee bags. The ones that are square and vacuum-packed. They looked like bricks. The Mt. Dew cans felt like bricks.* But I had the orange juice bottle in my hand. That meant something. I looked at the Mt. Dew. Spaceships. *Orange juice.* To ensure my choice, I opened the bottle and drank half of it down as I walked to the food aisle.

I had rules about what I ate when tripping—rules grounded in past experiences. *Nothing once alive/now dead*; I ate a hamburger during my first trip, and I puked on the sidewalk outside of McDonalds's. The charred flesh of another animal was inside me, becoming a part of me as I digested. I was becoming a cow. *Nothing greasy or made entirely of sugar*; once, I ate a bean burrito and Snickers bar, and I felt the fat grams and calories traveling in tiny fat cars to parking lots in my thighs. I had bruises for weeks from where I had poked my stomach in an attempt to wreck the cars soon after digestion. *Nothing artificial or containing ingredients I could not pronounce*; I ate two bags of Ramen noodles, and I spent three hours trapped in front of my friend's bathroom mirror, rubbing my cheeks in circles to see if my face was still made of skin or if the preservatives in the noodle pack was turning me into a mummy. My options were too limited for gas station food. I went to find Gent.

He stood in front of the Frozen Coke machine—a swirling mass of cola-colored frost. Soon, we both were standing wide-eyed.

“Man.”

“Yeah. I know.”

The curling layers of tiny frost particles stacked one on another, forming intricate quilts of spinning, caramel-colored ice. And we stood. And we watched. And we stood. And soon a line formed behind us. And we stood. The machine was humming warm. I was drinking my juice from orange trees in Florida. We both were smiling. And ice made quilts. And we watched. Until the gas station attendant came to us and said something. I don't know what. Her lips moved. The people behind us acted like they knew what she said. I stared into her eyes. I thought that if I stared long enough, I could resurrect the already-spoken words from her thoughts, play them backwards to decode any hidden messages she had received from the Mt. Dew cans, and replay the fully decoded, better-than-the-first-time statement.

“Heck-bock soon daow? Tismuth do-yah binkle doom.”

Her lips moved again, and we stood. And fear—the kind of fear that I have in dreams when all of a sudden I realize I'm naked. Fear that didn't seem to have an origin or rationale draped over me like a black veil. I drank another gulp of orange juice. On our way to the door, I looked back at the cashier. “Can I help y'all kids with something?” she asked. Her lips didn't move.

\*

Gent had to pee. I sat on the concrete sidewalk that led to a stream at Buzzard Roost, a stop off the Natchez Trace Parkway. The sun melted into the hills, turning the trees into singed silhouettes against the thawing sky. Gent was brave. I had to pee, but the bathrooms were on the charred hill, and I saw the spirits of old Indian warriors swirling like smoke from the ashen trees. Cursed with boredom, they danced in the silhouettes—spinning and swirling the air into a vortex



which sucked life into death. I grabbed a handful of rocks at my feet.

“Look at this one,” I said, holding up a piece of cement that had broken off the sidewalk.

Gent, who had just returned from the bathroom, sat down next to me, took the chunk from me and examined it.

“It’s like a microcosm of Corinth,” I continued. “You know, like if Corinth was a planet. And this big brown rock over here, it’s like Wal-Mart. Because that’s the center of our society. You know?”

Gent rolled the hunk over and over in his hands, rubbing each stone and rock. “They’re glued,” he said in a whisper. “Each one. Stuck forever. Until some violent force releases them. And even then, the blow that released them could leave them broken and chipped. It’s possible only a part of them would be free.”

I continued with my train of thought, “All small towns center around Wal-Mart. Consumerism. At one time, the heart of the little rural towns was the church. I read somewhere that the church steeple was the first thing you’d see when you entered a small town like Corinth. And all these small pebbles, you know. They’re like the churches,” I carried on, taking the rock from Gent to point out the specific stones. “And these little black dot-rocks are the houses. You know? And the bottom part that’s flat and smooth is representing the fact that all the consumerism—the fact that it’s our focal point, the nucleus of our way of life—makes us flat. You know? We’re smoothed out and glazed over and made to look presentable. Blemishes are a bad thing. But underneath all that—or on top of all that—is the real thing. That we’re controlled by the need to buy. Blemishes are natural. There’s perfection in imperfection. It’s not natural to be smooth like the sidewalk. Wow. Thank you, Indian spirits!”

We both sat there in silence with the cement rock now sitting between us at our feet until

Gent picked it up. “If that’s Wal-Mart, then downtown would be over here, and that’s where my parent’s house would be.” He pointed to the side of the block covered with quartz pebbles.

“Gent, are you shedding?” There was hair all over the sidewalk. Thin, silver downy hair like a newborn’s skin.

“Maybe this is where the deer come and lay at night,” he said. “Maybe during hunting season they come here because it’s safe.”

That sounded good. It sounded right. The deer came out of the woods to get a drink at the spring. They lay on the sidewalk because it was safe and left their hair behind. I looked around to make sure this hypothesis was correct.

“But it’s growing,” I said.

“Yeah. It is.” Gent waved his hand over the silver tips. A whirl appeared where his hand had been. “Yep, it’s growing. And we’re sitting on it.”

The sun had charred everything and left. The moon was black. The stars were silver like the hair on the sidewalk. We sat and caressed the sidewalk hair until a line of light hit us in the face. A car turned into Buzzard Roost. It could be a cop. It could be a serial killer. It could be an elderly couple. We got back in the car. The sidewalk hair was crawling on me. I could hear their wriggling. I could see the goose bumps where they had been. I needed a bath.

\*

An NPR acoustic show was on the radio. The sound waves from the guitar and the sound waves from the woman’s voice wrapped together as they came out of the speakers, and became a vine of red and blue sound ivy that blew from the open roof of my Miata, flapping behind us when I sped up, slapping me in the face when I slowed down. Song after song, the ivy grew, the leaves changed, the vines spread. By the time turned in the parking lot of Rice Hall, my

dormitory at the University of North Alabama, a landscape of sound had formed in the car—red and blue hills, purple valleys, orange peaks. The song ended. I turned off the car. And purple valleys and orange peaks remained. A ghost of sound made of purple and orange dust.

“That was a Bob Dylan song,” I said without speaking words. *That was Bob Dylan*, I told Gent with my eyes.

*Of course it was Bob Dylan*, he said back to me without saying it. *It was Bob Dylan*, he said from behind the ghost of red and blue hills. *That’s a given. A universal law. If you turn on the radio and hear a random song—a perfect perfectly random song—perfectly written, that perfectly fits your mood at that very moment. Perfectly fits not because you felt that way to begin with, but because the song made you feel that way. Made you feel the way you didn’t feel when the song first came on, but as if it was how you’ve felt all along. If that’s the case, then there’s a 90 percent chance that the song was written by Bob Dylan or Robert Hunter. That’s a given*, he said with his eyes. *Yeah, it was a Bob Dylan song.*

\*

I was alone in the car, and I couldn’t remember if it was today or last week. Had I dosed by myself today, and with Gent last week, or was it last week I tripped by myself? I was parked at Rice Hall—in the back where I could see Rice Hall and her male counterpart, Rivers Hall, standing like castles in a fish bowl. The water was air. And I was parked in a fishbowl—a fishbowl empty of air-water and filled to the brim with falling leaves. It was today. It wasn’t last week. I was alone, and it was today. So I got out of the car. Purple dust flew off my car when I slammed the door. I walked with leaves falling all around me in rivers.

“I knew you’d come,” Gent said with real words that came out when his mouth moved. I had found him, so today was last week and not today. And Gent was standing in the middle of the volleyball court between Rice and Rivers Halls, ankle-deep in the sand. I had left my car

parked in a fishbowl and walked all through today to get to this moment last week with Gent standing in the middle of a great eye he had carved in the sand with his feet.

The volleyball court was made of four-by-fours nailed together like a huge sandbox. We were children, who went freely to the underworld. We were the sand in the volleyball court, held by four square inches of wood. We were the sand on the ground, held by roots of grass blades. We were the sand in the sandcastles—the molded, solid sand, stacked one on another, standing seven stories high in a fishbowl. We were the melted sand in the windowpanes, holding the wind in place, keeping the water and leaves out. We were the earth in all its forms—the light and the dark. And I understood that Persephone hadn't been abducted. She went willingly—searching for what she could not find in her mother's house. She went willingly to the underworld to taste the mysteries her mother's world could not give her.

## All that Remains

And then it snowed.

Before the snow, came rain, and before the rain, the clouds threatened with heavy gray patches in the sky, looming dominate like mammoth tombstones and turning the horizon into a feathery graveyard over the hospital. It was February, and February in Mississippi was a soggy, fickle thing. There was always the hope of snow. But the snow rarely came, and if it did, it fell in uneven bittiness on the ground that melted before the day was over.

My mother, her two sisters, her brother, and I sat in a small square room on the third floor of Magnolia Regional Hospital. The waiting room was typical of hospital waiting rooms—tackily decorated with blue wallpaper, matching blue tweed upholstered chairs and blue matted prints of Victorian houses in large gold frames. My grandmother lay in a bed in a smaller white square room down the hall. She was dying; we knew it, and we talked about the clouds and the snow and whether or not we thought it would stick this time.

“Well, you never know,” my uncle James said in a muffled, twangy voice that sounded like he was yodeling with a pillow pushed to his face. He was sitting in one of the sky-colored armchairs staring at a magazine in his lap. “Mama loved the snow. You remember how she used to bundle us up and take us out?” he asked, never looking up from the magazine. “We’d play for hours.”

“And if it snowed at night,” my mother continued, “she would get up early, before we got up, find the freshest snow—the spot where there were no footprints or tracks, scoop up a gallon ice cream bucket full, and make snow cream for breakfast.” She and her two sisters were sitting one after another in the row of padded chairs that faced a small television mounted on a black metal swivel arm, hanging from the ceiling. It was on, but no one was watching it. They each

had a magazine as well, but no one was reading. I stood across the room next to a window that overlooked the parking lot. The sisters chimed in with other stories of Mimi and snow, but I turned to look out the window and tuned them out. I didn't have any memories of my grandmother and snow. I stared at the cars in the parking lot slowly becoming white and tried to remember anything of Mimi that was solely mine.

"I can't remember the last time it really snowed," I added softly, still looking out the window. The others were laughing at some shared anecdote and ignored me. "Actually, the only time I remember it really snowing, where you could actually build a snow man, was when I was about seven," I continued a bit louder, nervously talking just to be talking, trying to find my way into other people's memories.

"It snowed a lot more when we were kids. I'm sure it snowed a lot when Mimi was little too," my mother responded. "She sure did love the snow."

They continued to talk, and I continued looking out the window, listening to the rise and fall of their voices, watching the snow pile up, hoping for snow cream.

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Two days earlier, Mimi had her last chemo treatment and bag of blood plasma. She had been in and out of the hospital since she was diagnosed with what the doctors called "pre-leukemia"—the stays became more frequent and longer each time. But at eighty-one, despite her failing health, Mimi had managed to not grow old.

When I visited her, I found her skimming the pages of *Vogue* or *Spiegel*. Her coordinating pink silk pajamas, robe and slippers, full make-up, painted nails, and perfect blond hair not only set her apart from the other patients in the Critical Care Unit, but also demanded that no one feel sorry for her. She never complained.

On the day of her last chemo treatment, she sat nervously picking the nail polish off her nails.

“Are you in pain?” the medical technician asked. “You’re fidgeting. Do you want something for pain? Do you need something for your nerves?”

“No. I’m just fine,” she said, looking up with a smile. “I just need to be out of here by five o’clock. I have somewhere to be tonight.”

“Where?”

“Oh, I dance at the VFW on Fridays. A lot of those old guys don’t have partners, you know. At least not women that dance as well as I do. They just love me down there. I’d hate to not show up and disappoint them.”

The technician laughed, and when the doctor returned, he warned her not to kill any of those old vets.

\*

The conversation in the waiting room turned to the funeral arrangements. I sat in a chair in the corner of the room with my eyes closed and listened.

“I think the casket she picked out is really beautiful.”

“Oh, I do, too. And that pink suit will be so pretty with it. So, the preacher from Tate Baptist will be giving the sermon?”

“Yes, and he’s a good little preacher. He really loves Mama. He’s been very good about visiting her in the hospital. He was here earlier.”

“Is that girl going to be able to sing?”

“Yes, and there’s a mother and daughter from the church who’ll sing as well. They do a beautiful version of ‘Like a River.’”

“What about the eulogy?”

“I can’t give one. I’d break down.”

“I’ll get Stanley to write something. Holly, I think you should write something, too,”

Paulette, the oldest sister, said. I opened my eyes. They were all looking at me.

“Yes, that would be so nice. Mama would love that, Holly,” Barbara, the middle sister, added, “And you’re so good at that stuff.” She flapped her hand in my direction.

“Really? Well, what would you want me to write?”

“Whatever you wanted,” said the oldest.

“A poem would be nice,” the middle one added.

“Okay.”

Satisfied with the arrangements, the sisters changed the subject, and I closed my eyes again. I got that nervous twitter beneath my breastbone. I had never written a poem on demand. At least not one about someone I loved—someone that was loved by so many—that I would have to read standing in front of all those people that loved her. The blue room started making me sick even though my eyes were closed.

\*

The afternoon before she died, I volunteered to sit with her so my mother and her siblings, who were then weathering the death of their mother in shifts by her bedside, could get some rest. I volunteered because I loved her. I volunteered so I could ask her questions. I wanted to graft her memory into my own—to fill in the gaps left from a deep need to forget.

The room faced the East and didn’t catch the rose colored light of the setting sun. It was cold and dimly lit—a complete opposite to the sunny kitchen and warm living room of my grandmother’s house. Mimi was curled into a ball on the bed, wrapped in layers of white



hospital blankets and a pink fleece throw that a cancer awareness organization gave her. She was a tiny woman—four feet and eleven inches tall, never weighed over 100 pounds and her body barely filled half the length of the bed. I had prepared a speech, made mental notes, chasing questions over and over in my head the way a dog pursues its tail, but coiled under that pink cover—the delicate curve of her spine, the slight crimp made by the bend in her knees, she looked like a child lost deep in dreamless sleep. I couldn't get past her fragileness—the minute way her body rose and fell with each breath.

I brought a messenger bag which contained a notebook, a pen, and pieces to a dress I was hand-sewing for my daughter's sixth birthday. I sat in an arm chair at the end of the hospital bed, stitching in double time rhythm to Mimi's smooth, even breaths. The pieces slowly took the form of a collared bodice with long sleeves, and the silence around us grew thin and crisp. I wanted many times to wake her, but I feared that with the slightest whisper the silence would shatter and fall in sharp-edged pieces all around us.

The nurses came and went with stealthy steps. Finally, Mimi sat up, and began to eat her lunch, which had grown cold beside her. Again I wanted to speak, but I couldn't find the right words to ask without being obvious that I knew she was dying. Her hands shook violently as she tried to bring the spoon of chicken broth to her mouth, but when I offered to help her she shook her head at me. No words. A silent refusal to show any weakness. By the time my shift had ended, she lay on her back and her breaths had become slow and labored. When my aunt arrived, I kissed Mimi's head and left with an empty notebook in my messenger bag.

\*

My mother's living room was jumbled with mix-matched furniture: two reclining loveseats, two couches, three desks, and a television armoire. Plants, lamps, side tables, and

coffee tables filled the spaces between the major pieces of furniture, and mail, newspapers, magazines covered every inch of flat surface. I cleared off the coffee table which sat in front of the paisley couch that Mimi had given my parents one Christmas. I spread out loose photographs of births, birthdays, Easters, and Christmases. I lined up framed black and whites of Mimi as a baby, a child, a young woman, and a bride, and I sat with pen and journal ready to remember something raw and rough-edged—some jagged gem that poems were made of. But nothing came.

Instead, she crept into my thoughts from the fringes. I had memories that contained Mimi—memories of places like the blue barn on her old homestead in Hatchee Bottom; memories of things like a rusty swing set frame with flower baskets hanging from hooks, a water pump surrounded by dark blue irises. But these were merely smooth stone memories that skimmed the surface and never quite sank into the personal. I had nothing of me and my grandmother in my memory, and this didn't make sense to me. We weren't estranged. She had been there my entire life. She is in all the pictures: my Christmases, my birthdays, my graduations, my children's births. My lack of her was wrought from my brokenness not from her lack of presence. I rewrote a poem I had written about Hannah leaving Samuel on the temple steps and put all the photographs of Mimi back in their places in my mother's living room.

\*

At the funeral, people gathered in small groups talking in hushed tones. For a while, I followed my mother from one group to the next, greeting them, thanking them, receiving their condolences. I held a box of tissues, and when she teared up, I pulled one out for her to wipe the running mascara from her cheeks. When she sat with her sisters on a Victorian-style couch next to the casket in the viewing room, I handed her the box and made my way through the crowd to

the coffee room to read over my poem. Two of Paulette's grandchildren sat at a table. The youngest was crying; his sister, Elizabeth, rubbed his back.

"Are you okay, Michael?" I asked. He didn't answer.

"He misses Mimi," Elizabeth said, looking up at me. Her ten-year-old face was solemn. She turned back to her brother. "It's okay, Michael. She's gone to a better place."

"Why do people have to die? I thought she'd live forever."

"It's okay. Nana says she'll live on in our memory. Let's think of all the good times. Nana told me to do that, and it helped. Do you remember the time we went swimming at Nana's pool and Mimi wore your Ducky float? That was funny."

He didn't respond. I found a tissue box, handed it to Elizabeth, and left the room. I sat alone on a bench in the hallway, looking at a framed print of baby angels. I roamed the funeral home, nodding to the clusters of people. I examined the flower arrangements, reading each card, smelling each flower, hoping the scent of roses, carnations, and calla lilies would recall in me a memory of Uncle Ed's funeral where I had cried. I lingered at the casket, trying to find that place in me that brought tears. But I had nothing to make her death mean something to me. No memories meant no sense of loss.

\*

When Mimi died, Gent, Grace, Noah and I were living in Tupelo, Mississippi. The 45 minute drive to Corinth allowed us to visit my parent's house about every weekend.

During one of our weekend morning visits, out of nowhere, my mother said, "Porky was a great white." We were eating a breakfast of homemade biscuits, chocolate gravy, and bacon. "He weighed 100 plus pounds or so, but he was very agile. He thought he was a dog," she continued, in between swallows. "He slept on the porch and wagged his tail when he saw you

coming. And he chased cars. We thought that the chasing would be death of him.” She paused to chew her food.

Mimi had been dead for five months at the time, and Mother remained to sort through memories and emotions. Our conversations centered around her telling and retelling stories about her childhood and her mother. She was making sure that every memory was accounted for and put in its place, and I was here to listen to the spool of actions unwinding and rewinding. I watched her silently.

“I remember the day Mama brought Porky home. She got him from Mr. George’s sow. He was the runt. The tiniest thing. Pink and helpless.” She paused, and we both sat chewing. “He slept next to my bed in a shoe box, and I fed him with a bottle.” My mother’s glance wandered to the plate of bacon we were eating.

I listened as my mother told how Porky came home, how he ate and slept on the front porch, how he chased cars and wagged his tail, how during the summers, he followed her and her siblings to the river to play in the water’s edge, and during the fall, he followed them to school and waited on the front steps for them to finish. These events always flowed smoothly like ribbons of linked sausage, but when it came to Porky’s fate, she paused like she couldn’t bear to say it out loud.

“I remember the day the slaughter truck came,” she continued. Her words came in a slow drone as she stared past the top of my head and out the kitchen window. “Poor mother. She was doing the best she could to raise us and feed us and clothe us.” She raised a forkful of chocolate-dripping biscuit to her mouth but paused before she took a bite. “We wouldn’t eat a bite of that meat.” After chewing, she said, “We would scream, ’No! That’s Porky! We won’t eat Porky.’ She had to give the meat away. I think she probably bartered for something else, but

I don't remember. I just know that we refused to eat pork for a good year or two. You know," she said not taking her eyes off the plate of bacon, "he was a good pig. But he was a pig and not a dog." My mother's glance shifted back to the window and she fell silent. I ate a piece of bacon.

During our weekend conversations, a life was resurrected. I learned that Mimi's mother died when she was ten or eleven from ovarian cancer. That she never remarried and managed his house the best he knew how, by dividing his children into pairs, each pair being responsible for certain household tasks. Mimi was paired with Margaret, and they cooked, canned, cleaned and took care of the baby with the help from stepstools and ladders their father built them so they could reach the stovetop and high pantry shelves. I learned that at sixteen, after she had graduated high school, she eloped. Hollis, my grandfather, went to WWII, and when he returned they had four children. But he was murdered before my uncle, his only son, was born. Mimi didn't remarry until she was in her sixties because she was afraid a step-father would not care for her children. I learned that she could whip up a new dish with no recipe just by tasting one that some one else had made. She could sew a dress without a pattern by looking at it in the Sear's and Roebuck's catalogue.

She was amazing. She was. But she wasn't mine. And the emptiness of her nagged me—not because she was grandmother and I should have known her, not because she was a wonderful woman in her own right whether she had been my grandmother or not—but because I began to realize that a lack of memory meant that I had no roots.

\*

Two years after my grandmother passed, I was still haunted by her. By our relationship. By why I didn't have anything of her as my own. A memory that was solely mine. Gent, the

kids and I had moved to Carbondale, Illinois, and not long after the move, I began having dreams where Mimi would return from the grave, bringing me her body parts. Sometimes she would offer me a foot. Other times a whole shoulder with an arm attached. In one dream it was a delicately fingered hand. The dreams weren't nightmarish. The body parts were never bloody. They were wrapped in soft white flesh like birthday gifts or wedding presents. I always accepted them with joy and ran into the house where my dream-relatives were busy with something. I would tell them that Mimi was back, but they ignored me. I would show them the body part. But I was invisible. They had their memories.

After one such dream, where Mimi had given me a small slender finger, I woke all at once in the middle of night, walked into the living room of my house. In Carbondale snow was a reality. I stood looking out the sliding glass doors that led to the backyard. My body was heavy with the remains of sleep. Everything outside was covered in a dreamy sparkle. Almost a foot of snow and sleet had fallen over the evening, beginning just as the sun launched its descent behind the rooftops. The sky was a pale gray-pink. Though the sun set hours ago, there was a brightness to the heavens, and the massive maple that grew in the center of the lawn shimmered in the unknown light. Having collapsed from the weight of ice, many of its immense branches were scattered through the snow-covered grass and piled on top the frozen fish pond. The largest one was slanted across the patio, blocking the door—the roof supporting the top of it and the shattered bottom resting on the deck's edge. The remaining branches creaked and moaned in the wind.

Mimi had been dead two years, and I missed her in a way I had never missed anyone. It was a strange mingling of emotion—like I had lost something I never had—a desire to return somewhere I had never been. My account of her was broken like the maple tree outside—a

version of her life based on the fragments of other people's stories. The rest I filled in. I imagined the same way I looked at the empty spaces left by broken branches and imagined a whole tree.

## Never

Ms. Brenda's house had gigantic rooms with ceilings ten-kids high. She had hundred-year-old oak and willow trees in her yard, dirt trails that led into the woods, and a carport for when it rained. But I liked the sunroom best. The sunroom sat catty-corner between the main house and the carport. Three walls were made of ceiling-to-floor windows, but a willow tree stood guard outside to block the sun. The sunroom was where Ms. Brenda did her laundry and stored her canned food and potatoes. I sat for hours on end in the room—sat on stacks of canned peas, vegetable beef soup and hominy or on crates of potatoes and onions, imagining worlds where girls were allowed to swordfight in Sunday dresses and black patton shoes. On wash days, the windows steamed over, and the smell of fresh linens was so thick my mouth tasted like fabric softener. The hum of the washer and dryer vibrated through my eardrums into the pit of my stomach. And I watched the dangling shadows and sunrays fight on the walls.

My mother worked during the day, and my brother wasn't old enough to look after an eight-year-old. I stayed at Ms. Brenda's from 8:00 in the morning to just before supper during the summers and from 3:00 in the afternoon until 5:30 when my mother had to work late during school months.

I didn't have many friends at Ms. Brenda's because I had as many G.I. Joes as Barbies. I climbed trees and liked to dance. I knew the proper way to braid a Cabbage Kid's pigtailed and the correct technique to fight with sword sticks. I had the whole collection of Rainbow Bright dolls and a Heman/Skelator castle swing set in my backyard. I liked baby dolls but I also played football with my brother and his friends.

The girls at Ms. Brenda's only wanted to play house or princesses, spending hours



pretending to clean up after they're babies and husbands or waiting for someone to save them. And the boys were just jealous. I was taller than they. I always broke the arm-links when we played red rover. And when we played cops and robber, if I was the bad guy, I always got away, and if I was the good guy, I always caught the thieves. But they said I was just a girl even though they knew I could pop them in the jaw so hard their mouths would taste like pennies.

I loved being a girl, but I didn't need rescuing, so I like the sunroom best. I could still see the flicker of the sun when I closed my eyes. No one came there. I was safe.

\*

There's a quote in a twelve-step program: "Our secrets make us sick." I heard a lady misquote it once. "Our secrets will kill us, Honey," she said nonchalantly to her daughter in the Wal-Mart check-out line like she was saying, "A penny saved is a penny earned." I didn't hear her conversation before or after, so I have no idea why she said it. But, it stuck. "Our secrets kill us."

Secrets were like the crickets in the summer when I walked at dusk. So tiny yet so loud; huge—their sound blanketed the entire forest, and they were bigger than the trees, larger than the night itself. Even when I went inside and shut myself up in safety, I could still hear them. Stronger than the glass panes, they wouldn't let me forget they were out there.

My secret was committed to coming back like a glass shard working its way through the scar tissue of a forgotten wound. Memories jarred open by a sound or a scent.

I was fourteen. It was Thanksgiving at my Maw Maw's house. She was making candied yams in an iron skillet on the stovetop. Brown sugar and butter bubbled and brought a memory of dull pain. I was peeling potatoes for dinner, cutting away the brown skins thin as paper, the way my mother had taught me. The smell of sweet potatoes lingered in my throat, choking me.

Something tugged at my brain like the foretoken from a cackling sage. The bowl fell. The sound of potatoes thudding against the floor. Then, another flash of something familiar but forgotten. Terrifying. Sharp as the knife I held. And I ran to the bathroom, slamming and locking the door behind me.

“You alright honey,” my Maw Maw asked from the other side of the door as I hovered over the toilet with my finger down my throat. I didn’t answer until I had emptied myself of breakfast, and buried my sin like a dog, watching the remains of biscuits and chocolate gravy swirl down the toilet.

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The smell of baked sweet potatoes and grilled banana and peanut butter sandwiches drifted from Ms. Brenda’s stove and out of the kitchen window. I got to the kitchen before Ms. Brenda had a chance to call us in for lunch. Having scrubbed my hands, I sat in my corner seat and waited. I watched Ms. Brenda place platters of food in the middle of the red and white checkered tablecloth. I admired her precise placement of plates, napkins and forks along the table’s edge. I was always first, waiting for the others to file in, dusty and sweaty from a game of chase, waiting for them to wash up.

“God is great. God is good. Let us thank Him for this food. By His hands, we all are fed. Thank You, Lord for daily bread. Amen,” we said in unison with bowed heads resting on clasped hands. I sat quietly waiting for Ms. Brenda to pass the platters around the table. Finally, the taste of crisp butter-fried sandwiches and brown sugar on the stringy insides of yams.

We had to wash up before and after lunch. That was a rule at Ms. Brenda’s. We couldn’t eat before we washed our hands. We couldn’t go play until we did the same after we ate. Billy Handall was behind me in the line that snaked its way out of the bathroom door. He was eleven.

He was a big kid. And he was the cutest boy I ever saw. But I wasn't for sure if it was okay to like boys or not so I acted like my heart wasn't pounding because he was standing so close behind me. He put his hands around my waist and tickled me, but I wasn't sure if it was okay to like boys or not, and I gave him a good elbow in the stomach and a slap across the face before I ran into the kitchen to wash my hands at the silver double sink where Ms. Brenda stacked the dirty dishes.

\*

Children view the world differently than adults—deal with things differently than adults. A child's height is her shadow. Her nights are lit by paper moons. And bad things are best swept away like dust under a rug, no longer seen but still there. Psychology terms this disassociation: a way for children to escape harmful situations when they have no other options, a way for them to disconnect from their environment by disconnecting from their feelings, a way to protect themselves when no one else is there to keep them from danger. When disassociation continues for a longer period of time, coupled with anxiety and other symptoms, psychologists call it post-traumatic stress disorder. PTSD—repression—sectional brain shut down. No matter the name, it pushes those who experience it into imaginary places; they go where nothing can touch them. They run from themselves.

Many people link post-traumatic stress disorder to Vietnam veterans. The man gone mad from Agent Orange. The man in olive green rags, sleeping in alleys. The man walking in the hallway of his house, fighting his wife because he thinks she's the one who caused the shrapnel cutting through his neck. But a majority of people with PTSD are women. The largest group of individuals with PTSD consists of rape victims.

Most women with PTSD become self-destructive. Their acute self-centeredness turns

into an inward, sharp-edged thing. Bulimia, anorexia, self-mutilation, drug and alcohol addiction are the ways in which they deal with life. It's as though the trauma they experienced severed their identity, and through random acts of self-inflicted violence they are trying to kill a part of themselves so they can live.

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I was sitting on the bushel basket filled half-way with potatoes when he walked into the sunroom. I almost peed my pants. Billy Handall. He leaned against the wall. The sun and dangling shadows from the willow fought across his face and made light and dark patches in his blond hair. He walked towards me, and I stood up. He hugged me. I didn't think I was supposed to like boys, but I liked it.

“Let me go!” I said.

“Oh, come on; I was just loving on you. Your parents love on you right?”

“Yeah, but..”

“But what?”

“Nothing.” I looked at the shadows fighting with the sunlight on the walls.

Billy grabbed me. My feet left the ground. He swung me around in circles; the shadows and light on the walls blurred into horizontal lines, encircling us. My head felt lop-sided like when I spun in Ms. Brenda's backyard, the trees and grass and sky making smudged cylinders around me until I fell to the ground drunk with dizziness. The sunroom lost its shape. There were no walls. No corners. No ceiling or floor. Just a hazy tube of shadow and light. We landed on a pile of dirty towels. My head hit the concrete block wall, and a sharp pain shot down my neck. Billy started kissing me. I pushed him away, and he pressed his mouth against mine, forcing his hard, slimy tongue past my lips. The sunroom was still not the sunroom. It was a tube of

shadow and light that fell on its side spinning around us. Everything still spinning around us. He pulled my arms above my head. I screamed, thinking he was about to tickle me.

“If you scream like that again, I’ll hit you so hard on the head, it’ll make you retarded and everybody will laugh at you. And your parents, well, they won’t love you anymore. And I bet they’ll put you in some home, because everyone knows that parents don’t love kids who’re retarded.” His face was close. Everything was still spinning, but I could feel his lips against my ear and his breath on my neck. He held my face out from him for a few seconds, squeezing my cheeks with his hand, and pushed my head back into the wadded towels. I was still dizzy-drunk. The air tasted damp. He stuffed something in my mouth. The taste of ammonia.

We weren’t in the sunroom. We were in that hazy tube of spinning light and shadow that turned on its side when we fell. He pulled at my pants, and tied my arms and legs. I felt the dirty towels under me. Dirty towels were in the sunroom. But now the sunroom was not the sunroom. I was in the sunroom when Billy came in. And now we were in a spinning tube. We were in the tin canister that held cookies on Great-granny’s kitchen counter, spinning around like it was falling sideways to the floor. But I was still in the sunroom that tasted the way fabric softener smelled. I was in the sunroom that smelled like the earth clinging to the potato skins in the bushel basket. Me and Billy were in the tube, but I was in the sunroom still sitting on top of the potatoes. I watched him hovering over me unbuttoning his pants. We were in the spinning tube. We were in Great-granny’s cookie tin. But I was in the sunroom where I was always safe.

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I went somewhere else, and I stayed there for seven years. I took my feelings off like an old sweater, and one by one I unraveled the threads and placed them in different boxes: “Good Feelings”—all A’s on my report card, ice cream cones that drip milk-syrup on my bare toes,

lights that dance with shadows—that box was left open; “Bad Feelings”—yellow and red stained panties, the my fist dripping with the blood from the nose of the boy I punched on the school bus, waking up next to someone I didn’t know—that box was closed and taped, stapled one hundred times, and the edges glued.

Having PTSD was like running a race I didn’t know I was in. All at once I was running. I couldn’t remember why, and I didn’t know from whom or what, and there was no time to see who was behind me, but all that mattered was that when I ran, the pain of reality blurred past me. I was safe. I was in control.

But the memories came. Silently. Patient. Stacking up one brick at a time until all at once there was a wall looming too tall to jump, too strong to knock down, too wide to run around. And I had no choice. I stopped running. There was no one. No one to run from. No one to build the wall. No one but me. And I terrified myself. The memories kept coming, brought on at unexpected times. I felt like a bomb.

To keep the memories at bay, I attempted to fill my time to the brim with as many extracurricular activities as possible, thinking that if I was constantly busy my past would not cripple me with flashes of horror while explaining a calculus problem to Eduardo, the Brazilian exchange student, or while I stood in front of my speech class explaining how to bake chocolate chip cookies. During my 10<sup>th</sup> grade year, I decided that on top of being a cheerleader, the class reporter, a SGA representative for the school and president of various other clubs, I would rejoin the marching and jazz bands—hoping that the little girl me would get lost somewhere between taking notes, practicing pyramids, learning dance steps, and reading music.

During football season, I would cheer and dance as the band played fight songs and our football team attempted to make third downs and then march with the band, playing my clarinet

while still wearing my cheerleading suit. During half time I had exactly three minutes to grab a drink and snack in between marching and cheering. My mom handed me a \$20 bill through the chain link fence that divided the football field from the stands and told me to bring back the change. I ran down the sideline with my ponytail bouncing the big bowed ribbon on the top of my head. The concession stand was run by the Beta Club. Mrs. Bowers, my calculus teacher and the Beta Club's sponsor, was standing at the window handing a gray-haired man a paper cup of Coke and a hotdog. I was at the end of the line that curved around the painted concrete block building. She smiled at me and motioned for me to go around to the volunteer entrance. After walking to the back of the building, I opened the metal door and waited for one of the Beta Club members to come and take my money. Someone grabbed my waist from behind and something twitched under my skin between the muscle and breast bone. I didn't look to see who it was. I just turned and ran, not stopping until I was across the field in the dark knee-high grass behind the field house. I could feel my heart beat through my entire body. I was cold, sweaty, and panting. After I caught my breath, I ran back to the sidelines. The other cheerleaders were already in formation and in the middle of a chant. My mom made her way down the stands.

"Where's my change?" she asked.

"I don't know. I don't know what happened to the money. I lost it." I said, breathless.

"What?" she screamed above the chanting crowd.

"I lost it."

At 17, I weighed 85 pounds, used daily, and continued to disassociate from my feelings by stuffing them any way I could (through attempting to control my body, using mind-altering substances, and pretending that I was sunshine girl even though I was rotting on the inside). I couldn't remember the boy's name. I had only a face and the oppressive flashes. I began to

wonder if it had happened or if I was imagining things—if my mind was breaking down, if I was crazy. I named him Billy.

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“Stand up!”

Billy leaned over me. We were in the sunroom.

“You know if you tell anybody, they won’t believe you. They’ll call you a liar.” He pulled up his pants. “And if you tell your parents, they’ll think you are as disgusting as I do. And, they’ll think you’re lying too. They won’t love you anymore, because good parents don’t love kids who lie.”

I didn’t answer Billy. I had been in the sunroom. I was never in the tube. I was watching the lights and shadows fight on the wall. He wiped the red and yellow stain up from where he had been in the spinning tube. He pulled a hand towel between my legs. Red and yellow like the spot where he’d been in the tube.

“Go tell Ms. Brenda that you fell on the carport and hit your head.” He pushed my shoulders against the wall and zipped my pants. “Go tell her that, and don’t say nothing about this. You’ll go to hell. I’ll go to hell, too, if you tell.”

Ms. Brenda gave me some Tylenol. I got a real Coke from the can and some left over banana and peanut butter sandwiches. Ms. Brenda told my mother I had slipped in the carport, just like Billy said. And I began running.



## Best As

My bed was two thin foam mattresses wrapped in a dull gray plastic. They were stacked on the floor against the block wall that stood half way between ceiling and floor, dividing the bunks from the commons area. Gloria and Bird had set me up there close to them, this being my first time in and they feeling the need to mother something in this sterile cell block. They showed me how to knot the flat sheet in to place so it wouldn't work its way off the slippery mattress and the proper way to make a pillow from the other flat sheet. After I made my bed, I remained there, wrestling with sleep and the numbness that had overtaken my legs. I'd been locked away for less than one day, and already time had become a dreadful embrace.

When I first entered the cell, everyone was asleep except two black women playing Rummy at a round metal picnic table in the commons. After the heavy metal door closed and locked behind me, I was left facing them with my county-issued belongings stacked neatly in my arms. They looked up from their cards, nodded, and returned to their game. I walked to the table next to them, an identical twin of their table, placed the items on the painted table top, and sat on one of the cold, round seats. My hands grew clammy as the silence of the cell consumed me. It was October, but the silence was the hot, lazy hush of open windows in summer when the drapes lift now and then like idle hands reaching for a smoke, or the paper, or a piece of bruised fruit. Uncertain of proper jail etiquette, I attempted to look cool by carefully examining the personal items in the zip-lock bag. Maximum Security deodorant. A toothbrush with hard bristles and a silver logo of vertical bars on its white handle. A short pencil with a dull tip and no eraser. A few squares of white paper. Toothpaste. A bar of Clean It Up soap.

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I spent close to forty-five minutes on the phone explaining to the receptionist, the nurse, and the nurse practitioner why Grace had to be seen that day, listening to their list of reasons for waiting until the next day, repeating the list of her symptoms, and waiting on hold while they transferred me to the next person.

“Yes, I understand that Dr. Lutchka is booked solid, but her fever hasn’t broken in two days. I know it’s flu season. Yes, the receptionist already told me that you’re having to work in several other people. Right now her temperature is 102. Yes, two days. I’ve given her Tylenol and Advil, alternating between the two every four hours. No, the lowest it has gotten is 102; the highest is 104. Yes, she started puking last night. No, she’s puked all morning. I’ve been giving her clear liquids but she can’t keep anything down. She’s dehydrated and weak. She has chills, she’s sweating, and her body aches. I don’t want to make her wait in the emergency room. No matter how long we have to wait there it won’t be as long a wait as it would be at the ER.”

Dr. Lutchka’s office was the family section of the Jackson County Women and Family Clinic in downtown Carbondale, IL. There were OBGYNs on one side of the building and Dr. Lutchka’s office on the other. Most of the parking spaces in the small parking lot were reserved for expecting mothers. We had to park along the street a block down and walk. I carried Grace, whose feet dangled around my shins. Noah darted several yards in front of us, ignoring my yelps at him to slow down and walk beside me, and I had to try to keep up with him, constantly shifting Grace’s weight back onto my hip as I walked.

The waiting room had big soft over-stuffed couches, slick leather chairs, and a play area for small children with a tiny table and chairs and developmental toys bolted to other small tables and screwed into the wall. I laid Grace on a couch with her bunny blanket and signed in. Crimson blossoms burst in splotches on her cheeks and forehead. The rest of her tiny body was

lily pale and clammy with sweat. Noah had already begun climbing on the armchairs and sliding off into the floor. I found him a book to read, sat him at the table, and threatened him.

“If you be still and listen to me, I will get you an ice cream cone. If you won’t be still and you don’t listen to me—everything, listen to everything I ask you to do and do it, I will take away your Thomas trains for a week. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“What did mommy just say?”

“If I am good, I get ice cream.”

“Okay, good. But what else did I say?”

“I don’t remember.”

“If you don’t listen, I’ll take away your Thomas trains. So what did Mommy say?”

“If I’m good, I get ice cream. If I’m not good, I don’t get my Thomases.”

“Good boy.”

We waited for two hours. Grace slept and dry heaved into the small disposable puke bag the receptionist gave us when we came in. In between wiping her face with a cold rag, and adjusting her blanket, Noah and I read books and magazines, played I Spy and What Am I, and talked about Thomas Trains, Pokémon cards and dinosaurs.

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One of the women turned to me. “How are y’all?” I asked—my voice breaking.

“Best as, you know, best as,” the woman closest to me said with a smile. Her full tawny lips spread thin to reveal a mouthful of jutting teeth grown crooked and sideways—some longer than others. She had a long, thin face that hung to one side and copper-colored skin. Her eyes were deep-set pools of ink framed by thick lashes, and despite her flaws, those eyes—those big,

coal eyes made her beautiful.

“Shoot. Best as. That’s for sure,” the other woman added, folding her fan of cards and tapping them on the table before standing to stretch her arms above her head. She was tall and softly shaped with a creamy cappuccino complexion and freckles across her small nose. “Best as,” she repeated in deliberate syllables. She twirled at the knots in her short brown hair with one hand and pushed into the small of her back with the other, arching backwards into a deep stretch. The white crewneck tee-shirt rose above her stomach, revealing thin stretch marks on the flesh which peeked from the between her tee-shirt and bright orange county-issued pants. She adjusted her shirt and sat back down to her hand of cards. The silence returned a subtly different silence where nothing changed so much as lit from within, and I feared that in the stillness of this place I would begin to worship my own hallucinations.

\*

“Grace Dotson,” a nurse called from the door that led to the examination rooms.

All the comfort and posh of the waiting room was replaced by two sterile plastic chairs, a paper-covered examination table, a small doctor’s stool, a sink, counter top and cabinets. After being weighed and measured, Grace passed out on the paper-covered table.

“Noah, you were very good in the waiting room. Do you remember our deal?” I said as he tore an edge from Grace’s paper sheet.

It was too late. He had been still and quiet for two hours and in that time all the energy he hadn’t used had divided and multiplied and grown. He was bursting with it, climbing on the chair, jumping to the floor, riding the doctor’s stool from one side of the small square room to the other. We waited for another hour. Long before Dr. Lutchka entered the room, I gave up on keeping him still. He touched everything on the counter—the blood pressure machine; the box

of tissue paper; the plastic model of a human heart; the box of rubber gloves; the jars of alcohol soaked cotton balls, extra-long cotton swabs, and gauze. He opened the drawers and took out band-aids. He pulled the feet of the examination table out. He washed his hands in the sink. He lifted the posters illustrating common childhood rashes and the workings of the inner ear, almost pulling them from the wall. He talked at a menacing speed about everything.

“Hey mommy, you know what? Hey mommy, I have to tell you something. Hey mommy, I have to tell you something. Mommy. Mommy.”

“Yes?”

“Do you know what they use these for? There for cleaning out stuff that gets in people’s noses. That’s why their so long. They reach all the way to your brains and clean them off. And you know what? Hey, mommy, you know what? You know what mommy?”

“Yes?”

“I wonder if they use this stuff for dogs. Do they? Do they use this stuff on dogs, Mommy?”

“No, dogs don’t come here.”

“No, I mean at dog doctors. That would be cool. And you know what else? Hey, mommy, I have to tell you something. Hey mommy, you know what?”

“Yes?”

“This thing here can see all the way through your head. It’s called a mahopalandous. And they use it to look in your ears and remember the last time? They used it and the doctor said that she could see you on the other side? And you know what else? Hey mommy, I have to tell you something.”

“Yes?”

“Look at this! What are these pictures? That’s gross. Look at that. That kid looks real bad. I bet he has some kind of zombie disease. I bet he died. Did he die? Hey mommy, look at this. You know what? I have to tell you something. You know what, Mommy?”

“Yes?”

“Can I have one of these? You make cows. Did you know that mommy? You can make cows from these. And this is purple. See? You can make cows. Look at that. And you know what mommy? Hey mommy, you know what? I’ve got to tell you something. You know what?”

“Yes?”

\*

The only decoration in Cell Block 8 were pieces of notebook paper taped to the wall of the commons, each page contained a poem penciled in bubbly handwriting. Poems with titles like “Keeping the Faith” and “There’s Always Room at God’s Table,” and each was covered with colorful drawings of elaborate crosses, crowns of thorns or breaking hearts hand drawn in detail with colored pencils and crayons. I stood, walked to one of the notebook pages taped on the wall farthest from the tables and began reading the lines centered on the page.

*God will never turn His back on you  
No matter what you choose to do  
Even if you turn away,  
He’s like a rock. He’s here to stay.*

The picture of a person standing with open arms on the edge of a cliff bordering a river filled in the bottom third of the page and extended up the right side. In the upper left hand corner was a sun partially covered with wispy clouds—a red cross drawn in its middle. Already I knew that jail was probably the most religious place I had been in years. I placed my finger on the man and traced the cliffs down to the water’s edge, wondering how painful his death would be—if his

head would crack open against the sharp cliffs and bubbly handwriting spill out of his opened skull.

\*

I had emotionally and mentally retreated long before Dr. Lutchka knocked at the door. When she came in, Noah was standing on one of the plastic chairs, dancing with a rubber glove that I had blown up and tied off into a purple cow udder. I gave him a look, and he jumped to the floor.

“I’m so sorry for the wait. It’s been craziness today. We’ve been double booked. I’ve already seen thirty people.” Dr. Lutchka swept her long blond hair into a twist, stuck a pen in it to hold it in place, and went to the sink to wash her hands. “So what seems to be the problem with Ms. Grace today?” she asked, drying her hands. “You look like you don’t feel too good,” she continued, walking over to the examining table.

While holding Noah in my lap, I went through the list of symptoms. Dr. Lutchka nodded at each one while she inspected Grace’s ears with the mahopalandous, looked down her throat, and listened with a stethoscope to her deeply inhale and exhale.

“It looks like strep,” she said, washing her hands again. “The nurse will be in in a second to do a throat culture, and I’ll write a few prescriptions.” She turned to Grace. “I hope you get to feeling better, baby.” Grace moaned. “If she gets worse or doesn’t get any better in a few days call the office.” And then she was gone.

I didn’t remember checking out or putting the kids in the car. I didn’t remember strapping them into their booster seats. I do remember Grace’s moaning in the backseat and Noah’s chatter. But as I drove, I blocked them both out. I blocked everything out. After pulling into a parking space, I sat with the car running trying to remember how I got there. I didn’t

remember going through the string of stop lights. I didn't remember the intersections. I didn't remember the turns. It was as if I had blacked out after getting the prescriptions from the doctor's office and came to again in the Kroger parking lot.

In the cart return next to the car, I found one of the buggies that had a plastic racecar attached to the front of it. I lifted Grace into the basket part of the buggy, helped Noah into the racecar, and placed my messenger bag in the front. My bag was huge. It took me four months to hand sew it. It was made of green velvet and lined with quilted silk. I had enough room for my computer, notebooks, books, purse, and planner. When it was full, it weighed almost as much as one of my children.

We dropped off Grace's prescriptions. I thought we'd pick up some things we needed while we waited for them to be filled. Noah had jumped out the racecar at the sight of candy, and the lifting and moving and rearranging began. I chased him down, lifted Grace from the basket, placed her in the racecar, and lifted Noah into buggy.

"I don't want to ride in here. I want to drive."

"Well, you haven't been driving now have you? You aren't staying put in the racecar. You have to sit in here where I know that I can keep up with you."

We got frozen pizzas, toilet paper, and a case of Diet Coke, cans of corn and peas. Grace dozed in the racecar, leaning forward with her head resting on the steering wheel.

"I'm scrunched. I want up front with you," Noah said, holding his knees to his chest.

I moved my messenger bag to the basket and him to the seat at the front of the buggy. We picked up eggs and bread and shampoo, and I placed them in Noah's lap. While I paid for Grace's prescriptions, Noah climbed out of the seat, dropping the eggs. There was a clean up. I returned my bag to the front seat and let Noah run free. We paid for the groceries and went out



the door. I steered the cart with one hand and held onto Noah's shirt with the other.

"Ma'am. Ma'am." A lady dressed in jeans and a tee-shirt followed us half way to the car.

"Yes?"

"I need you to come back inside with me."

"Is something wrong?"

She didn't answer. Grace had woken up, turned sideways, and stretched her legs across the racecar seat. I placed Noah in the basket with the sacks of groceries and followed the woman to the entrance where a man stood waiting. He was wearing a pin-striped button-up, a red tie, and dark dress pants. His hands were in his pockets.

\*

"This your first time in?" the lighter skinned woman asked.

"Yes," I said turning to face her.

"Thought so. Newbies usually get a far off look about them. But you up and about looking at the walls gave you up. Most folks hit a bunk heavy until the dope wear off or reality set in—one or the other. Well, my name's Celia but everybody call me Bird."

I walked toward her with my arm extended, and she folded her cards again and reached to take my hand. "I'm Holly."

"This is Gloria or Puddy, which ever you call her, she'll answer to," Celia said nodding to the other lady. After Gloria and I shook hands, I returned to my seat.

"You sure taking it well," Gloria said, shifting her body to face me. "Lord the last girl—it her first time too—she be screaming and wailing from the time the door close."

"That girl full up with crazy," Bird added. Her clear hazel eyes widened with her words .

Gloria continued, “We finally had to call the deputy with the intercom that go up front and get that Bitch out of here.”

“Shit, she full up with the crazy. You hear me?” Bird repeated, tucking her chin down, poking out her bottom lip and looking up at me with a worry crease between her eye brows. “Full up. When the door close, she look around, and I guess she being the only white girl in here, she freaked the fuck out or something. Threw her shit up against the wall you was standing at, and ran over to that far corner where the trash can sit. And that where she stay too, cozy with the garbage. She knees at her chest. Screaming and wailing like she done lost a child.” Bird cocked her head to the side and did this thing with her mouth—half pout half smirk—with her lips poked out and cocked up on the right side of her face. “But that was the worse. The rest the time, she be peeking around the can there, mumbling nigger and shit.” Bird shook her head, did that thing with her mouth again, and made a clicking noise by sucking air through her lips while touching her tongue to her top front teeth. “But you alright. You cool. Taking it real good,” she said nodding at me. “You going be alright. The judge set your bail on Sunday.”

“Sunday?” I asked, “They won’t set it before then? When is visitation?”

“Tomorrow,” Gloria responded.

“You be alright till then,” Bird added. “You cool.”

“Do you know what time it is?” I asked.

“No. That’s part the way they keep us down. Time don’t mean nothing and it mean all that,” Bird said.

\*

“Please follow me,” the woman said as she scurried through the entrance and past the check-out lines. The man followed. We went to hallway on the opposite side of the store. We

got on an elevator and got off on the second floor.

“Can you please tell me what’s going on? My child is sick and I need to get home, give her her medicine and put her to bed.” I was angry.

“Would you please lift your bag?” the woman responded.

I did. Under it was the bottle of shampoo. My face flushed.

“Oh dear. I thought I had paid for that. Can I pay for it here, or do I need to go back downstairs?”

“It’s too late for that. I’ve already called the cops,” the woman said without any expression.

“Excuse me?”

“You will need to call someone to pick up your children.”

“What about my ice cream?” Noah whined.

I ignored him. “My husband is at home but we don’t have a house phone. I have the cell. We only have one car. You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Well, you’ll have to call someone or children’s services will be here to pick them up.”

“What?”

“What’s going on, Mommy?” Grace asked. For the first time all day Noah was quiet.

“It’s okay baby, Mommy’s going to call someone to pick you up.”

“You’re not going with us?”

“No.”

“Where are you going?”

“It’s okay. Mommy’ll be okay.”

I went down the numbers in my cell phone’s address list. No one answered until I tried a

friend of a friend.

“Kylie? I have an emergency. I need you to come to Kroger and pick up Grace and Noah and take them home. No, no one is hurt. It’s a long story. Just pick them up and tell Gent that I’m going to jail.”

“You’re going to jail,” Grace screamed. “I don’t want you to go to jail!”

“It’s okay, baby. It will be okay.” I rubbed her head as I finished up with Kylie. “I don’t know where they’ll be.”

“At the front desk,” the lady said.

“At the front desk. Please come as soon as you can.”

\*

The other women were just ending a Bible study, and tangled stirrings of whispered prayers echoed off the concrete walls, turning the barren cellblock into an artery to heaven and rousing me into my austere reality. Between each set of bunk beds that lined one side of the block were tall narrow windows framed in a slanted fashion that faced them away from the building. Barred and opaque, they provided only a sliver of the outside world. I stared into one of the milky panes, attempting to gain some insight into the time from an external light or shadow, but everything beyond the glass obscurely imitated night—deep and cool like dark waters, reflecting nothing but itself. I listened to the velvet murmurs of “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.” Laying silent and motionless like an old stone suffering with memory, I closed my eyes and tried to remember where I had misplaced my life

## A Bruised Sky Falling

*Many people think that recovery is simply a matter of not using drugs.  
They consider a relapse a sign of complete failure, and long periods of  
abstinence a sign of complete success.  
—Narcotics Anonymous Basic Text*

My Spanish consisted of a few ill-pronounced words, a great many hand gestures, facial expressions, and animal sounds, but buying the needles was no problem. I had been in Spain for a little over two and half weeks, and most people were kind enough to work with me if I attempted to speak their language.

A simple green sign with white lettering hung above the door. *La farmacia*. It was much smaller and more run down than the drugstores located closer to where I was staying, but my plans were secret. I had walked an extra ten and a half blocks to an out-of-the-way station to catch the Metro and got off five stops away in an unfamiliar neighborhood to ensure I didn't encounter anyone I knew. A bundle of bells on the door handle signaled my entrance. The pharmacy was narrow and cluttered. The lighting was dim. The spaces between the aisles were cramped. And I couldn't comprehend the Spanish on the signs which hung from the ceiling between the rows. There were two aging Spanish beauties clucking over bottles of medicine. I passed them twice in my winding back and forth and looking up and down, having to raise my arms above my head, suck in my stomach and tighten my buttocks to squeeze past them. Each time I passed they narrowed their eyes and sucked at their teeth, but I didn't care. I knew I wouldn't have time to come back, and I didn't want to chance getting caught. After a few minutes, I found them—third aisle to the right on the end cap.

Placing the bag of needles on the counter, I mispronounced, “Cuánto?”

“Cómo?” the drugstore clerk asked. He was a young man with slicked back hair, the

small, round face of a child, and a beak nose which took up most of his face. He raised his eyebrows and cocked his head at me like a curious chicken.

“Um,” I paused, “How much? Cuánto?” I asked again, holding my hand in front of my face and rubbing my middle and forefinger on my thumb.

“Ah. Sí. Seis Euro, por favor.”

After fiddling through my purse, I found my wallet. I took a deep breath, holding it until my head went numb and I felt my toes would pop. I had this one moment to find space between my impulse and my action. *I could leave and go back to the room.* The women seemed to grow louder, distracting and diverting. Their tongues engraved membrane through marrow, tattooing my brain with clicks and lisps of their unknown language. Another voice beat in my pulse. I exhaled and handed him the money, took the bag of needles now concealed in a brown bag, and placed them in my purse. The old women cackled and clucked.

“Gracias.”

I opened the door, and my mind spread wildly with bells and voices, and I grew dizzy with the sweetness my flesh remembered.

\*

I hoped that my days in Spain would roll out to the same rhythm as all my other days back in the States. That I would get up early every morning, smoke a cigarette, drink a cup of coffee, meditate and write. But I knew that once I was away from all the responsibilities, I would have to face myself. Somewhere in the middle of my life, I had become someone’s mother and my husband’s wife. I was no longer a person.

The day before I left for Spain, I woke up at five a.m. with my face buried in Grace’s hair. Soft, lilac scented—the smell of sweet dreams. We were sleeping at the foot of the bed;

the boys at the top. It was a habit I knew we had to break before the summer ended—two adults, two kids, girls at one end, boys on the other (reversed each night to keep things fair). A full sized bed.

I got up and sat on my front steps in my nightgown. The starlings had returned. I watched them terrorize the tree tops, swooping from branch to branch to ground in swift direct raids, cackling and clicking—like a gang of bikers. They overturned a robin’s nest. Knocked loose branches and green pecans to the sidewalk. Shit on my car. Then they all rose at once over the tree top like knots in an invisible net and cast themselves on my neighbor’s tree. I wanted to shoot them. But I didn’t own a gun. When they returned to my yard, I went inside to take my medicine—an anti-depressant for my anxiety, a pill for hypothyroidism, a capsule for my allergies, a multi-vitamin. But there was no pill for the worthlessness I felt.

The mornings were the only time I had for myself. To sit inhaling and exhaling the silence, to stare blank-faced at the walls. By eight they’d all be up—husband, kids—all demanding something. Gent would need clothes for work. Grace and Noah would need food, a movie to watch, hugs, kisses on the forehead, a warm lap, a game, a Popsicle, a toy they couldn’t reach, a book to be read. Nothing too demanding, but some days I felt I was too self-centered to be a mother or a wife. Some days I felt that all I could do was slouch into the loveseat, holding my knees, rocking back and forth, staring at some speck on the wall. On most days, I just went through the motions, hoping someday it would feel real.

“Mommy, Mommy, Mommy, Mommy, Mommy, Mommy, Mommy, Mommy, Mommy.” Noah stood before me in his railroad pajamas. I looked up and said nothing.

“Mommy, Mommy, Mommy, Mommy.” he continued.

“Yes, sweetie?”

\*

Relapse was a reality. Staying clean was hard work. It took the whole of a person. The twelve-step way of life was a disciplined one, and in the four years I had stayed clean, I had seen people come into the program, stop using, get to feeling a little better, put on a little weight, get their lives back in order, make the wife/husband/child/parent/judge/probation officer happy, begin to think that since everything was going so well they didn't need to go to meetings, work steps, or call their sponsor, start to think that they had control over their using, and use again. I had seen members, who had been clean for decades, turn back to drugs and die. The fact was that drug addicts used drugs; telling an addict to not use was like telling water to not be wet.

Death always resembles who we are, takes on our own stink and light, is experienced by and is waiting only for us—addict or no addict, we all die, but using addicts never die pretty. Car wrecks, gun shot wounds, overdoses, beatings, suicide. Lives poured out like fallen rain. I had peered into the caskets, leaning over broken, bruised, and bloated bodies dressed in cheap suits. The eyes glued shut. The hands folded neatly to cover track marks. The face hidden under waxy make up meant to hide some bit of the violence.

\*

The Metro car wasn't crowded, but I stood entangled in this weighty thing I had fed with my trip to the pharmacy. A mass of flashing emotions clouded my mind. *The bag of needles in my purse.* I remembered the tender rush that came after—that gentle passage into a black release through soft, swollen gates. *I didn't have to do this. I could throw the bag away. I could give the needles to one of the junkies that always sat on the steps of the Metro station by the dorm. I could find a meeting. Madrid was huge. There had to be a meeting somewhere—one where they spoke English. I could call someone. I could. But there was the spoon that I took from the small*



*café on the first floor of my dorm building, and the one hundred and fifty Euros worth of crisp bills in my wallet. I knew better. I had learned. Hadn't I? But I wasn't really like all those people in the meetings I attended. I was different. Wasn't I? Yes. Yes. I was a writer. This is what writers do. I could handle it. I was experiencing life. I had taken all this time and used all this energy. Just once wasn't going to kill me. Just once. Just one. Just one. Just one.*

\*

Relapse was never an accident. I had forgotten. I already reached the point in my life where the pill, the dose, the shot, the tab, the fix was my only friend, my best friend, my only best friend—the one thing in the whole world that made me feel as though I had come home. I experienced that place where heaven and hell are never far from one another—over and over. But time had become a heavy lumpish thing. A sinking stone that carried away my memory. I had been four years without so much as a drink. Gent and I both had gotten clean in our early twenties, when the kids were still babies. I hadn't lost the things other members in my recovery meetings had—the job, the car, the house, the children, the husband. I hadn't gone to the places they had.

Before I left for Spain, I had stopped attending recovery meetings. I stopped writing step work. I stopped calling my sponsor. My life was too full. I was doing well. I had other responsibilities. I forgot how it felt to like what I wanted and take what I wanted and become something different once I'd had it and after I had enough. Forgetful addicts don't live long lives.

\*

My first week in Spain, I drove a group of us to a Bob Dylan concert at a soccer stadium just outside Madrid. I parked the mini-van a few blocks from the entrance and the seven of us

walked to the entrance. The stage was set up on one side of the field and thousands thronged in the grass—some standing, some in lawn chairs, all surrounded by a fringe of picnickers on blankets spread out end to end leading in zigzags from the concession stands. It seemed we were the only Americans. We pushed our way through the crowd attempting to get close to the front, but we found ourselves stuck somewhere in the middle of field. When the concert started everyone around us began dancing like cowboys and singing Dylan songs in a mixture of English and Spanish. After a few songs, a two or three from our group went to get something to drink. Lee offered to buy me a beer, but I assured him that I was fine.

It wasn't long before the heat and the sweat of strangers got to me. I left the group by myself to go and buy a soda and use the bathroom. The line at the concession stand was thirty or forty people deep. I waited behind a couple. They were both wearing patchwork skirts. Their hair was in dreadlocks. And the more I listened, I realized they were speaking English. I scooted closer.

“Where are y'all from?” I asked as the line inched along.

“Oh my god. This is insane. Are you from the States?” the guy asked. He was in his early twenties. He was shirtless, tan, and a little overweight. His round, brown stomach and love handles poured over the skirt he was wearing. He began dancing in circles around the girl and me, swooshing his skirt to the music, revealing that he wasn't wearing any underwear.

“I'm from Mississippi,” I said to the woman. She was tall, pale-skinned and thin and dressed in the exact same skirt as the boy. She had an apron shirt on that tied in the back and at the neck. Her armpits and legs were unshaven.

“We're from Oregon,” she said, laughing. “You have to forgive him. We're tripping, and he's gotten a bit excited.”

“That’s okay. No better place for it,” I said. Although I was just a few years older, I felt decrepit and outdated. Next to them, in my khakis and tie-dye, I looked like a soccer mom. I was forced to exchange my patchwork dresses for more traditional attire when I began teaching college classes.

The line moved. We talked about bands and how we ended up at a Bob Dylan concert in Spain and how strange it was that we were in line together. They ordered beers and chips and danced away. I got a soda. I was jealous.

The only restrooms were port-a-potties. I waited in another line just as long as the one for the concession stand. My soda cup was still half full when I got to the toilet. I sat it on the sink area as I tried to hover over the seat and hold my pants off the floor, but the toilet was too high. My pants slipped all the way to the floor, and when I urinated, I discovered that there was a crack in the toilet’s base so the pee came out at me feet. My pants were covered with piss. In one swift, cringing motion, I pulled them up and left without my ten euro soda.

The crowd had changed shape while I waited. The man in the blue and white cowboy hat was no longer there. I had remembered him as my marker for where to enter the mass of drunkenness, but now everywhere looked the same. I stood in my piss-soaked pants and panicked. Song after song began and ended. My pants turned to damp piss then to dry, stiff piss. I began thinking the others would just take a cab to the nearest Metro station, and I would be waiting here all night. Then out of nowhere the dreadlocked, patchwork couple popped from the crowd.

“Hey Mississippi!” the boy said.

“Hey guys. I’m lost.”

The girl sang, “I once was lost but now I’m found, was blind but now I see.”

Their pupils were saucers. I could barely see their irises. “Yeah, I’m sure you can see,” I said, “I bet you’re seeing things I haven’t seen in a very long time.”

“Oh my god! This is the best fucking shit I’ve ever done!” the girl screamed in my ear as she leaned down to hug me like I had something to do with. “This is the best trip ever.”

She made me feel uneasy. Next to her I was straight-laced and fat, and I knew there was enough alcohol and LSD or mescaline flowing through her blood stream to send me on some kind of trip too if I just bit her and got a little taste of her blood. I looked at her milky forearm. I wanted to get high. They began dancing with a group of middle-aged Spanish women, and I stepped into the crowd, pressing and pushing until I came out at a clearing on the other side of the stadium. I reentered the mass of people and pressed and pushed across the field in another direction and then another, but my group had vanished. The concert ended and I waited by the entrance for them. They came out sober and calm in the midst of singing, tipsy Spaniards.

I drove the part of the group not staying at the dorm to their apartment, and on the way back to the dorm, I got the rest of us lost. We ended up in a cul-de-sac. It reminded me of suburban neighborhoods in the States, but with lines of prostitutes instead of two story houses. The sight was both alarming and natural at the same time. I and the others with me were alarmed at the vaginas and breasts on display, but the women walked around carefree and the men causally circled the looped like they were at a McDonald’s drive through. I had heard that prostitution was illegal but tolerated. Madrid had brothels and *las putas en la calle*, street hookers, if you knew where to find them. The brothel women were supposed to be beautiful and expensive; the street hookers were all addicts working for their next hit. We had to make the loop as well since there was no other way to go but around. The three of us stared out the windows. I can only imagine what the hookers thought of us—two women and a boy-faced man

in a black minivan. A few women made kissy faces at us. Others smiled. One woman shook her massive, sagging breasts and pulled apart the lips of her vagina with the fingers of one hand. We silently made the loop, took a left on the main road, and in a few minutes, the surroundings looked familiar and we were back at the dorm, but I now had some place to come back to.

\*

It always started with just drink or one pill. Rarely did people relapse on a hard drug. It was a benign bottle of beer or a harmless little blue pill meant to help with the stress of living. Slowly, outside the realm of my recovery program, I began to slip back. I went to bars with friends. At first, I ordered *Coke Lite* or *aqua de lemon*. But eventually my old habits took over.

There were twenty or thirty of us at a sangria karaoke bar. It had the feel of a cave—low, curved ceilings, cold, dusky, dark. We were squeezed into four tables listening to the piano playing karaoke singer. No one offered me a drink. I just took one from the pitcher. I felt my face flush. My blood turned warm. I leaned back in my seat. I talked a little louder. I sang “Let It Be” off key and too close to the microphone, making it squeal throughout the narrow bar. When I got back to the dorm, I puked until my body caved with dry heaves. And two weeks later, I was sitting on the Metro with a bag of needles in my purse.

I tried to take my mind off using, looking around the car to find something to focus on. A large woman in her twenties stood against the window of blinking lights and flashing color. She was stuffed into a denim mini skirt and a low-cut black leather vest. Mounds of creamy flesh bulged like fleshly shaped marzipan. I watched her long, plump legs jiggle under her fishnet hose. She was smooth, round, and sensual. *Sure of herself.*

The train stopped. The woman got off, and another woman with hair dyed the color of boiled shrimp stepped on the train. I looked intently at the hot pink curls trickling to her

shoulders, hoping that if I stared long enough, the feeling would go away. By the time I got off the train, my brain had chased its tail, and hope had become a twitching thing that lingered somewhere under the skin—a tingling between the flesh and the breastbone. *Just once. Just one. Just one.*

\*

It was 2 a.m. when I left the dorm with the bag of needles in my purse. I walked four miles until I came to the circle and the hookers. They huddled in distrusting clumps when I walked up, glaring, pointing, and calling things to me in Spanish. I walked up to a group of them. Their breast shook as they shooed me away with their hands, calling more Spanish. I shook my hands in front of me, “No. No. No,” I called to them. I stretched out my left arm, forearm facing up, and slapped my right hand against the bend several times. I showed them the needles in my purse, and smacked my arm again.

“Sí?” I asked.

One of the women walked to me, took me by the arm and guided me to a bench where she propped her foot on the seat, bent over, and began digging under the band of her knee-high, stiletto boot.

“Sí?” she asked, holding the little corner of a sandwich bag stuffed with white powder—the end twisted into a knot.

“Heroin?” I asked. She nodded her head.

“Mi llamo Maria,” she says, placing her open palm on her chest, and nodding her head.

“Holly,” I say, repeating the same gesture.

“Olly?”

“Holly,” I repeated. “Hu. Holly”

“Ah. Hola, comadre.”

“Cuánto?”

“Fifty,” she says in accented English.

I get out the spoon, the lighter, the cotton balls, water bottle, and belt I brought from the dorm—the tools needed to abort this feeling growing inside of me. We cooked it. Pulled it. Tied off my arm. I watched the needle enter the bend of my arm. Some place to come back to. I swallowed a monstrous dove, and arrived at the unknown through the disordering of all the senses. Before I knew what had happened, Maria was holding my hair as I puked beside the park bench.

Wind chasing summertime heat.

I left my memory in a ravine,

took a mess of shadows for my meat.

Star kissing star through wave on wave into my body rocking.

A bruised sky fell into the basin of my mind.

My sense of touch had left me.

A symphony of hells had taken me back to the place where suffering is all I was able to believe. I had done what I never wanted to do again. I had done what I wanted. Some place to come back to.

## Hand-me-down

“There are the kids,” I told myself.

I was preparing to make a list, making mental notes while I looked for a pen and one of my journals. I was alone in a new house. Before I left for Spain, I had packed up all of the belongings in our duplex in Tupelo. During the month I was in Spain, Gent had taken all the boxes and furniture to a storage room in Corinth. The day I returned from Spain, we loaded our life into Land Rover, or Honda, and my dad’s F350 and moved to Carbondale, Illinois for Gent to start a Ph.D. program in Rehabilitation Counseling from Southern Illinois University. He was at work or school. I wasn’t sure which, and I didn’t care. The kids were at school. Noah had started his third day of kindergarten, Grace her third day of first grade. And I was in a house that echoed. The living room was a long, lonely room that ran the whole width of the house. Stacks of boxes lined the walls, piles of toys scattered the floor, and the only furniture was a desk without a chair scooted into one corner of the room.

Before they started school, the kids decided to help me unpack. They ripped the labels off all the boxes and dumped toys in the floor. That was two weeks prior, yet I hadn’t unpacked or picked up the mess. I didn’t know where anything was, and I needed a pen and journal to write down the reasons for not killing myself before I forgot and did something stupid.

“There are the kids,” I said as I took a box from the top of one of the stacks. “There are the kids,” I repeated as I cut through the tape with a box cutter. I paused a moment and looked at the gleaming, sharp blade. “There are the kids.”

The box was full of Gent’s old counseling books. I pulled another box. “The kids,” I said again. Barbies. Another box—dinner plates. Another—underwear. By the time I got to the box that contained a selection of my poetry books I had forgotten what I was looking for, and



the five open boxes made me feel tired. I set the alarm on my cell phone so I wouldn't forget to get the kids from school. In my bedroom, the mattress was in the floor next to the bed frame. I fell onto it and closed my eyes.

\*

I'd grown into my life the way one grows into a pair of hand-me-down jeans, taking what's been given to me, though not what I would've chosen for myself, and waiting until the day when the fit felt right.

I didn't decide to get married. My mother made that decision. I loved Gent. We were engaged. But I got pregnant at the beginning of wedding planning, and when I said I didn't want to go through with it—that I wanted to wait, my mother threatened. So it was her that drove us to the courthouse in Selmer, Tennessee. It was August and humid, and the only sounds during the fifteen minute ride from Corinth, Mississippi came from the radio. The courthouse was large, square, white, columned, and surrounded by huge oak trees, statues of men on horseback and bronzed pyramids of cannon balls. It could have been any courthouse in any small city in the South, but it was the closest one to Corinth where two people could get married without waiting for blood tests.

I was nineteen and four months pregnant—not quite showing. I wore a white eyelet lace sun dress that my mother wore in the late sixties. It was four inches too long, and I had to wear platforms to keep from tripping myself. The shoes were once my mother's as well. Gent had on a plaid button up and khakis. When we got out of the air conditioned car into the heat, his glasses fogged over with humidity, and he had to untuck his shirt to wipe them. I had my engagement ring on my left hand—Gent had the wedding band that matched it in his pocket, and on my right thumb I wore my dad's wedding ring. I hadn't got Gent a ring yet so we borrowed

my dad's until I could get one.

After a few close calls on the thirty-something steps that led to the entrance, I teetered through the heavy door with Gent and my mother close behind. And there the three of us were, obvious to all onlookers. The only thing missing was the loaded and cocked .22 in my mother's hand. We went into the judge's office, filled out the appropriate paperwork, and followed him down a slender stairwell to the vault where we had to sign our names for the county record. The record vault was a narrow, high-ceilinged room. It reminded me of a normal room that had been turned on its side—ten feet wide and sixteen feet high. It was cool and dark and smelled of old books. A single naked bulb hung from the ceiling and cast shadows on our faces. The only contents of the vault were a small card table, a folding chair, and shelves and shelves of books—ceiling to floor. We all scooted inside after the judge and stood shoulder to shoulder while he pulled a massive, three-foot wide, leather-bound volume from a stack of other identically massive, three-foot wide, leather-bound books on the floor.

“It's water proof. And fire proof,” he said nodding his head and pointing around the vault. His other hand swept the wet hair stands back across his balding head. “It was designed to survive a nuclear bomb. There're records of all kinds in here. Marriages, births, deaths, divorces. People's whole lives. Yep, y'all are surrounded by over a hundred and fifty years of history.” He kept chatting trying to ease the awkwardness of the moment—trying to make it seem less obvious. But every time he looked up we were still the same—two scared teenage kids who had sex and made a baby out of wedlock, and one mother, determined to keep her grandchild from being a bastard. He had to use both hands to open the book. Then, he flipped through the book, beginning with chunks of pages and slowing with single sheets, until he found the place he was looking for—close to the middle. He smoothed the page flat. “Now, I just need

you two young folks to sign here.” He pointed to a line in the ledger. “We can go upstairs to do the ceremony,” he continued, handing Gent the pen. “If you like we can go outside to the courtyard, under the trees. I just performed one there earlier today. It’s quite cool in the shade. And the oaks are a bit romantic.” He winked at me.

“Can’t we just do it here?” I asked.

“Well, sure, young lady, right here would be fine.”

\*

I woke up before the alarm rang. I was still tired. I wanted to go back to sleep until the heavy feeling on my chest went away. I wanted to lie on the hardwood floor and seep in between the boards. I wanted to lean against the wall and meditate myself into paint. I fantasized I was in another reality where I could cease without consequence. I could just disappear and not affect the lives of other people. Just evaporate and they never know I had existed—live happy lives without any memory of me. I wanted to die, but I didn’t want to kill myself. I remembered my list. I went to the living room and dug through the papers on the desk to find my planner. It was a FranklinCovey—red leather binder with gold plated rings. There were daily, monthly, and yearly planning pages, and for each day, there was a page for daily notes, another page with an appointment schedule and prioritized daily task list, a cartoon from *The New Yorker*, and a daily news break—misprints and funny reports found in newspapers and books from all over. I opened to the day’s date and began my list in the daily notes section, “Reasons to Live: The kids.” It was all I could think of at the moment. But I knew if I could hold on to this one thought, I could make it through the next fifteen minutes. I closed the planner and returned it to the desk. It was time to get Grace and Noah from school.

\*

It was my first speech in my first speech class during my first semester in my first year of

college—a five to ten minute speech on myself (extra points for a visual aid). I waited until the night before to plan. There were too many other things to do: I had several checks I stole from my mother’s purse—I needed that cute mini-skirt from Gap and the matching jacket and a few purses (on sale) for back-to-school gifts for my friends; I had Gent and a case of Rolling Rock—he needed to a place to loose himself; I had a sack of weed and my convertible—I needed to get lost on county roads, to find abandoned barns, ankle-deep streams, and open corn fields. So I waited. How hard could it be to talk about myself?

I didn’t have the materials to make a chart or diagram. I had spent all my money. I had no idea what I was doing. I was too stoned and hung over to think logically. But I did have eggs. I hard-boiled my visual aid and went to bed.

The next day, I was standing in front of the class behind a wooden podium with a joint in one pocket of my new jacket and an egg in the other. I held the egg between my forefinger and thumb, raised my arm, and waved the egg in front of the class like I was about to perform a magic trick.

“My name is Holly Yarber, and this is why I am like an egg.” I was not nervous—never had been in front of people. I never got any trembles or sweaty hands. I didn’t worry about what I was doing until after it was over. But the egg was sweating—condensing from being in the refrigerator, and it slipped from my hand and fell on the tile floor. The small end of the egg dented in. Some in the class gasped like I had dropped a baby—like this was the part of the illusion meant to stupefy them. I stood in front of them. Inhaled. The egg rolled across the floor. I stood. The class began to chatter like hens. I exhaled and walked to the egg, picked it up, and continued.

I cupped the egg in my hand the way people hold new born dogs. I looked at the egg. I

looked at the class. “Eggs are small and white,” I said, on my way back to the podium. “I am small—5’1”, 95 lbs., and white—my heritage is German, French and Scotch-Irish (my great-great-grandmother was a full-blooded Cherokee, but the Irish took over in the gene pool). I have egg-shell skin, speckled with splashes of freckles like a farm fresh egg.”

I looked at the egg again and back at the class. The egg. The class. The egg. The class. “Eggs have layers,” I finally said. “There is a shell, an egg white, and a yoke. I have layers too. I might appear fragile at first.” I peeled the shell off, walked to the corner of the room, threw the shell in the garbage can, and squeezed the husked egg. “But I can take a knock and still be okay.” Without a thought, I sink my teeth into the egg and chewed it in slow steady bites. I hated eggs. I sat down with yellow sludge in my mouth. I left something out.

The truth. That I was fragile and cracked easily. That I was messy—everything ran out at the same time—scrambled, one part undistinguishable from another. The truth. That I was a foreigner—a displaced person. That I only functioned on the surface, drifted just above real human interaction. That I didn’t know who I was. That I looked for myself in the mirror every day, and I wasn’t there.

\*

When we returned from school, I fixed the kids a snack, helped Grace with her homework, and they went to play in their room. After the activity died down I was alone in the living room again. The boxes. They still lined the room, looming with responsibility. I couldn’t escape them.

*Maybe if I push them all into one room and close the door, I thought, or push them into the back yard and burn them. I won’t open them; I will douse each box with gasoline. Light a match. Watch the tape melt and the cardboard slowly curl to reveal the contents. Watch my*

*anxiety turn to ash and smoke and unidentifiable clumps of smoldering plastic.* I would burn them.

I shimmied a stack of boxes from the wall by pulling it one way then the other. Then, I pushed it towards the sliding doors that led to the back yard. I stopped, leaving the stack in the middle of the floor. I did the same with another stack and another until the stacks formed a towering circle. I plopped down in the middle of the boxes and looked through the glass doors and into the empty yard outside.

The walls were bare. Everything echoed. I wanted to die. I stared at the floor and drifted into the narrow shadow of one of the crevices. And the heavy weight of other people's decisions lifted. I was nowhere. Minutes passed. Thirty. Forty-five. I looked at the time on my cell phone, and I remembered the kids in the other room.

“Gracie. Noah.” My voice echoed off the walls around my head and into the pit of my stomach.

\*

I had never made a major decision for myself. All the moves—from Corinth, Mississippi to Florence, Alabama, back to Corinth, back to Florence, to Tupelo, Mississippi to Carbondale, Illinois—all the moves had been Gent's idea. Even the graduate school I attended had been Gent's decision. He applied for me, filled out my application, sent in my writing. It wasn't until I got the acceptance letter that I knew. I went along with it because it was what I did. The program was a Master's of Fine Arts in creative writing. It was what I wanted to do, and it was low-residency so I could move wherever Gent needed to go and unpack boxes and clean and cook and raise the kids. The only catch was that I had to go abroad for a month during the summers. I went along with it. It was what I did.

The day before I left for Spain, I took the kids to a park in Tupelo. A few minutes after we arrived, a maroon minivan swooped into a parking space like a huge, tottering bird. The side door open, and two boys tumbled out—one about 8, the other about 3. The older boy’s eyes were glued to a hand-held game; the younger boy jolted full speed in one direction and then the next until he reached the infant swings.

“I want to,” he said, pointing to one of the high-backed swings.

“No. Go over there to the other swings. I can’t reach you up that high,” the older boy said, not taking his eyes off the game. He was leaning against one of the poles of the swing set, with his back to the little boy and his neck bent down.

The younger boy looked at me. I was sitting at a picnic table about four feet from them, reading a book for school. I smiled and then looked away, but I continued to listen to them, while I watched my own kids chase one another through the hamster-like plastic tubes on one of the playground sets.

“I want to.”

“It’s too high. Go to the big swings.”

“I want to.”

I looked at the parked mini van. The sliding door was still open. There was a woman in driver’s seat. She sat there flipping through a newspaper. I couldn’t see her whole body, but her arms were huge, flopping like albino elephant trunks. The van was close enough for her to hear the conversation, but she never took her eyes off the paper. I looked at the boys and to her, and instantly, I hated her.

“I want to swing!” the smaller boy insisted in a shrill. The older boy looked to the van. Her huge flopping arms didn’t cease turning pages.

“I can’t lift you that high.”

“I want to.”

“Do you want to leave? I’m just here because you wanted to come.”

“I want to swing, please, Bubby.”

The older boy put the game in his pocket, looked to the van, sighed, and picked up his brother by placing his child-hands under the toddler’s armpits. They both struggled—the older brother straining to lift, the younger brother flinging his legs. I stood to help, but they managed to finish the task. The older boy pushed his brother with one hand and played his electronic game with the other until the toddler screamed, “I want out. I want in the bouncy car.” And the struggle began again.

I looked to the van. I hated her. I hated her for being too fat and lazy to play with her kids. I hated her for not listening to her little boy’s plea to swing. I hated her for putting her parental responsibilities on an eight-year-old. But most of all, I hated her because I could see myself—or what I thought I was. A fat, lazy, worthless mother. I hated her because I knew that while I sat there at the picnic table, watching my kids play in the distance, there was another mother somewhere across the park, playing ball with her kids, watching me out of the corner of her eye, thinking what a fat slob, what a worthless mother. I didn’t know myself well enough to think otherwise.

\*

Noah came running from the bathroom with something in his hand. “Look what I made!” he yelled excitedly. “Look, Look.” He ran to me, standing in between two of the box towers. After placing the planner on the floor, I swiveled around to face him.

“What is that?” I asked, mimicking his excitement.



“I made it.”

“Where did you get it?”

“I found it.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know.”

“In the bathroom?”

“His name is Ratty.”

Noah shoved it out in front of him. Ratty was resting on his open palm. I looked closely.

“What is that?” I asked again, stretching my neck out and leaning up on my knees—my hands on the floor.

Noah stepped closer. I looked again. Ratty was a tampon. Noah must have dug in the open box of toiletries in the hallway, found the pink box of Playtex, pulled one out, opened it, popped it out of the applicator, and fluffed it up. It did look like a rat.

“Let me have Ratty, please,” I said, holding out my hand.

“No! You’ll kill him or hurt him!” he screamed, pulling his hands close to his chest.

I stood up. Noah stepped back, bumping into a stack of boxes, which wobbled before tumbling to the floor behind him.

“Noah, sweetie, you can’t play with Ratty,” I said, struggling to pry the tampon from his hands. “I told you not to mess with the boxes in the hallway. Ratty was in a box that was off limits. I told you to play with your toys. Ratty is not a toy, Noah.”

Noah pulled away, collapsed to the floor, and rolled his five-year-old body into a ball, pulling all of himself into his center—knees, arms, and chin tucked to his chest. I leaned over him. Gracie ran into the living room and stood there—silent, watching me wrestle her brother in

the center of the circle of boxes. I grabbed Ratty and stood, holding it over my head while Noah jumped and flailed his arms to reach it.

“Buddy, I’m sorry, but you can’t play with Ratty. He’s a tampon,” I said, struggling to hold Noah off of me.

“What’s a tampon?” Gracie asked.

“It’s something Mommy uses when she has a period,” I responded, distracted.

“What’s a period?” she asked again, “Do we have one?”

Noah stopped grabbing and reaching and flailing. He collapsed again on the floor. His eyes were filled with tears, and he screamed in incoherent mumbles.

“Gracie, baby, not right now. We’ll talk about it later. Like when you’re nine or ten or twelve or something,” I said, grabbing the planner from the floor and returning it to the desk across the room.

“But I want to know now! Why want you tell me?” she screamed, collapsing to the floor next to Noah. I turned around to see what the thud was and stood there silently watching them. I looked around the room. The bare walls. The bare floor. But there was no time to feel anything. I was distracted and removed from everything except the kids’ voices and the echoes of their voices.

“I want Ratty!”

“What’s a period?”

“Ratty!”

“Why want you tell me?”

“Ratty, Ratty. Ratty!”

“Do I have one?”

Their shrieking bounced off the walls, circling around my head and vibrating into a string of nonsense in my ears—“I want Ratty Ratty Ratty what’s Ratty a tampon Ratty why Ratty want you Ratty Ratty tell me Ratty Ratty why want you Ratty.”

I took a deep breath, looked at the stacks of boxes and the piles of fallen boxes and the kids.

“Stop it!” I yelled. “Both of you stop it!” They continued screaming. I took a deep breath. “Noah, you can’t play with Ratty. Ratty might be nice now, but when you get older you’ll look back and wonder why your mother allowed you to play with a tampon.” I walked into kitchen and threw Ratty into the trash can. “Ratty could lead to you having major mental and emotional issues—years of therapy,” I called from the kitchen. “Ratty could destroy any hopes of you having intimate relationships with women,” I continued. For a moment, I was having fun. I walked back into the living room where the kids were still laying in the floor screaming.

They had turned on each other, kicking and scratching like wild animals—the stacks of boxes circling them like a fighting ring. Looking at them screaming and kicking, I wanted to run out of the house and drive away. But instead, I picked up Noah. He went limp in my arms, sobbing. I wiped his face, walked him into the bedroom and placed him at one end of the mattress in the floor. Returning to the living room, I picked up Gracie. She clung to me. I rubbed her back, walked with her into the bedroom, and placed her at the other end of the mattress.

“Now, both of you stop,” I screamed. My hands covered my face, and I saw them through my fingers, staring blank-faced on the ends of the bed.

\*

Self-destruction kept me at arm's length from my children. They loved me without condition— without holding anything back. But I felt that if I gave them all of me—that inner part—it would tear them into little pieces and they would spend the rest of their lives trying to put themselves back together.

My mother gave me all she had—sharp edges, points and all. Everything. And I still wanted more. I stood at her door screaming for apples. “I want apples! I want apples!” like a spoiled child. And she offered me what she had—angular star fruits, prickly pineapples, her tough-skinned oranges and bananas. I felt slighted. But nothing comes out of us that isn't put into us, and we can't give away something we don't have.

The children pleased her. While we were still living in Corinth and I was finishing up my bachelor's degree, I would take the children to see her at least twice a week. They were just two and three, but they enjoyed the visits, and she was always glad to see them.

The day was one of those brisk, clear days that felt endless and safe. The trees stood half-naked against the sky. Their leaves gathered in heaps like stripped clothing. A faint hint of burning leaves lingered in the cool air. When we walked in, she was working the crossword puzzle in the *Daily Corinthian*. She put down the newspaper and opened her arms to the babies. They loved her.

I didn't know why I told her. I knew the response; I'd been told before. I should have kept it to myself. But I didn't. I needed something. I needed her to approve like a normal mother. I needed her to face to light up. I needed her to jump up and wrap her arms around me. I needed her to smile. I had it planned out in my head. I saw her rising from her chair with a light surrounding her. I saw her walk to me—arms out, smiling. I heard the joy in her voice. I heard her say, “I am so proud of you. I know you can do it. That's wonderful. You can do it.

You're smart enough. If you need any help let me know."

But our relationship was buried under the brokenness of two incomplete lives. She hid her pain. It was a dark nebulous embedded in her center—shadowy, veiny, and bruised. I knew it, but not in its original form. She held it inside her like a mutated fetus. Only parts of it came out in gluey chunks of anger.

"I'm applying to Columbia," I said. I said it. The words came before I had time to stop them. A reflex. A gag. I puked out the words and watched her reaction as they hit the air. I felt like I'd been punched in the gut.

"Where's that?" she asked.

"Columbia. It's in New York. It has one of the best M.F.A. programs in the country," I said.

"New York! That is the stupidest thing I ever heard." She glared at me. I looked away at the T.V. I could feel myself slipping inside like a wounded animal, retreating. She continued talking, but I didn't hear her. Her words were just white noise.

"Holly! Are you deaf?"

"They have student housing," I continued like I hadn't just mentally retreated. She didn't let me finish.

"What about your children? How could you even think of that? Look at these babies!"

"I've already looked into preschools. There's one at the school and there're several others. And museums and culture and energy. They would benefit from it. They would love it. Some of the best pre-schools in the nation are in New York."

"You can't afford preschools in New York. Good grief. You can't even support yourself here. I do. The state pays for your daycare. How are you going to pay for preschool in New

York? Well?” She was standing now. Screaming with her arms in the air. Her face red. Her blood pressure rising.

“The schools I looked at have scholarships. They like diversity.” I was screaming without thinking about screaming. It just came out. The kids were crying. She sat back down and picked up the crossword puzzle she was working on when we came in.

“Diversity. What a joke. You’re white. You’re kids are white. How do you expect to get your kid’s preschool paid for based on diversity?” She looked down at the paper, dismissing me.

“Well, we’re from Mississippi. That’s diverse. How many people from Mississippi do you think they have in their schools?” I paused. Inhaled. Everything stopped. For a breath, a silence, calm as moss, filled the space between us. The kids quit crying. My mother’s living room dissolved. I could only hear beating in my ears. I could only feel a thumping in my chest. I exhaled.

“What kind of mother would drag these precious babies to New York City? Well, I’ll tell you—a worthless one. You wouldn’t know what to do. You don’t even keep them now. You drop them off on anyone who’ll keep them. On day care,” she said, looking at me to see how deep that cut. I didn’t let her finish.

“They go to daycare when I go to school,” I protested. “I don’t drop them off on anyone who will keep them.”

“You’re a selfish little bitch. Do you ever think about anyone but yourself? Do you even think about your children at all? Well, I hope you don’t get in. I’m going to pray that you don’t get it. I hope you don’t. You’ve come up with some stupid ideas, but this is the stupidest.” She pulled her glasses to the tip of her nose and exhaled. She had won. She sat surrounded by the

silence of her victory. Until I stood.

“Oh, go to hell!” I was trembling. “You’re the fucking bitch.”

“Fuck you!”

“Fuck you,” I said grabbing Grace and Noah by their elbows, “Come on babies. We’re leaving now.” Those emotions were back—foreign and familiar at the same time, biting, rising in the back of my throat.

“What about our toys?” Gracie asked. She was crying again. “Mommy, can we take the toys? I want my toy. I want my toy. I want my toy. I want my toy. I want my toy.”

We left without their toys or the red sweater mother had bought me. But I took the five dollars for gas and slammed the door. I drove 85 miles an hour to my house. The kids quickly fell asleep in their car seats so I didn’t stop for gas.

*Fresh Air with Terri Gross* was on NPR. Her guests were bird song specialist.

“Why do birds sing? What are they singing about?” Terri said. *Who cares?* I thought.

Terri and her guests began talking about how song birds learn their songs. Each song bird had a different song or series of songs. The parents taught their babies their language. The baby birds babbled, like young children. They needed their parents to be able to learn.

But wrens were different.

“Where does a young wren get its song?” Terri’s guest said. “Well, the female doesn’t sing. She’s the architect of everything the young male sings, but she doesn’t actually sing. So the choices for a young male are either his father or other birds after this young male has left home. And what I found after a wee bit of work, banding lots of baby birds. Putting little bands on their legs. Following to where they would eventually settle, which was usually about a mile away or so. I found that these young birds were certainly capable of learning their father’s

songs, but then they rejected all of those songs so that they could sing the songs of the males that were around them on the territory that they would hold for the rest of their lives. So that they could fit into this new community. Father songs meant nothing in this new community because after all it was a different dialect and, dialects change over very short distances—over a mile or so.”

When I pulled into my driveway, the trill of a wren was blaring from my speakers.

I put the babies in their beds and hovered over the trash can in the kitchen. Three-week-old potato salad and chili from the bowls Gent cleaned out of the refrigerator, empty Diet Dr. Pepper cans, a jug of out-of-date milk. I forced my finger to the back of my throat, and when I was through, the emotions were gone. Whatever I didn't get from my mother was now in the bottom of the garbage can. I forgot about Columbia. I never applied.

\*

I lowered my voice. “Noah, Mommy's sorry that I threw away Ratty. I really am.” I looked around the bedroom not knowing what to do next. There were boxes stacked against the wall next to the mattress. Boxes leaning out of the open closet door. Boxes lined neatly on the floor in the empty bed frame.

“Mommy,” Gracie said.

“Yes, baby?” I asked, exhaling the words.

“What's a period?”

I walked over to the mattress, climbed over Noah, sat next to him at the head of the bed, and leaned my back against the wall. I motioned Gracie to us with my right arm. She crawled to where we were and took her place beside me opposite Noah.

“Well,” I said searching for words, not knowing how to explain menstruation to a six-



and five-year-old. “Well,” I said again.

“Does it have something to do with your bagina?” Gracie asked.

“Vagina,” I said. “Yes.”

“Does Noah have one?” Gracie asked.

“A vagina?”

“No. A period.”

“No. Only girls have periods.”

They scooted closer to me, and both of them were silent with anticipation. I paused, looked at the wall, and wrapped an arm around each of them so that their heads were resting on my chest.

“Well,” I said once more. “Girls have eggs.”

“Like chickens?” Noah interrupted excitedly, rocking back and forth and making the bed bounce.

“No, not just like chickens. Girls have tiny eggs—microscopic eggs, that means that you can’t see them without looking through a magnifier. They don’t have shells like chickens. And. Well. Girls have. They have these things inside them. Um. Girls have things called fallopian tubes. And they have a uterus. And two ovaries where the eggs are stored. And once a month, an egg travels from one of the ovaries down one of the fallopian tubes and into the uterus, and it sits there, waiting.” I unwrap my arms from them. My hands move in a curving motion in front of me and meet in front of my chest so I look like I am praying. The kids mimic me and we are all pausing in prayer. “And if nothing happens, then it dies.” My hands fall to my side. The kids’ mouths widen. Their hands remain in prayer. “And when it dies, the woman bleeds. And the blood comes out of her vagina.” There was a long moment of silence before the kids lower

their hands and return their heads to my cradling arms.

“So I have dead baby chickens inside of me?” Gracie asked, worried.

“No, baby. Mommy isn’t doing a very good job of explaining this, but I just can’t explain it right now. You don’t have dead baby chickens. You don’t have live baby chickens. You don’t have babies of any kind. You just have microscopic eggs and their staying put for a while. They won’t start traveling to your uterus until you’re much older.”

“Mommy?”

“Yes, baby?”

“Where do babies come from?”

“Can we talk about it later?”

“I guess,” she said.

I closed my eyes. And for a moment, we sat there. No one said anything. In the silence, all I was aware of was the rise and fall of their bodies as they breathed in my arms. I pulled strands of their hair through my fingers. For a moment, I accepted the world as it was given to me. The sound of their breathing. The weight of their heads on my chest. The soft smell of their hair. All I felt was the warmth of this moment and the completeness of three bodies together.

## Vita

Holly R. Dotson was born in Tupelo, Mississippi and grew up in Corinth, Mississippi. She attended the University of North Alabama in Florence, Alabama, where she received a Bachelor's of Science Degree in English and Professional Writing in 2003. She has lived and taught English courses in Tupelo, Mississippi, and Carbondale, Illinois, and she has studied writing in Southampton, New York, Madrid, Spain, and San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. She and her family currently resides in Florence, Alabama, and she teaches English at Northwest-Shoals Community College in Muscle Shoals, Alabama.