Purpose:
It is the express purpose of *Epiphany* to provide a quality bi-annual nontraditional student literary journal to showcase and further encourage the creative talents of nontraditional students of Weber State University.

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## Epiphany Notes

### Short Fiction

**Epiphany Winner:** Owens, Chelsea: *Duplicity*  
**Short Fiction Winner:** Stumpp, Britta: *Love and Las Vegas*  
Bristow, Karen: *Remember When*  
Cutrubus, Heidi: *Only Fourteen*  
Everett, Laurie: *Exposing Love*  
Hill, L. K.: *Overestimate the Underestimated*  
Wheeler, Ben: *Autumn*

### Flash Fiction Section

**Flash Fiction Winner:** Cutrubus, Heidi: *Can I Come In?*  
Bristow, Karen: *Meghan*  
Cummins, Tracy: *The Storm*  
Cummins, Tracy: *The Best Vacation Ever*  
Hill, Carissa: *Home*  
Ramey, Billie: *Beating the Best*  
Shepherd, Scott: *Not Everybody Likes Fries*

### Non-Fiction Section

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Daniels, Matt: *The Dark Room*  
Hill, Carissa: *Where’s the Owner’s Manual?*  
Hill, L. K.: *Family Home Chaos*  
Simonson, Gabrielle: *Encounter with a Stranger*

### Poetry Section

**Poetry Winner:** Adams, Dwight: *Red Autumn*  
Adams, Dwight: *Roadside America*  
Adams, Dwight: *Invisible Constellation*  
Benson, Kathi: *Ode to a Dandelion*  
Chard, Elden Gabriel: *Paralyzed by Melancholy*  
Chard, Elden Gabriel: *Hanged*  
Conner, S. Winston: *After*  
Conner, S. Winston: *In Pursuit*  
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Hughes, Tom: *On a Death Bed*  
Hughes, Tom: *The Dream of Dreamers*  
Hughes, Tom: *Road to NoWheresVille*  
Huerta, Charlys: *Winter Trees*
LeFevre, Janice: *To Edward Franklin Kameny*  
Samford, Rebecca: *The Widow’s Might*  
Samford, Rebecca: *Scented*  
Samford, Rebecca: *Handle With Care*  
Simonson, Gabrielle: *Gender Neutral*  
Snyder, Dexter: *Why I Write*  
Sparkman, Ann: *Stay With Me*  
Sparkman, Ann: *Winter’s Apple Tree*  
Stumpp, Britta: *Kindred Matter: To Phoenix*  
Stumpp, Britta: *Roskilde*  
VanDaam, Jason: *The Red Light District of Petersburg*  
*Was Whoever She Was*  

**Editor’s Section**  

**Managing Editor:** Cox, Rachel: *One Leaf*  
**Design & Copy Editor:** Kent, Brianna: *Chemo in the Morning*  
**Assistant Editor:** Hodges, Amber: *Late*  
**Assistant Editor:** Chard, Mia: *An Argentine Reality*
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Rachel Cox – Managing Editor
Brianna Kent – Design & Copy Editor
Amber Hodges & Mia Chard – Assistant Editors

WSU Nontraditional Student Center Staff Advisor: Debbie Cragun
WSU English Department Advisor: Dr. Judy Elsley

Rachel Cox, Managing Editor
Rachel Cox hails from Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She came to Weber State to study theater, but found that writing was her one true love, though she often uses her theater experience in her writing. She worked as a tutor in the Writing Center for a year, and is currently a peer advisor in the Nontraditional Student Center. Rachel won first place in the fiction category of the 2009 WSU College Writing Contest for her short story “One Leaf.” She will be graduating this spring with a BA in English, Creative Writing Emphasis. She plans to start her English Masters program in the fall of this year as well. Rachel is currently writing a novel, and is deeply committed to finishing the monster this year so that she can get on with all of the other writing projects floating around in her brain. On the days that she gets too frustrated with the novel or when her characters just won’t cooperate, she writes short stories, poetry, a blog, journals, letters, and anything else in which pen and ink are involved.

Brianna Kent, Design & Copy Editor
Brianna Kent is a transplant from Colorado. Since she was old enough to hold a pen or pencil, Kent has been writing stories and poetry. She was first published when she was in third grade. She was Editor-in-Chief of her High School newspaper and Editor of their literary magazine. Since that time, her writing has been published in a collection of poems A Surrender to the Moon, Folio, a book of her poetry: Through a Keyhole, and recently in Epiphany. Her other publications include: The Eagle Eye, Black Forest News, and Tri-Lake Tribune. She will be presenting her poetry at the National Undergraduate Literature Conference this spring. She recently won first place in the poetry category of the 2010 WSU English Department Writing Contest. Over the past 15 years Kent has read in front of different audiences in California, Colorado, Illinois, Utah, and even in Germany. She continues to write poetry, short fiction, non-fiction and children’s novels.
Amber Jo Hodges, Assistant Editor
Amber Jo Hodges was born in Salt Lake City and is the oldest of five children. She grew up in Harrisville, Utah and graduated from Fremont High school as the English Sterling Scholar. Amber was a closet writer for many years, and discovered writing when her sister died. Her mother discovered her work, and encouraged her pursuit of the talent which has led to so much success. She is an English Major with a Creative Writing Emphasis, has been published in Folio, Epiphany, and Metaphor, and served as the Arts and Humanities Liaison for the Scientific Journal Ergo. Her writing strengths include flash fiction and creative non-fiction, but she likes to venture into other genres often. This summer she married the most fantastic person she knows, the love of her life, and lives with him in North Ogden. She is a sports nut, and also enjoys reading, playing the piano, cooking, and playing monopoly with her husband into the early hours of the morning. She loves family and friends, travel, and being an editor for Epiphany.

Mia Chard, Assistant Editor
Mia Chard was born and raised in Morgan, Utah. She has always been drawn to the written word and just recently discovered a passion for writing. She has attended Weber State University for the past three years and will be graduating with a Bachelor in English this coming August.

Special Thanks:
Epiphany would like to thank all the Nontraditional Students who entered into the contest by submitting their finest work. Epiphany is made possible by your talent. Epiphany would also like to especially thank Debbie Cragun and Dr. Judy Elsley for their support, patience and advice.

We especially would like to thank Weber State University Printing Services for making this possible. For all of you nontraditional student writers and poets, keep writing your passion. This is just the beginning of your journey. Thanks also to any and all who come into contact with this issue of Epiphany.

Please submit for the Fall Issue 2010.
Editor’s Note:

Each of us on the *Epiphany* staff have been drawn to the written word in such a manner that it consumes our time, energy, and hard drive space. We understand what it is like to wake up in the night with an idea so vivid we can’t go back to sleep. We know what it is like to experience that epiphany when your muse speaks to you in words that cannot be ignored. In short, we come from that world where passion meets pen or where insight overflows onto the computer screen.

We have dared to believe that this journal was more than just a brief moment of inspiration. In fact, we embraced this idea for what it was, a collective epiphany. When you find yourself discouraged as a writer, ask yourself this: When was your last epiphany? We promise that when you find that inspiration and you write from that place, you will be heard.

This journal is a compilation of students’ writings that have been born of dreams and of ink as all great literature is. The nontraditional student writers have put pen to paper (or fingers to computer keys) and made their voices heard.

From all of us to you, who read this page, and to you who got us each here, thank you. Simply believe, and you will see your dreams materialize into something much more tangible than where they started. Ours did.

We wish to thank all of the mentors that have touched the lives of each of us here—professors, advisors, spouses and parents who gave of themselves unselfishly and nudged us to follow our dreams. To name a few specifically: Debbie Cragun, Dr. Judy Elsley, Dr. Brad Roghaar, Dr. Sally Shigley, Dr. Vicki Ramirez, Dr. Scott Rogers, Dr. John Schwiebert, Dr. Mikel Vause, Dr. Bob Hogge, Prof. Ron Deeter, Prof. Walt Prothero, and the rest of the English faculty, Dewey, Tyler and each of you reading this.

We invite you to enjoy this volume of *Epiphany*. As you read these pages, you will see a glimpse of the best, most brilliant work we saw this semester. We hope you will not be disappointed. Perhaps in reading these pages, you will be inspired to have your own personal *Epiphany*.

Regards,

Rachel, Bri, Amber, and Mia
Short Fiction Section
Like the evaporation of winter fog in the eventual warming of the sun, he slowly became aware of light around, firmness supporting him, and a hum of noise. There was a shape facing his eyes, flickering occasionally but uninteresting. He blinked, and was surprised to sense the soft fan of hair on his eyelids and the comfortable wetness that relieved his eyes. As a result, his attention was drawn to other aspects of his physique.

He closed a hand, triggering his head to notice the movement and turn downward. The hum of noise stopped; the subsequent silence drew his focus away from himself to the object across from him. He realized it was a screen, though that information confused him slightly as he wasn’t sure how he would know this or what the knowledge meant.

There was a face on the screen looking at him politely, expectantly. The face was dark, female, and pleasant to look at. However, the purse of her deep red lips and the lift of her right eyebrow indicated that she waited for him to respond. Her mouth opened, and he recognized, “Are you all right, Mr. Ilker?”

He felt his mouth open in surprise, and briefly enjoyed the sensation of stretching his lips, and the outside air entering to cool his tongue and throat. Still, the enjoyment was not as strong as the surprise that caused it, the reaction to auditory comprehension. He heard the words, and knew them. Just like recognition of the screen, however, he sensed the strangeness of the mental activity. His mind felt clouded, new, and these stimulations were strangely superficial.

The woman seemed …irritated now, he decided. He liked her face better when it seemed polite, so he strained within for a solution.

“I’m fine,” he heard a crisp and confident voice say. The sound was similar to her sounds but deep, young, and refined. It was he who spoke the words. He felt his teeth touch together and the edges of his mouth curve up. The resulting look was not very reassuring, but the woman relaxed and smiled in sympathy.

“Well, Mr. Ilker,” she said, “I see no obstacles to your employment with us.” She smiled more fully. “Of course, your outstanding qualifications and reputation made this interview more a formality than a necessity.” He tried to smile as she did, but only managed a smirk.

“I recommend you depart immediately, which is why we suggested you contact us so near the airport,” she explained. “Of course,” the lovely voice interrupted, “that is entirely up to you. Perhaps you need to return home to pack your belongings?” A dark hand with deep red fingernails—he realized it was hers—appeared on the screen near her face and swept in the direction of his feet. He bent his neck to look down and
realized she was referring to his lack of possessions. There was just him, in a ...suit, he thought, and ...shoes. He was alone with the woman on the screen, alone in a room, alone and supported by something.

Longing to sort things out and even to examine his surroundings more, he found the woman and her comments irritating. She was demonstrating her expectant look again, so he had to placate her first to free himself.

“Yes, I must pack my belongings,” he said carefully. It seemed appropriate to add, “Thank you.”

The woman smiled again. “Wonderful,” she pronounced, “I will send your tickets to our station at the airport. You have three hours before expiration.” She repositioned herself into a professional stance and ended with, “We eagerly anticipate your arrival.”

Her face was replaced by blackness, and he realized the screen was no longer flickering. Immediately, he stood up. As with words spoken and names of objects understood, the action was completed involuntarily. What was happening? Where was he? What was he?

He realized his hand was still closed, so he opened it. He was briefly fascinated by his stretching fingers and their nerves tingling back to life, but was interrupted by a hollow sound he recognized as knocking coming from a rectangle in the wall. The door moved into the room at an angle, and a man stood in its space with his hand on the doorknob.

“If you are finished with the room, Mr. Ilker,” the man lisped, “we will clean up the equipment for the next client.” He shuffled into the room somewhat, and the lights reflected off a nametag with E. Martin cheaply printed on the tan rectangle.

It did not seem appropriate to address E. Martin by name, even with his name so clearly visible, so “Mr. Ilker” did not. Instead, he slid his hands discreetly into his pockets and straightened his posture as the woman had at the end of her speaking. “Yes, you may prepare for the next reservation,” his curt voice assented.

E. Martin nodded slightly, not expecting anything more, and entered the room fully. “Mr. Ilker” realized he was to leave. Accordingly, he searched around the small room in case he had some property, but the room was empty and he headed out the door deep in thought.

He had been so focused on the interview with the woman and even E. Martin that he did not notice his hands for several paces down the unadorned hall. They were still in his pockets, and he realized there was a small rectangular object gripped in the right one. He drew it and the rectangle from his pocket. Under close scrutiny, he was able to discern some numbers on the object. An address, he thought. It’s a house key.
Less surprised at the occurrence now, he accepted the automatic flow of information and even strove to gain more. This key ...this key was for his house, or at least the house of his belongings the woman had spoken of. The number on it could be used to instruct a vehicle to take him there, a vehicle he would engage outside the building he presently paced through. He increased his pace and soon found himself outside and employing such a vehicle.

Once inside the cab, he was isolated from interruptions and able to focus again on himself. His name was Mr. Ilker. He was important or the woman would not have praised him, and E. Martin would not have been subservient. He had no possessions with him, but held a key to a place he knew he owned.

*How could a person be in his situation?* From himself alone, without inspiration, he knew as much as a child. Well, he certainly had more intelligence than a child, though it was hard to separate what was his and what was already there. He decided he was more like an adult kept in isolation and just introduced to himself and the outside world. *How was that possible?*

These conclusive musings were halted by the cabdriver slowing down. They parked in the shadow of a tall, attractive building with an imposing entrance. The driver got out and opened his door. She closed the door after him, and he turned to face her. In process, he caught a reflection in the cab window that scared him. It was the face of a strong, masculine, proud man. The eyes were cold blue, and the bone structure firm. This man was he, Mr. Ilker, and it was no wonder he commanded respect. He went to run his right hand through the well-groomed dark hair, but noticed the cabdriver staring in curiosity.

Impatiently, the cabdriver held out her hand. Automatically, he placed his key into her palm and she deftly transferred it to a small device she pulled from a pocket. The device beeped affirmatively, and she placed his key back into his still-outstretched hand. He blinked and swallowed, then retracted his arm and turned to face his building.

The cab left rapidly, quickly enough that its departure left behind a puff of air that tugged at his suit. He stared up at the building and felt uneasy. He sensed a problem, but saw no outside signs of danger. Gripping the house key, he mounted the stairs and approached the door.

He found a small device similar to that the cabdriver had, and accordingly brought his key to it. There was no beep, but the door resonated with a muted *click*. He pushed it open and understood why the cabdriver had hurried away, and why he’d felt …*dread* in approaching his
house. It may be his house, but there were people inside that should not have been.

*Intruders*, he understood. He could see one through a doorway, dressed in black and rifling through a drawer. He could hear at least one talking *upstairs*, over his head. Yet another emerged into the entryway he was standing in, and this one tilted his head toward a …*speaker* near his ear. He saw Mr. Ilker and stopped in shock. There was frightened astonishment drawn all over the intruder’s features.

Mr. Ilker sought for automatic inspiration, but none came. Perhaps this was an unforeseen event, though he couldn’t say who had been foreseeing the other things. He stepped back a pace, perhaps to escape, but the movement finally triggered action in the stunned man in black. He rushed forward and grabbed Mr. Ilker roughly by the arms.  

“Get over here!” The man in black yelled to his comrade through the doorway. The noise also attracted the intruder from upstairs, who descended rapidly with another close behind. They were all shocked, though trained enough to surround Mr. Ilker and take his arms securely from the first man. Mr. Ilker felt pain as they pushed his arms tightly behind him and held them.

“What is going on? Report!” The speaker on the first intruder crackled. The man leaned toward it again and responded, “Require instruction. Have apprehended an intruder. It is Ilker.”

Mr. Ilker was certainly surprised to hear that he was the intruder, and not they. The speaker responded, “That is impossible, Makker. Verify information.”

Makker looked closely at Mr. Ilker, who leaned away as much as possible with the men behind him. Makker rapidly slapped Mr. Ilker across the face, causing Mr. Ilker to attempt to punch him back. He could only assume this was another reflex, since it didn’t make sense to try such a thing with his arms pinioned. Makker smirked and said, “It’s Ilker, though I don’t know how. Maybe he came back to squeal after all.”

“Maybe it’s his twin brother,” a gruff voice holding Mr. Ilker’s right arm said.

“Or a clone,” Mr. Ilker was surprised to hear a female voice holding his left arm.

“A clone, yes. That is the closest you house-breakers can come to the truth,” interrupted a much louder voice, from all around them. Strangely, it was the same voice with which Mr. Ilker spoke. He had not opened his mouth, though, and was sure he had not voiced anything. The intruders holding his arms loosened their grip slightly as they backed up a bit in surprise.
“Makker, you fiend, I trust you are broadcasting to your superiors,” the voice continued insultingly, “I know they want to hear this, and I know I want to tell it to them.

“Congratulations, you killed me. It wasn’t difficult. I am, after all, as human and frail as you all are. Unfortunately, the reign of Ilker doesn’t end with the destruction of the tabernacle. A ghost, a clone, a replica stands before you. Do you know if there are others? Do you know what he knows?” He laughed self-assuredly.

Suddenly, the intruders around him straightened unnaturally and fell to the ground. The speaker on Makker was buzzing, so Mr. Ilker turned it off. The idea occurred to him quite naturally to turn off the equipment on all the others as well.

He strode to the wall and stated clearly, “Ilker Replication Present. Proceed, Creator.” Eagerly, he listened to the ensuing instructions.
Before she came to live in Las Vegas, Shelby Martin had been the most infamous girl in Vernal, Utah. Her trademarks were black combat boots and a switchblade she kept in her back pocket at all times. She and her cousin, Tessa, were the scandalous girls. They smoked and drank and swore like sailors and had been caught smoking pot in the school gymnasium more than once. Some of the boys whispered the Martin girls would “go all the way” in junior high.

They dyed their hair every inhuman shade imaginable and took pride in standing outside the acceptable social circles of their home town.

When Shelby took a job on her sixteenth birthday at the Dinosaur Museum restaurant serving burgers and sodas, every boy in town spent their hard earned cash each weekend on fries and milkshakes just to get a look at her. Her self-assurance was intoxicating. She smiled at them all and made out with a few of the truly brave ones. Tessa had her fair share of admiration as well. The boys kept coming like smitten puppies at their heels even though all the parents in town chastised their sons for “courting” such loose girls.

In her seventeenth year, Shelby overheard Mrs. Jenkins, the town do-gooder, discussing her at length one afternoon in the Wal-mart with several other ladies.

“That Shelby Martin is trouble. Following in the footsteps of Tessa no doubt. Of course, Shelby’s mother is a sweet lady. I see her in church every Sunday. It’s true, she tries to be a good mother. It’s a shame she should have gotten mixed up with a boy like Andrew Martin. With a father like that, there’s no wonder Shelby is so wild. All of those Martins are bad news. Perhaps if her mother was not working like at slave at Denny’s and Village Inn to keep that ramshackle of a house, Shelby might have had a chance. But even if poor LuAnne is a sweet woman, that’s no excuse for our boys to be out cavorting with harlots.”

Shelby told Tessa the whole story and they had a good laugh together. The Martin clan had a reputation of general delinquent and incendiary behavior; the men were hoods and the women were sluts. The two girls were used to the whore label by now. The Wal-mart ladies’ daughters gave the Martin girls a daily dose of pretentious judgment at high school. With so much male attention, the Shelby and Tessa could expect little else. Every girl in town secretly prayed for some unfortunate accident to take the Martin cousins out. They stuck pins in dolls chanting the names Shelby and Tessa over and over again to no avail.

On her twenty-first birthday, Tessa declared she must see Las Vegas and brought Shelby along for the ride even though her cousin was barely nineteen. They took a Greyhound en route to Tucson and giggled
like school girls the whole way. Stepping off the bus, the girls were hit in the face with a wave of heat like a baseball bat. Las Vegas in July is an inferno. Sweat fell in beads across their lips like crawling, salty ants. The winds blew so hot they turned Shelby on, bringing her to her knees, begging for mercy.

Starstruck, they set out. The Martin girls were bright-eyed tourists, running from casino to casino in long black skirts, basking in the brilliance of so many lights. No one asked Shelby for ID when she ordered cocktail after cocktail, poolside. Men loved paying for their alcohol, their meals, their taxis. They saw the Cirque du Soleil with two business men from Ontario, California. They ate seared Ahi tuna at the Aureole in Mandalay Bay with two Norwegian tourists who wanted to meet real American girls. Shelby imagined the good times would never end in place like Las Vegas.

She told Tessa, “This is where I’m going to live someday.”

“Really? Why?”

“Why?” Shelby gave her cousin an astonished look. “Because I’m sick of our family stigma, that’s why. I’m tired of being the town fall-out girl and I want something more. Do you really want to spend the rest of your life in Vernal? All we have to look forward to in that town is a job at 7-11 and worthless husbands who will expect five kids.”

“Oh, come on Shelby…”

“Come on! You know it Tessa!”

Tessa shrugged her headstrong cousin off and downed a shot of vodka. Shelby looked up at the bright lights and made a silent vow. She wanted out of Vernal and Vegas seemed like a great place to start.

Within a year of their return, Tessa fell madly in love with a boy named Jay Kotter from Green River, Wyoming. They got married, were pregnant five seconds later and consigned themselves to work for Jay’s father, farming turkeys. Seeing her cousin, swollen in a paisley dress while her husband, drinking a Keystone and confidently groped Tessa’s hips, Shelby swore that would never be her.

Shelby packed up a few clothes, the amethyst pendant her late grandmother had given her, and a worn out copy of On the Road. She had four hundred dollars and a beat up Ford Pinto. She left a brief note on her mother’s kitchen table, knowing full well her mom would not look for her. LuAnne was working late at the old folks’ home every week night. Shelby wrote, “I love you but I won’t be coming back,” before signing her name. She lit out south, toward all those bright lights, getting high on expectation. The hour was close to midnight and the harvest moon was high in the sky. She cranked up her stereo and crooned songs like “King of the Road,” and
“Long Tall Sally” all the way there. It was October and the air crackled with electricity. Shelby hoped she would arrive on her own twenty-first birthday, a day she believed very auspicious for new beginnings.

She drove for five hours straight, stopping only to get gas, junk food and coffee. She barely took her foot off the accelerator, slowing only when she spotted a highway patrol officer ahead of her. By morning, she felt woozy yet rapturous and pinched her cheeks to keep her eyes open. The sound of cackling coyotes rising with the pink horizon echoed across vacant canyons towards her.

While the sky was still shades of purple hues, she saw lights shimmering in the distance on the flat, barren desert. Beacons beckoning to her like a lighthouse in the fog. There it was. The pink crests of dawn illuminating the city like a spotlight. She had arrived.

She checked into a Motel 6 off Dean Martin Drive for thrity bucks a night. No one asked where she came from. No one cared. She stretched out on her floral print bedspread and slept well into the evening. Shelby sat up that first night, fascinated, watching toothless prostitutes walk the streets in their leopard skin boots and their latex miniskirts. Thought seriously about buying a Beretta for home defense, then turned on the TV to some HBO series about morticians. She cranked the volume up full blast to drown out the sound of the prostitutes with their customers in the room next to hers. She filled out applications at every restaurant and bar on the Strip the following day. She had experience as a waitress, three years at the Dinosaur Brew Haus Restaurant. Someone would hire her.

The Pinto began creaking and chugging two days later. Cursing, Shelby managed to maneuver the little car to the closest mechanic shop she could find. A tall blonde with a white bandana tied around his head took her keys and went to work inspecting her car. Shelby noticed the red, shield name tag on his uniform said Kip. Clucking and shaking his head as he fretted over the engine, Shelby felt certain he was about to chastise her for the shoddy condition of her own car. Twenty minutes later he informed her that the head gasket was blown.

“How much will that cost to fix?”
“Well,” he said, scratching his forehead, “this is a really old car. It could cost anywhere from three to six hundred dollars and that’s if we can fix it.”
“What?”
“Yeah,” he said very calmly, “it’s a bitch.”
“What the hell am I going to do now?”
“You got someone who can drive you around for a while? There’s no telling how long this could take.”

“No,” she choked, “I just moved here and I don’t know anyone. Seriously, I just got here three days ago. I’m living in a motel and I haven’t found a job yet.”

He just stared at her. Kip liked the caramel tone of her voice.

“I don’t even know if I can pay you for looking at it today. I’m sorry. I’ve been looking for a job. I thought I could make it on my own down here. Oh god, I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

She was looking off in the distance, obviously talking to herself at this point. She put her hands to cover her mouth, breathing shallow and sweating. Normally, Kip would blow a situation like this off. He wasn’t big on pity, but he liked the way her pale hair looked in the sunlight, how she crossed her right ankle behind her left knee, and bit her lower lip in concentration. He liked the stringy chords of Levi hanging from her worn out mini-skirt, and the holes in her black t-shirt which revealed a turquoise bra. Looking down he smiled at the chipped purple nail polish on her toes.

“You got a name?”

“Shelby.”

“Shelby? That’s my favorite car!” He was jubilant, a juvenile look took over his face, grinning. “Did you ever see Gone in 60 Seconds? With Nicholas Cage? The Shelby G.T. 500, that’s Eleanor. You know, the Unicorn.”

Christ she thought, I’m up a creek without a paddle and this guy is asking me about movies? She felt like kicking him, and then checked herself. After all, she might need his help.

“No, I uh…I never saw that one.”

“Look,” he put his hand on her shoulder, “I got a place. Why don’t you come stay with me for a while, and I’ll look at your car when I get home, free of charge.”

Shelby stepped back with a look of both surprise and fear. Either this guy was incredibly sweet or he wanted to rape her.

“Just until you find work,” he assured her. “Shouldn’t take too long. It’s easy to find work in Vegas.”

“That’s really nice, but I don’t even know you.’

“I’m Kip; I’m a nice guy.”

Just like that. He made a statement and expected her to believe every word of it. In the back of her mind, Shelby could hear her mother’s warnings about creepy guys who would do horrible things to you if you gave them half a chance, but he seemed so sincere. He was cute too.
Beautiful, white teeth. Ice blue eyes, sparkling. All of life is filled up with taking chances.

“Alright,” she said.
“Alright.”
Shelby waited for Kip’s shift to end, pacing in the checkered lobby. He came out of the bathroom around five p.m. in clean jeans and a crisp white t-shirt.
“Ready?”
She jumped out of her seat and followed him to his car in the back.

“Do you need to pick anything up from the motel?”
“No,” she said, “everything I own I keep in my car. I didn’t want my stuff to get stolen while I was out.”
“Well, grab it. We’ll get my friend, Jake, to bring your car to my house with his tow truck tomorrow.”

Shelby gathered up her back packs and followed him to his car, second-guessing herself every step of the way. On the drive to Kip’s house, she sat cocked like a revolver; her palms were sweaty, her eyes trained to the door handle. If he tried anything, she’d jump out in a heartbeat. His soaped-up, white Corvette barely cleared the ground anyway. She didn’t think the fall would be too hard. Kip seemed oblivious to her nerves, smoking a Newport and bobbing his head to Eminem. She allowed herself to relax…a little.

“So, how’d you get your name?” she tried making light conversation.

“My Mom really liked Kipling,” he said. “She was kind of weird that way. My full name is Rudyard Kipling Barnett. She used to read that story about the mongoose to me when I was a kid. Rikki Tikki Tavi. How’d you get yours?”

“Nothing special. My Dad picked it, but he died in a car accident when I was three so I never got a chance to ask him.”

“Why’d you come to Vegas?”
She swallowed. Flash of a one horse town, no opportunities, condescending uptight girls, disapproving elders, married women with too many children, living in the trailer park, and the Martin social stigma.

“Seemed as good a place as any when you’re trying to get away.”
“Okay.”
“My Mom and I don’t really get along. She thinks I’m immoral.”
“Religious?”
“Yep.”
“Let me guess,” he chuckled, “Idaho?”
“No. Utah.”
“Even worse.”
“Are you immoral?” he turned a quizzical brow her way, hoping to make her laugh.
Shelby huffed, blowing her bangs out of her eyes.
“Can we talk about something else?”
“Okay.”
She waited for him to change topics but he said nothing, so she remained silent. Shelby noticed each home was within arms reach of the other. Packed in like sheep. No lawn. No flowers. Only block after block of desert landscaping. Beige and amber. Cattle skeletons and cactus. Jettisoned cars strewn on every corner. Very different from the glitz and glam of the tourist saturated Strip.
“Not exactly like being put up in the Bellagio is it?” Kip asked.
“It’s alright,” she muddled. “I mean, this is how real Las Vegans live right?”
He laughed.
“No. Real Las Vegans live in shit-hole, ratty apartments down on crack avenue. This is a nice neighborhood.”
They pulled into a crumbling drive-way riddled with crevices and hardy weeds peaking up through the cracks. Little yellow flowers and green vines. Kip lived in the basement of a pink stucco rambler on the East Side. His best friend, Sean, owned the house with his wife Natalie. Sean and Natalie were trying to pay off their mortgage by renting. Sean and Kip’s camaraderie had been symbiotic, fostered since high school. Best friends for life. Kip’s ex-girlfriend, Abbey, had just moved out citing chronic lack of ambition on Kip’s part to their doomed relationship. She was a vegetarian who worked at Lone Star Steakhouse and dreamed of becoming a croupier at the Luxor. Abbey had a pretty face Kip said, but was flawed with neurotic tendencies. Kip explained all this as he walked toward the door of the basement, down three cement stairs.
“Do you need to ask your friend first? About me staying with you?”
“No,” Kip stated as a matter of fact. “Sean doesn’t ask me questions.”
There was a kitchen with hard wood floors and dozens of empty vodka bottles lining the cupboards, a brown leather sofa, an enormous TV, a Playstation, oodles of CDs and DVDs stacked alongside a massive stereo and walls plastered with Americana kitsch; Pink Floyd, a glow-in-the dark mushroom swirl, the Grateful Dead, Dr. Dre.
“Home sweet home.”
Kip threw his keys in a dish full of marbles, spreading his arms wide to emphasize the digs.

“You can sleep on the couch,” he pointed to the sofa. “I’d give you my room but there’s so much stuff in there, it would take weeks to make it decent.”

“That’s okay.”

“Well, make yourself cozy.”

Sean and Natalie were sweet; far more hospitable than the hypocritical lot back home. They welcomed her without question. Sean was lanky, with a shaved head, and too many tattoos who also worked as a mechanic at Toyota. He and Kip made Shelby’s Pinto a pet project to be fussed over and frowned upon with boyish delight. Natalie was a quiet, graceful beauty with long chestnut hair. She worked at Spago’s, an über trendy Nuevo restaurant in the forum shops mall at Caesar’s Palace. Within a week of moving in, Natalie got Shelby a serving job there.

Shelby kept looking for an apartment, but Natalie wouldn’t hear of it. She had very few female friends and warmed at the prospect of adopting this guileless transplant. She showed Shelby all the great consignment shops and music stores off the Strip. They became easy pals. They liked sharing dinner and shopping together. Some nights, the four of them lit bottle rockets off into the open sky, eyes illuminated by the bursting explosions. No one ever worried about the cops coming. It took a lot to get in trouble in Las Vegas.

Working at Spago’s was fascinating. Shelby’s prior waiting experience had not prepared her for it. At Spago’s she had to memorize a wine list twenty pages long. Appetizers consisting of crab stuffed mushrooms, calamari and Asian pear salad. The customers appeared elegant, in black suits and ankle length dresses. Women oozing expensive perfumes.

“They’re all fake,” Natalie told her one day in the kitchen. “It’s all a ploy. Most of these people are yuppies pretending to be big time. They’ll go home to their suburban house, their three kids plus dog and their mind numbing jobs, feeling like they got something special in Vegas. The real high-rollers wouldn’t sully themselves at a restaurant in the forum shops.”

They had Shelby fooled, but she was still new here.

Many things shocked her about Vegas. For one, no one seemed to think her extraordinary at all. In Vernal, she could set a room on fire with gossip simply by walking through. Here, her behavior was not scandalous or even interesting. In fact, many people accused her of being a prude. If only Tessa could hear that, she thought. Imagine a Martin girl being called prudish.
Though Shelby met different men through work and dance clubs, none of them struck her as particularly remarkable and they were too hasty. In Vernal, most boys quivered in her presence. Here, men were offended if she did not want to go home with them the first night they met. Only Kip seemed to ignore her altogether. He was courteous and more than eager to help her repair her damaged Pinto, but he rarely treated her with any more disparity than Natalie.

Over time, Shelby found him more and more appealing and despaired at his lack of attention. He was polite and fun to be around even if he had terrible taste in music and his smile was contagious. She took extra care with her appearance when she knew they would be home together and interrogated Natalie about Kip’s likes and dislikes when it came to women. Natalie immediately recognized Shelby was falling in love with him long before it occurred to Shelby herself. She smiled and decided to keep her little secret for the time being.

Shelby stayed up watching _Twilight Zone_ episodes with him in her sexy, but not so obvious, pajamas. He snuggled with her on occasion but nothing more. She found it ironic that the one man she had finally found worth more than her usual condescending, limited, discern was the one who barely noticed she was alive.

Kip was well aware of Shelby’s tactics but had also recognized within a few days of living with her, a spoilt nature when it came to men. He imagined she must have always been one of those girls men would do anything for and left her in suspense about his own feelings to heighten her desire. Sean and Natalie felt the room spark with tension any time Shelby and Kip were in one together. The butter began to melt whenever Shelby was in the kitchen. Kip’s alarm clocks malfunctioned every other day. Cats sat outside the basement windowsill serenading the whole neighborhood with their wretched love songs.

One night, the four of them went to a bonfire party in the wash-out beyond the city limits. There must have been a river flowing through those willowy bushes once, but now there was just the shell of a dead river. Dried up like everything else scorched by the unrelenting sun. A bunch of hippies were gathered round a kindled blaze, singing “Wish You Were Here,” to acoustic guitar. Peasant shirts and broomstick skirts. Bonfires pirouetting like ballerinas.

Shelby and Kip shared a joint mixed with ecstasy. She drew a big hit and suddenly the sky came alive. She could taste the wind—all smoke and sage—and feel the tiny grains of sand caress her ankles. She wanted to dance on the fire. She couldn’t stop touching her own skin. Someone handed her a Corona and it was the best beer she had ever tasted. She
wandered away from the group and sat alone by a Joshua tree—lay on her back so she could contemplate the stars. She wondered if Tessa was looking at this same sky back home in Vernal. The full moon looked so big she thought she could touch it.

Footsteps approached her from the west and Kip sat beside her in the dark. He reached for her hand and she let him. He lay down in the sand next to her and turned her chin towards his face, then kissed her ever so lightly. Shelby had been kissed by many men before, but never like this. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end. She tried to think of something to say to him, but all conversation eluded her. As he unbuttoned her shirt and kissed her throat, he whispered, “Don’t think,” into her ear. And so she didn’t.

Years later, she would remember this moment as the turning point in her life, when courage pushed her forward into the arms of fate.
When my mom walked into my room, I could sense her disappointment in me for not listening to her, and knew I was about to get the talk. It wasn’t the usual talk that mothers gave disobedient children, reprimanding and punishing; instead, mom gave the happy memories talk. It always started with “Remember when…” and went on from there. By the time she was done, she had covered the best times of my childhood and had me feeling pretty guilty about what I’d done to put a kink in the good times.

As I lie on my bed, mom walked over to my window, released a deep sigh, and said, “Oh Lacey, I just don’t know what to say. If only you’d listened. Remember when . . .” and then it began. I would always be still and listen as mom reminisced. That was best for the guilty party, and this time would be no different. If there was something I wanted to say back to her, I would have to say it silently.

Mom continued, “I was two weeks past my due date with you and very eager for your arrival. When the time finally came, I hollered for your dad to grab my things, and we rushed out to the garage. As we stepped out the door, we looked at each other in a panic. We had a flat tire. It was our only vehicle, and we were stuck. I was going to call grandma, but with his adrenaline pumping, dad said he could change the tire faster than she could get here. I’ve never seen your dad move so fast. He had the tire changed in record time, and lucky that he did, because you arrived exactly seven minutes after we entered the hospital doors. What a beautiful baby you were, so soft and content. Little did I know it would only be short time before you started showing your stubborn, independent side.”

Ya, I thought. I guess it didn’t last long. For as long as I can remember, I’ve been a free spirit; unpredictable and headstrong. But I get that from your good example Mom. I’ve always wanted to be just like you; those are your strengths.

“And then”, she went on, “there was that time when you were three years old. I took you into McGuire’s clothing store with me because I needed to make an exchange. While I was at the checkout counter you wandered toward the back of the store. I thought you were going to find the big mirror by the dressing rooms that you loved to look at yourself in when we shopped there. I should have kept a closer eye on you. After I finished my exchange, I found you in the children’s section, stark naked, with the biggest smile on your face! You pointed to the pile of clothes on the floor all around you and said, “Mommy, I need you buy all these pretty stuffs for me.” I was so embarrassed. I quickly got you dressed and gathered the clothes into a pile, and then rushed out the door. You were always doing things that turned my face bright red.”
I was laughing on the inside. I had heard that story so many times I’d lost count, and each time was funnier than the last. I’m sorry I embarrassed you, Mom, but it does make a great memory, doesn’t it?

“You were so unpredictable. You can’t forget the time when you were five and you and your little brother were outside playing. I suddenly heard the front door slam and you screamed, ‘Mom! Mom! Hurry!’ I ran to see what the matter was and saw you jumping up and down in a panic, pointing out the front room window at your brother, who was being licked to death by the neighbors saint bernard. You shrieked, ‘Help Zach, Mom! It’s tasting him! It’s tasting him! Help him! I started laughing so hard at your reaction; I could hardly walk outside to save him from the beastly doggie bath he was receiving. He was so little and frightened by Jaws, who was appropriately named. Your concern for Zach was genuine, but you weren’t about to rescue him from the enormous creature.”

Zach was a slobbery mess after Jaws got done with him. That was hilarious! Well, not at the time, but we’ve had good laughs about it since then. And luckily, Zach was little enough that it didn’t traumatize him too much. I love Zach, Mom. He’s the best little brother a girl could ever ask for.

It was working. As mom continued with the stories of my childhood, and the sweet, funny girl I was, I was feeling more and more guilty for what I’d done. I wished I could take it back. I wished I could have a do-over and make a better choice, but I couldn’t. I kept quiet as mom continued.

“Then when you were about ten and dad was teaching you how to ride the horse, you nearly gave me a heart attack! Gus was being so calm, letting you guide him around the pasture and practice your riding techniques. You just had to stir up trouble by kicking him in the side as hard as you could. The poor horse took off like a flash of lightning! I started screaming at your dad to stop him, afraid that you were going to fall off and get hurt! Dad was frantic, running after you and yelling at you to pull back on the reigns. But what were you doing? Kicking Gus more and laughing. ‘Faster Gus, Faster!’ you yelled, and Gus kept going. By the time we got things under control I was so mad at you. You had frightened us more than ever before. Dad and I were terrified! But you thought it was the best ride of your life. After that fiasco, you’re lucky we ever let you get back on a horse, ever!”

I loved hearing that story. Gus was my favorite out of the four horses we owned. I rode him more than mom and dad ever knew. I would sneak out at night and go to the barn to brush him and talk to him. Sometimes I would ride him around the pasture a couple of times before
going back inside. We became secret friends, and that is how I knew I was safe when he took off that day. We trusted each other.

I missed Gus. He died right after Christmas when I was fourteen. I hoped there was a grand Horse Heaven where he would be welcomed and taken care of.

“Later that same day, mom went on, you and Zach were at your grandma’s playing in the tree hut. The National Guard was doing training in the field next the house, and Grandma and I watched out the kitchen window and laughed as our nation’s most valiant and honorable men would sneak up to the tree and ask you and your brother where the men on the other team were hiding. Getting into the spirit of the game, you would point and tell them exactly where the men could be found, giving their team the advantage and the win. You little stinkers!”

Oh, those were great times, Mom. Zach and I were part of the Guard. The men even rewarded us with official National Guard stickers one day. Remember that? We were so proud! Maybe that is the reason Zach has such a desire to join when he gets old enough. We looked up to those men and the great things they did for our country.

“Lacey, I just wish things were different. I wish you would have listened!”

Mom was crying now. I wanted to cry, but didn’t. I knew she just needed to keep talking and work through her disappointment in me. She would focus on the positive, and that would give her the strength to forgive me for being so stupid. I loved my mom so much, and I wanted to reach out to her, to tell hug her and tell her I was sorry, but I couldn’t.

“I’ll never forget the day you went to your Junior Prom. You were so beautiful as you descended down the stairs in your glistening pink dress. Your hair was perfect, your smile was perfect, you were perfect. When you were younger you would watch the Disney princess movies and go around the house singing ‘Someday my prince will come . . .’ over and over. You always dreamed of putting on a ball gown and dancing around the room with your prince. That night you did, and you were stunning.”

Mom started to cry again. I wanted to comfort her.

“After that night you told me you couldn’t wait to find the perfect guy who would be your husband, so that you could wear the perfect wedding dress and dance around the room again like a princess.”

More crying.

My dad and Zach walked into my room. Mom turned around walked over to them. She put her arms around dad, hugging him and sobbing into his shirt. Her fingers curled around his T-shirt and he began to cry too. Zach joined in. The doctor then walked into the room.
“Mr. and Mrs. Langston, it’s time.”
“No,” cried my mom, “not yet.”
“Honey, it’s time. We have to let her go,” said my dad.
More crying.
“I can’t. I was just talking to her about the good times, I was just reminding her of the funny memories I have. I want more of those memories! I want more!”

My mom and dad cried together and held each other. A couple of minutes passed. The doctor waited patiently until the time was right to speak again.

“Mr. and Mrs. Langston, she won’t feel any pain. The process may take a few minutes after I shut the machine off, but she hasn’t shown any brain activity for a very long time now, so she won’t be able feel anything.”

Zach and my mom and dad sat on either side of my bed. I could see them from where I was, beside my body. I could hear everything that was going on. I loved them all so much. I was so sorry that my life had to be cut short like this. The night it happened was snowy and cold. I had just been on a ski day with eight other kids from my school. The driver of the van tried to stay in control, but the road was too slick and we veered off, head-on into a truck in on-coming traffic. Everyone but me made it out with only minor injuries.

Mom had asked me not to go that day. She couldn’t give me a reason. She just had a feeling. It was the last trip of the season. I didn’t want to miss it. I begged her to let me go, reassuring her that everything would be all right. I talked her into it. I should have listened to her warning. I shouldn’t have carried on like I did. I hoped she wouldn’t blame herself. It was my fault.

“If there’s anything you’d like to say first,” said the doctor, and then nodded his head.

“Lacey,” dad cried, “I want you to know how much we love you. You have brought so much happiness into our lives. The eighteen years that we had you were the best years of our lives. You are our little angel, our sweet baby girl. We’ll miss you so much! We think about you every day and look forward to the time we’ll meet again. We love you baby.”

“I love you so much, my princess,” mom said as her throat cracked and the tears flowed down her cheeks, “I’ll always, always love you.”

“I love you Lacey,” Zach sobbed as he laid his head on my arm, “I’ll miss you.”
My dad let go of my hand, and my mom ran her fingers over my face, I wished I could tell them how much I loved them.

The doctor stood beside my bed, looked at my parents one last time with heartfelt sympathy, and then turned to shut off the machine. I watched and listened as the sound of the pumping air made a suction noise and went silent. My family stood at the end of my bed holding each other. The numbers on the heart monitor and the blood pressure machine slowly decreased and within minutes, I took my last breath. As I did, the room became brighter and brighter. I was not afraid.

Mom, I whispered, it’s so beautiful and peaceful. I can feel so much love surrounding me. Please don’t worry about me. Everything is so perfect here. I will be waiting for you and dad and Zach when it’s time. Take care of each other. Love each other. Know how much I love you all and will miss you. Always ‘remember when.’

As I turned to go, my mother’s hand touched the side of her face and I knew she had felt me there with her.
I stand at my kitchen sink, lost in a fog, methodically washing the breakfast dishes. “The papers for your divorce are filed,” my attorney said.

I am numb as I hang up the phone, not recalling if I said goodbye. Blankly, I gaze out the window at my two beautifully, giggling daughters, gliding on the swings, back and forth. Their long hair floats behind, dancing on air with every forward move. Now, the dishwater has gone cold. I haven’t noticed. All while the word “divorce” bounces off the corners of my mind, triggering a cascade of memories - memories from a lifetime ago when my sisters and I first learned the meaning of divorce.

I was barely four when Mom and Dad divorced. My two sisters and I were awarded to the custody of our mother. Consequently, Mom took her legal right to move us girls out of state, away from home, leaving us only summer breaks to spend with Dad. Our family was forever broken.

Even when I try, I can only recall a few memories of us all under one roof: I remember once drinking chocolate syrup right out of the can from the fridge door. Tilting back the tin can, while sticking my tongue through the hand made triangle openings on top. I must’ve dripped it onto the kitchen floor beneath the fridge, and I am sure it was still on my face, but I was probably closer to four than five, and I wouldn’t have known what traces I left behind. Then my dad asked who had gotten into the chocolate syrup. I lied to him and said, “Not me.”

My dad, with his finger, wiped a bit of the chocolate off of my face then put his finger in his mouth and said, “This is the best tasting mud I’ve ever had.” He smiled then hugged me. No scolding.

The backyard of our first home had about a dozen or so orchard trees which my dad loved pruning. Once he bought us Bubbalicous Bubble Gum, opened up the packages and then hid the pieces into the crooked branches of the baby orchard trees. Holly, Heather, and I ran from tree to tree branch finding all of the pieces. After Dad’s work was finished, he’d give us a ride in the old red wheel barrow down to the corner of our street. On that corner, opposite the junior high, was The Pie Dump, an old neighborhood store. We would buy candy lipsticks, the colored chalk kind, with a matching plastic cover. I would pretend to be Miss. Piggy while I caked the spit-filled chalk onto my lips. Dad would say, “What a beautiful color you’re wearing.” I would’ve loved to have been raised by my father.

I don’t remember the actual moment my dad moved out. I just remember, before we moved out of state, Mom dropped us off at my dad’s apartment one weekend. Mom stood in his doorway, reading off some list of things to do that was written on some important yellow sheet of paper. I can still see her angry face, and I was scared and unsure of what was going
to happen next. Dad tried to hug us and welcome us in; all the while, Mom was insisting that he listen to her, pay attention to her.

The next memory that comes to mind was meeting her next husband, husband number three. All of us were parked in Mom’s car, my sisters and I in the big backseat. The sun shone down straight into the window to where I had to shade my eyes. Suddenly the glaring sun was blocked by a guy who came to Mom’s window. My eyes were still adjusting to the sudden darkness, and I couldn’t see his face clearly, but I noticed he wasn’t as tall as Dad. I could tell because he didn’t have to bend over nearly as far when he stuck his head inside of the car and gave Mom a kiss. I heard the smack, and I couldn’t believe a stranger was kissing Mom. I didn’t like it, and I wanted Dad. That didn’t matter. Soon after, we were moving, to Washington and Short Guy, husband number three, came along.

Moving and marriages, they’re what I remember. I became a spectator and unwilling participant in my mom’s addiction: euphoria, that great feeling Mom got when she first met a guy, or when Mom forced us to move somewhere exciting. As soon as this wore off, she was gangbusters to find her new fix. My mom needed euphoria. I can’t recall a time that we weren’t on the move or being introduced to a potential step dad. Living with Mom didn’t feel like home, didn’t feel safe, and she never slowed down fast enough to realize she made us feel this way.

There was a certain time when Mom was truly crazy; we were moving and she was marrying faster than we could even unpack from our previous life. Lots and lots of unfinished lives, that’s how it felt. There were so many husbands and even the occasional live-in. One was Slimy Lizard, whose head looked like a fuzzy red toupee, and another held the world record for the longest kiss during the Lake Placid Olympics. His entire body stank of onions, and I never could imagine anyone wanting to kiss him that long. Another guy, Tube Sock, wore striped tube socks all the way up to his kneecaps. I was always embarrassed to be seen with him. With the Gay Guy, Mom had no clue; how could she, they only dated for a couple of weeks. And Cokehead, thankfully, only lasted a couple of months. Like clockwork, every new season brought us a new address and some new brand of shaving cream in the medicine cabinet. I was relieved when husband number five, Tom, showed up at our door.

I could tell right away he was kind - like the way a dog can sniff out a good owner. Considering the bar hadn’t been set very high, Tom was most like what I would consider a dad. Closer than anything I had had in a long time, as long as it had been since I had seen my real dad. Tom loved baseball, telling jokes and barbequing everything. He wore flip flops and
the short sporty kind of corduroy Op shorts. I think he had a pair in every color. He wore those shorts and flip flops all year long, even when he cooked steaks and chicken outside in the middle of December. He drank though. He drank a lot. I mostly remember him outside relaxing over the BBQ with a cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth and his drink resting on the table section of the barbeque. He could’ve juggled spatulas, plated of chicken, and tubs of BBQ sauce, all while talking and never once did his cigarette fall from his mouth.

He drank vodka, vodka with orange juice and 7up. I can see his glass now, sweat dripping down and the ingredients separating with the alcohol settling to the bottom. In the summer, he would watch us jump on the trampoline and help us count how many back flips we could do in a row. Once I did seven. He also taught me how to make potato salad, the good kind with lots of eggs and a little bit of mustard. Mom and Tom fought though – fought a lot, about some things I can’t quite remember, but mostly about money and his drinking.

When my mother left Tom, Holly and I went with him. I think we figured that at least we knew what Tom’s problems were. We wouldn’t know what Mom’s next guy would have to offer. So, we moved with Tom into a condo next to our high school. I was fourteen and Holly was sixteen. My other sister, Heather, two years younger then I, went to live with a family we knew from church. My youngest sister, Robin, was the only one left with Mother, probably because of the five hundred dollars a month in child support Mom received from Short Guy. Dad, her second marriage, only paid seventy five dollars per kid for the three of us; our dad didn’t make as much money as Robin’s dad. As we grew up, we became a bigger liability than asset to Mom. To her, we weren’t worth as much. How does one survive knowing what you’re worth? How does one survive knowing this when you’re fourteen?

After only a few months with Tom, I quickly caught on to the evening routine of a drinker: Come home, mix the first drink, don’t talk much and flip the channels impatiently. Second or third drink, begin talking, make a couple of jokes. Third or fourth drink, decide not to eat dinner with us, act or say something that just doesn’t make sense, enveloping the room with personality, causing others to be cautious - bewildered.

After the seventh drink, finally eat dinner and stumble off to bed. Once, before passing out, he took all the food and shelves out of the fridge and got inside just to prove he could. Everyday was like our own private coaster, and quickly, we learned how to roll.
I didn’t have my driver’s license and Tom knew that, but he would have me drive him anyway. I would take him to the dry cleaners, the grocery store and the liquor store. Those are the only places he ever wanted to go. Every time I would make a mistake behind the wheel of his big brown Cadillac, he would tell me, “That is strike one. You only get three strikes and then you are out.” More than once I made it to strike six, but he never enforced the out rule. He and I both knew I was better behind the wheel than he would’ve been. Holly and I always had his checkbook, and therefore we did the shopping. Every once in a while we would give the checkbook back to him long enough to sign a few checks, then he would hand it back to us and say something like, “Don’t spend it all in one place,” or “Don’t forget to buy me some toothpaste next time you’re out.” Things were as good as they could be for a couple of kids living with an alcoholic that wasn’t our father.

Until one fall night, Tom brought home a girlfriend; she was nice, quiet and shy, much different than my mother. She wasn’t as pretty as my mother - she was plain without the kind of color or presence that Mom had. Maybe Tom’s girlfriend was just normal, just not the kind of normal I knew. Now that I am a middle-aged woman, I realize how sexy and vibrant Mom must have been - five foot seven, mostly legs, maybe one hundred and twenty pounds, perfect face shaped by sassy short brown hair. Not the mousey brown kind, more reddish. Mom was always the biggest personality in the room. For being beautiful, Mom constantly needed to be reminded of how good she looked or how funny she was.

Tom’s girlfriend started coming around more often, and before we knew it, she had moved in. He never told us we had to go; he never said the actual words, yet, Holly and I just knew. But where could we have gone? We knew Mom was out of the question because she was dating some guy who barely tolerated Robin. The family Heather was living with could barely afford her, and most importantly, neither one of us ever wanted to go back to strange, foster homes like before. So, a week later my sister and I found a one-bedroom apartment next to the Mall. We were officially on our own.

I can’t remember who owned the truck we used to move with, but I keep thinking it belonged to my mom’s new boyfriend; anyhow, I just remember taking our one queen size bed and the bedroom dresser that matched it, four plates, two bowls, and some old mismatched spoons and forks.

Later that day, Mom brought us over an old television and a metal stand, all the while, she was crying and acting like she was the one who was the child left out on her own to survive. Like usual, Holly and I began
consoling her, telling her that we were okay and that she wasn’t a bad mom because her new boyfriend didn’t want all of us kids. We told her that we were just fine, and that we liked our apartment and living on our own was going to be okay. At least she brought us our child support: seventy-five dollars each.

For me, that was the end. I have never looked back and acknowledged her since as my Mother. I only see her as a distant deranged relative; one whom I’m compelled to see twice a year: Christmas and her birthday.

Now that housing had been taken care of, food became the newest priority. Later that week, we found a pizza place that would deliver one large pizza for ten bucks. We didn’t have a car, so cheap delivery was perfect.

Our apartment was only four blocks from the mall. My sister already had a job there in a jewelry store, so I found a job at the Grill Restaurant down the hall. I was a bus boy - or girl, I guess. I made $3.25 an hour, plus the servers split their nightly tips with me, making me about twenty dollars a day, barely enough money to pay half of the rent, thus keeping the fear of foster homes at bay. The Grill’s juke box played cool music, music that I had never really heard or appreciated before. Everyone who worked there seemed to be cool, like someone I wanted to be. I was only fifteen. I didn’t know what I wanted, but this felt right. All the employees smoked, so I started too. The waitresses wore hemp bracelets, silver rings on their fingers, and chopstick barrettes in their hair. I wanted to look like that, but I didn’t have any of those things. They talked about what party they were going to that night and whom they were hoping to hook up with. The big difference was they had parents to go home to, someone to protect them from their definite stupidity. Holly and I didn’t have this. I found myself sleeping in later and later. I didn’t get off work until about twelve thirty in the morning and I started going out with the waitresses or cooks afterwards. I quickly began to make myself look older and act older. I must’ve pulled it off because it wasn’t long before I scored a fake i.d. and started sneaking into bars.

Loud and smokey, my first bar, The Bar and Grill, was a major college hangout. I got up on the stage and sang with the Gammarays, “Blister in the Sun” by the Violent Femmes. I couldn’t believe that I wasn’t kicked out, and I remember the whispers between the bar tender and the bouncer as they watched me. Later that night, a fight broke out in the ladies’ room. Some girl cracked a beer bottle across a bathroom sink and then sliced another girl’s face with it. Blood poured from the V-shaped gashes carved in her face. I had never seen so much blood before; it was
so red compared to the white tiled walls where the roll up hand towel hung. Blood was everywhere. Holly grabbed me and we ran. I never knew if the cops or ambulance showed up first. This “first” scared me. Instantly, I knew that girl could’ve easily had been me - someone could do this to me. I realize now the only thing that saved me, time and again, was the fact that I was scared.

I don’t think I had been to my sophomore classes in over a month. I started taking day shifts and working doubles. I was working so much my manager just started paying me under the table. I remember one time at the Grill - it was our slow time, around three-thirty in the afternoon - I was standing on a chair, having just erased and washed the blackboard above the juke box, I began writing the dinner specials. I wanted the writing to be nice, maybe even little curley cues on the letters. As I was finishing writing the words, “steamed clams in herbs and butter,” I turned to see that three of my seven teachers had sat in the booth by the buss boy bar. There was no way to miss them - who was I kidding; the Grill wasn’t that big of a restaurant! There wasn’t any place to hide.

My biology teacher looked up and over her menu and noticed me; she remembered my name. At that moment I tried to remember where my biology book was. I hadn’t seen it for months. She asked me how I was doing, and I didn’t know what to say. I felt like telling her everything, telling her how our mom didn’t want us, how Tom had found a girlfriend, and how I hadn’t seen my dad in six years. I wanted to tell her that my apartment was just down the street, that we didn’t have a couch or anything like that, but she could come over and see it. I wanted to tell her that I really liked her class and wished I wasn’t so lazy to walk the mile and a half to school every morning. I could probably cut through the Smith’s parking lot and save some time. I could probably get to school on time, but I had to be to work by three o’clock. I couldn’t walk home that fast, change my clothes and be to work on time. My face felt hot standing alone high up on that chair and I was scared. I finally told her that I was doing fine and yes we did move. She asked me, “Where?” I couldn’t lie and I replied by saying just down the street. She looked bewildered, and I am sure she wondered why I hadn’t been in school. Not long after that encounter, something bigger than myself, but still inside of me, told me to stop, slow down, and get some help.

I only remember that I woke up in my bed, somewhat hung over and not remembering how I got home the night before. Wondering where Holly was, I got up to go to the bathroom and saw a guy, I didn’t recognize, passed out on the hall floor. I stepped over him and made my way into the bathroom. As I was sitting on the toilet, I turned my
Epiphany
Short Fiction
Heidi Ferguson-Cutrubus

shoulders so I could look into the mirror. The person in the mirror grabbed my attention - that person wasn’t me. Her eyes looked different, her face fake and unrecognizable, and the mascara left dark black circles around her eyes. She was like a ghost and the ghost told me to call my dad. I don’t know where the idea came from. I hadn’t been thinking about him, I hadn’t considered he might be an alternative before. I didn’t even know where he was.

Later that day, about an hour before my shift started, I picked up the phone and called information. Having not seen Dad in six years, I didn’t know if he still lived in the same house. I didn’t know if he was still a school teacher. I didn’t know if he even wanted to talk to me. I figured I could try to reach his mother. Grandma and Grandpa wouldn’t have moved. Information gave me the number to Grandma Beth’s house, and I started to dial. As the phone was ringing, I wondered if Grandma’s number was still a party line and four of her neighbors were also going to pick up the phone. Grandma picked up.

―Hello,‖ she said. I froze. I thought maybe she might be mad at me for what happened six years ago, and maybe she didn’t want me to call. Maybe she didn’t remember me?

―Grandma,‖ I said, a little unsure about even calling her Grandma. “Jessica, is that you?” she said. She knew my name; I couldn’t believe she remembered me. How did she know it was me?

―Yes, it is me,‖ I answered. I went ahead and asked her if she knew the number to my dad’s house and if she would give it to me. I asked her if my dad still lived in the same place. She told me he did, and that my dad had Air Force reserves this weekend, but as soon as he got home that night she would call him and make sure he called me back. I gave her my number, and she told me that she was so glad to have heard from me and that she loved us girls. She said she couldn’t wait for my dad to see us. I thanked her and thought that wasn’t so bad as I hung up the phone. I picked up my bag, locked the front door, and started my walk to work.

The next day I talked to my dad. The conversation flowed easily and it wasn’t hard to tell him about our living situation, not like it was to the table full of teachers before. I don’t remember him ever asking if I wanted to come and live with him, but rather how soon could we move? I must’ve asked him to come that weekend and get us, but he told me he couldn’t - Grandma Beth died and her funeral was in a couple of days. I didn’t know what to say; I had just talked to her, talked to her for the first time in years, she couldn’t die. I wanted to ask him when, “When did she
die?” After all these years, I never have asked my dad how soon after I talked to Grandma did she die? Somehow, in my mind that question is off limits, like perhaps answering it will prove that I did her in by calling her out of the blue, after so long. Grandma suffered from a rare kidney disease and her transplant didn’t take. She had been sick for a long time. Really, I was blessed to have had that last chance to speak with her.

When Dad finally came, he pulled up in front of the apartment and got out to help us put our duffle bag in the trunk, I looked at him for the first time in a really long time, trying to see what I remembered. His face looked the same, no new wrinkles, although he had less of his sandy blonde hair, which was blowing sideways in the wind. His eyes were cool blue - just like Heather’s, and his nose bumpy - just like Holly’s. We all looked alike and I knew we belonged to him.

He smiled and I could tell he was as excited to see us as were to see him. On the way home he let me drive his car - the same car I remember, his white Datsun 210 with a hatch back and two doors. Dad’s car even smelled the same as I remembered - of Brute’ cologne and leather. He never once told me, “Strike one,” like Tom did.

Next Dad packed up the few possessions we had and then went to find Heather who was still with the family from church. He took us home - back to the same childhood home, to the same friends who remembered us better then we remembered them, to the same orchard trees in the yard, now only bigger. Dad helped set up our bedroom; we even had the same bunk beds from when we were little and this little connection was comforting. I was so relieved to be there and so angry that we weren’t there sooner. For us, this was the first time that we stayed an entire school year at one school – no moving. It was also the first time I knew that my sisters and I weren’t going to have to live without Dad again.

I began to embrace my new role as a teenager; I started going to dances, movies and all the other normal teenage stuff. Dad even bought motorcycles, and we spent most weekends in the mountains riding and camping. For the first time, “something new” wasn’t frightening. We were experiencing unconditional love. I also never had to worry about Dad drinking. Dr. Pepper was the hardest drink in the house. For three and a half years, my life was normal and this is what saved me.

I awaken from my own memories of divorce to hear the back door open, and in bounce my precious girls. “Mom,” calls Sophie, “When are we going to Grandpa’s?”

“Soon,” I reply, “Now go find your shoes.”
“Grandpa’s,” … their casual reference is my everything, and I am thankful my dad will be there to help me raise my girls, as I seek to find my new normal.
My younger sister and I were not friends until high school. We were too consumed with competing for Dad’s attention. You see, our mother died in a car accident when Fria and I were toddlers and Dad never recovered from the shock. I suppose some siblings might be closer after a trauma. We were more like planets orbiting the sun, revolving around the warm glow of the mother we could never touch. I felt stifled with questions, but Dad wouldn’t even talk about himself, so I could hardly expect him to talk about the woman who caused his deepest pain. He spent long hours at work to avoid home – and us. The few minutes of attention Dad gave us formed our silent rivalry…at least until our social discomfort was stronger.

I first noticed my sister’s beauty at our high school drill team tryouts. Her bright blonde hair, pink lips and ocean-blue eyes were muted by her poor self-esteem. She was tall for her age, giving a warped weapon to jealous peers. Compared to my dull-auburn hair and brown eyes, she was a goddess…only Fria couldn’t see it. But as she danced that day, she looked more confident than any time I’d ever seen. She seemed relaxed, focused, passionate. I was so proud of her.

“Bridget, I did it!” Fria exclaimed.
I hugged her close; shocked to realize the love I felt for her. “You were wonderful!”
Her eyes dimmed, “But, there are so many great dancers here…and we have to wait until tomorrow for the judges’ decisions.”
“They’d be crazy not to pick you.”
“Well, it wouldn’t be any fun without you dancing next to me, Bridge. Good Luck!”

With a quick hug from my sister, I ran to the middle of the gym for my tryout. I blocked out the smell of sweaty sneakers and zoned into my routine, allowing my body to express the natural rhythm of my soul. Soaked in sweat, I ran back to my sister for comfort.

“What do you think Dad would say if we both made the team?” Fria asked.
“He’d be the happiest guy around!”
I gathered my backpack and water bottle and we began our walk home. I realized I didn’t care as much what he thought. I didn’t need his approval on this. Dancing brought me joy, it gave Fria confidence, and it was a safe space for us to finally begin a friendship.

We both made the team and I was happy to share the experience with Fria. Our confidence grew and I liked having a friend nearby. We choreographed together, participated in competitions at dance camp, and we even performed at the spring talent show. It was a great bonding experience; our trials seemed easier as we danced through the year.
This was also the year that each of us had our first experience with love...or what we thought it was. My boyfriend, Jack, was like a puppy; following me around with glossy brown eyes and not thinking on his own very often. He smelled lightly of Pi cologne. Most high school boys reeked of cologne – as if they showered in the stuff. He was very sweet in the beginning, but I got bored and wanted my freedom. So, that was the end of my first romance.

Fria started dating a senior named Kris. I could tell she was flattered by the attentions of an upper classman. I was concerned. When he spoke, his brown eyes seemed to turn black and his smiling lips looked more like a snarl. He acted like the world revolved around him; this especially applied to Fria. I saw how controlling he was about small things and figured he probably demanded more when they were alone. My suspicion grew when I noticed a bruise on her back when we were swimming one day.

“What happened to your back?” I asked.

“Nothing, I…I just bumped into the metal cage in the locker room after practice.”

“Well, it looks like it hurts…um, I don’t remember you getting hurt,” I insisted.

“Yeah, I think you were arranging the bus for our next competition, Bridge.”

“Oh,” was all I could mumble.

I supposed that could’ve happened, but I had a prickly feeling she was lying to me.

Later that week, when the other dance team members said they didn’t see Fria get hurt, I decided to find excuses to be around Fria and Kris; until Fria noticed how much I was hanging around.

“Why are you babysitting me, Bridge? Don’t you think I’m old enough to take care of myself?”

“Well, yes…but I don’t trust Kris.”

“Why not? He’s always been nice to you!”

“But he hasn’t been nice to you, Fria.” My glistening eyes held hers for a moment while I tried to say that I knew he was hurting her – and that I loved her. After so many silent years in our family, it just wouldn’t come out. She broke the stare and walked away from me.

“He gets upset if you talk to any male friends; guys you’ve known for years! Even when you’ve spent hours consoling him on the phone, trying to convince him they’re just friends. And for Christmas when he asked if you wanted a fur-coat, you told him no, but he bought it anyway.”

“Yeah, he buys me things...so what?” Fria yelled.
“It’s like he’s trying to make up for other stuff…things that happen when nobody else is around. I’ve seen how he squints at you and you stop what you’re doing or saying…you’re disappearing, Fria!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” she yelled. “Leave us alone!”

During the month that we weren’t talking, Fria snuck out of the house at night. I didn’t tell Dad, but desperately wanted to convince her that she was tempting fate. I decided to write her a note.

Dear Fria,

I want you to know how much you mean to me.
I’m sorry for hurting your feelings. I’ve missed you these last few weeks. I want to be friends again. Will you forgive me?

Love you,

Bridget xoxo

I placed it on her pillow with a yellow rose and fell asleep with a prayer in my heart: “Please let Fria be okay.”

I suddenly awoke to my bed shaking and the sounds of stifled sobs nearby. The dark room barely allowed me to make out Fria snuggled next to me, smothering my pink teddy bear with tears. I pulled her into a hug.

“I’m right here, Fria.”
“I hate him!” she vehemently whispered.
“What did he do?”
“I never wanted to do anything with him…he forced me.”
“What?” I yelled. “We need to get you to the hospital; we need to call the police.”

Fria buried her head in my shoulder and began to whimper, repeating, “No, no, no, no.” We sobbed together until she fell asleep. I started fantasizing about castrating the bastard! My thoughts were spinning with hatred of her “ex” for doing this to her. Why did this happen to her? Hadn’t she gone through enough? She did not deserve this! I’ll kill him! I even mentally planned a way to trap and torture him with the help of some of my varsity football friends.

Eventually, the plans for vengeance wearied me and I drifted off into a restless sleep.

It took a few weeks to get back to a normal pace in our lives. This equaled eight hours of school, then dance practice, homework, a basketball game, and hopefully sleep. It was hard for Fria to see Kris at school, especially since no one else knew what he was really like. At first, he acted like nothing happened. Yet, Fria had to go to a counselor twice a week. She
pretended she was okay around her friends, acting happy about breaking up with “the jerk” as she rubbed her new mace keychain inside of her purse. But at home she was quiet, sloth-like, and depressed. What he did changed her. She was like an empty egg shell: brittle and fragile, drained of the contents that made her strong. I still wanted to have her “ex” tortured, but knew I wouldn’t get away with it. Kris had surrounded himself with his friends like a horde of jackals, which one day Fria and I accidently stumbled into.

The large bald guy yelled, “Hey, Fria! Ya gettin’ any tonight?” Kris’ friends cackled as we ran to the school parking lot.

“Karma will get you!” I snapped. Getting away with his crime actually made the pig bolder. I hugged Fria close to help her into the car. Once we’d driven a safe distance Fria crumbled into hiccupping tears.

“They-put-a-note-in-my-locker-that-said: ‘Anyone stupid enough to go into a dark room with a guy, deserves what she gets’,” Fria bawled. “I wish I had reported him. It’s been five weeks but he’s not gonna leave it alone.”

“Predators are only stopped when they become prey…or die,” I guessed. I pulled over and turned to my sister. “Fria, I wanted to hunt him down but instead I’m gonna start praying that justice will take care of him.”

“I didn’t know you prayed.”
“I only started to a few weeks ago…it gives me strength, er restraint…or I would’ve taken vengeance already.”

“Okay, I’ll pray for it, too. Maybe I’ll at least feel better instead of nauseous all the time.”

We were watching the family movie that Friday night when a newscaster interrupted to show pictures of an SUV smashed in the canyons.

“Four teenage boys died at the scene when the owner lost control while driving too fast; intoxication is suspected...”

I watched Fria’s eyes widen and her face pale. She jumped up, pointing at the TV and whispered: “Look at the license…it’s Kris—” and she passed out on the floor.

I sat in the grungy chair at the emergency room, trying to read a magazine but not quite seeing the words. I can’t believe it! God sure answers prayers quickly. My sister is finally free of her tormentor. She’ll never have to see his face or worry that he can hurt her again. When the nurse came to get me I rushed in to give Fria a hug. She had a bandage where her head hit the tile and was still quite pale.
“Everything will be okay. He’s gone now. It’s over,” I said.
I could tell by the doctor’s somber face something was wrong.
Dad sat in the chair next to Fria’s bed, dropping his face in his hands.
Silent tears flowed down my beautiful sixteen year old sister’s face. Her
lips trembled as she said, “I’m pregnant.”
Terrance Graham leaned back in his hard chair and marveled about how God can certainly kick a man in the behind from time to time.

Terrance had been a teacher all of his life, and he’d always thought teaching was God’s work. He prided himself on spying talent among his students and giving the promising ones a little extra attention to help them along. Now, after today, he knew he would have to rethink his entire philosophy. Perhaps he had a terrible eye for talent after all. Perhaps all these years he’d been focusing on the wrong ones, and letting the real talent slip through his fingers.

Today was the annual oration before the Phi Beta Kappa society. He, along with more than a thousand students and alumni, was attending. He himself had been in charge of finding the speaker. His first, second, third, fourth, and fifth choices had all declined. He’d had to go through quite a long list before getting anyone to agree to speak today. By then, he didn’t care who it was, as long as there was a speaker.

The man at the pulpit was incandescently captivating. Terrance remembered the speaker as a young man attending Harvard. Back then he’d gone by the name Ralph. Ralph had been the class poet, and had delivered a quaint little poem to his peers a month before graduation, as was custom.

It didn’t stand out in Terrance’s mind, though. Nothing about Ralph stood out in Terrance’s mind. Terrance kept trying to recall specific memories of the speaker as a young student, but couldn’t. Ralph had been mundane; mediocre, even. But now…

Ralph was euphoric, engaging, and magnificent as a public orator. He spoke with a grandeur of passion Terrance had rarely seen equaled, even in highly reputed public speakers. Every member of the audience gazed at Ralph, who was gesticulating gracefully from behind the podium as he spoke with rapture. Eyes wide and mouths open, it was as if, for every individual in the audience, Ralph was the only person in the world who existed.

And to think, Terrance hadn’t been looking forward to this. He’d actually been disappointed.

“Mr. Graham,” his secretary’s nasal voice startled him upon entering his office.

“Yes, what is it Oliver?”

“The next chap passed too.”

“What?! He passed? How could he pass? That’s twelve people who’ve passed on giving the speech. Twelve! Who else is there?”

“If I might, sir, I did have a thought.”
“A thought?”
Oliver shrugged uncomfortably, his shaggy blond hair hanging limply about his face. “It’s been known to happen.”
Terrance smiled tightly. “Of course, Oliver. I didn’t mean to imply otherwise. It’s just that this oration is scheduled for three weeks from tomorrow and whoever ends up speaking will need time to prepare. The longer we wait, the less chance we have of anyone saying yes.”
Oliver was nodding.
“Well, go on, man. What was your thought?”
“Do you remember the class poet for that year? Name of Ralph?”
Terrance thought for a moment, rubbed his forehead, and then blinked at Oliver. “No.”
“He recently published an essay that’s getting a lot of attention. I think it’s about plants and leaves and stuff.”
Terrance shrugged. “I guess I haven’t read it.”
Oliver waved his hands as though it was unimportant. “He published it anonymously at first, so people are just starting to realize who penned it. He’s an up-and-comer, though.”

Terrance hadn’t remembered Ralph at all until Oliver pulled his transcripts and showed Terrance a picture. Even then, Terrance had been less than over-whelmed.
Ralph had had a humble up bringing. He hadn’t done anything extraordinary in school, graduating in the exact middle of his class. He made a decent stand in literature courses, but was horrendous in math and even science, which was surprising given the recent success of his environmental essay.
Truth be told, he’d been downright blasé as a student. Still, no one else had accepted the invitation to speak.

“Very well,” Terrance had sighed in Oliver’s general direction. “We might as well ask him. All those who graduated higher in the class or have done greater things have already turned us down. We might as well ask him.”

Terrance had almost hoped Ralph would say no, but Ralph jumped at the opportunity, and Terrance had sighed heavily.
But now “young” Ralph stood before them. He was a decade and a half older, with streaks of silver in his hair. He had wisdom pressed into the wrinkles around his eyes that simply is not there yet when young men
graduate. The speech he was giving was new, groundbreaking, downright revolutionary! And why not? This was 1837, after all, and all present were Americans!

Ralph was proposing intellectual freedom. He was challenging the intellectuals of America to find their own voice and identity in the world. He talked of the divinity of an individual, intellectual identity. He used the phrase “American Scholar.” As the speech neared a close, Ralph’s momentum picked up, and Terrance’s heart rate raced to match.

In the audience, many were openly weeping. Others were literally on the edge of their seats, doing all they could not to jump up and cheer.

When the speech finally closed, and Ralph bowed, waving his hands magnanimously, the thunderous applause and shouting of the crowd was overwhelming. Terrance felt tears in his own eyes.

He had been a teacher for his entire life. He’d always felt the education of young minds to be God’s work. He tried at all times to see God’s work, His voice, and his countenance in the young, impressionable minds he had the pleasure of working on.

But how naïve he could be! How misguidedly judgmental! He had been certain that this young man would never amount to anything. Now, as he added his hearty applause to that of the crowd, something burned deep within him, testifying that he was seeing history in the making; that this man might be one of the greatest writers and public orators America would ever see.

“So, young Ralph will give the address, then, will he,” he asked Oliver, sighing again. “I suppose I must resign myself to a mediocre oration.”

“Take heart, Mr. Graham. It might not be that bad. He might surprise you. Oh, and he doesn’t go by Ralph anymore. He likes to go by his middle name.”

“And what is that?”

“Waldo, Mr. Graham. Ralph Waldo Emerson.”
Songs, love songs I would have found disgustingly needy three months prior, now accompanied my Saturday evening routine. As soon as I got out of the shower, I wiped the steam from the bathroom mirror to get the first raw gaze of myself. My eyes were bloodshot and my dark hair was ratted. Standing their naked, I would try to perfect the face that God had made. This long obsessive process of working and glaring at my reflection was only distracted by another more domineering face. “Six thirty eight; I have to hurry!” I said while quickly swiping a razor across my face.

Suddenly, I felt a sharp pain from my lower lip followed by a warm sensation flowing down my chin. I looked in the mirror to see the inevitable blood trickling out of the neat little cut. I instantly ran for the toilet paper, grabbed a wad and pressed it gently against my lower lip stopping the flow of blood. “Damn it!” I exclaimed “Always when you’re in a hurry.” In an attempt to ignore the incident, I began wildly singing, “Tonight I’m going to...” Something about my reflection suddenly led me to silence. The wad of toilet paper had fallen from my lower lip and I peered closely and could find no marking. “Live,” I then quickly dressed and picked up the flowers I had bought earlier and headed toward the back door.

The hot and violent August wind reminded me that the summer was coming to an end as I walked toward my waiting old pickup truck. I struggled with the wind to get the door open, then I noticed her. She sat on the hood of an old car, smiling back at me, in the photograph that I had placed in truck’s dash board. “I'll see you soon, Autumn,” I said peering into it. I then leaned forward and started the engine and began the westward journey that I had taken so many Saturday nights before.

Autumn lived on a street right next to the highway. She lived with her parents and siblings in a faded blue single level house. Behind the house was a half acre of land that caused her small rural town a great deal of visual strife for it was covered by at least half a dozen abandoned cars. Autumn was the youngest sister now age twenty-one and her appointed career was tending the children while her family was gone driving trucks.

“Simon; Sime Time!” I heard childrens' voices yelling excitedly as I pulled my truck into the long dirt driveway. I looked up at the tree house, which was swaying drastically in the wind, and saw the trap door swing open. Suddenly, the three little figures of Jacob, Alyson, and Rusty fell from it. Grabbing the flowers, I walked toward the front door. I didn't quite make it for the trio tackled me into a hug.

“Sime, Sime Time!”
“I found a birds nest!”
“I know a new trick on my bike!”
“Simon, Simon, I want to show you a picture I drew!” Their voices were all going at once. I couldn’t tell who was saying what, so I interrupted: “Have you guys been staying out of trouble?”

“Nooo!” they laughed back at me.

“That’s the way,” I laughed. “Uh oh, does that mean that Autumn is in a bad mood?” I exclaimed.

“No, I'll get her for you,” Jacob said followed by, “I also want to show you a picture I drew today.”

“I can't wait to see it and can you give Autumn these flowers for me?” I asked him.

“I sure can,” he exclaimed then he ran through the front door screaming, “Autumn, Simon's here!”

Turning back to Alyson and Rusty, I asked. “So you guys found a birds nest huh?”

“Yes in that big tree,” Alyson exclaimed.

“What types of birds live in the nest?” I replied.

“Pretty birds!” she laughed happily.

“Let me get my bike!” Rusty yelled excitedly as he ran toward the back yard.

“Alright, Simon came to see me!” a familiar woman's voice rang out.

I looked up to see Autumn standing there. She was wearing a blue denim dress and her dark brown curly hair was put up in a wrap behind her head. When our eyes met, she ran toward me and jumped into my arms. I slightly swung her around while she wildly kissed me. “I missed you so much!” she exclaimed.

“I've thought about you all week and I've missed you too,” I answered tasting her pasty lipstick.

She then loosened her grip and slid down out of my arms and her ear naturally pressed against my heart. “You look absolutely beautiful tonight,” I said.

“Thank you,” she answered.

“Simon watch my trick!” Rusty said riding up on his bike.

“No!” Autumn yelled. “It’s too late to be riding your bike; now you kids go play with your Aunt Beth.”

“Oh man!” Rusty exclaimed.

“Come on now, there will be plenty of times when Simon can watch your trick, we're leaving,” she said.

“Group hug!” Jacob shouted as all three kids ran up and hugged us goodbye.
Suddenly, Autumn screamed as a powerful gust of wind seemed
to push her running toward my truck.
As I climbed into the driver’s seat, I felt Autumn slide over and
softly lay her head on my shoulder. “How was your week?” She asked.
“Work was busy as usual,” I replied. “How was your week?”
“Those kids are driving me crazy!” she laughed back as we drove
away. “I get tired of being cooped up in that house all week,” she finished
in a more solemn tone. “So what are we doing tonight?”
“Well I thought I would first take you to dinner and then we could
check out a movie or go to a club or something.”
“Whatever Sie, as long as I'm with you,” she answered.
“Same here,” I hazily replied.
Then in an instant she cried, “I love this song!” while turning up
the volume on my truck's radio. She then snuck over to the passenger
window and began softly singing along with it. I gave her a few glances as
she sat alone in wonder of the early-evening.
“Do you mind if I smoke?” she asked was suddenly rocked by
another gust of wind.
“No, go ahead,” I answered.
Instantly, that hot summer air hit me as she rolled down the
window to light her cigarette. Autumn's smoke seemed to put me into a
relaxed daze amidst the radio which I could barely hear.
“Stupid teenagers,” Autumn muttered ending the peaceful
moment. Suddenly, I realized what she was talking about as I noticed the
green Jeep Cherokee that was driving directly along side of us. As I peered
in closer, I saw many restless figures moving about behind its dark
windows. “Typical Salt Lake Saturday night,” she said. “A car full of
drunkards.”
Great, were coming to a red light. I thought to myself as I slowly
stopped the truck directly left of the waiting Jeep. The Jeep's motor revved
a few times until the driver's window began to roll down. “Autumn,
whatever they say let’s just ignore it,” I said.
“Alright,” she quietly agreed.
I couldn't believe who the tinted window dropped to reveal. I took
a closer look to see the perfect face of my long lost childhood friend,
Ashleigh Mueller. Her strawberry blonde hair blew viciously in the wind
and when our eyes met; my entire childhood seemed to appear in the dark
hue of her eyes. Suddenly, Ashleigh teasingly blew me a kiss.
“B---h!” Autumn screamed while flinging her lit cigarette toward
Ashleigh's face. Ashleigh ducked and avoided it only to look back at
Autumn who was now flipping her off. Ashleigh then looked at me with an
angusted gaze so horrifying it seemed like the mirrored dead-spirited reflection that a coward has to face. My happy memories of childhood seemed forever singed away by the new memory of this expression.

The light turned green and the Jeep sped off. Frozen in bitter disbelief, I couldn't move.

“Green means go,” Autumn said sarcastically.

Now barely able to see the Jeep's tail lights, I drove through the intersection. Autumn turned up the radio to full volume while bobbing her head slightly. I was so disgusted that I couldn't look at her, though I sensed her presence by the prevailing smell of cigarette smoke. I couldn’t contemplate whether I was more shocked over the incident, or the way I now felt toward the girl I had tried so hard to win over and please. So lost in furious confusion, I could not stand the sound of loud music. I instantly turned the radio down.

“Hey, I like that song,” Autumn said.
“I kind of have a headache,” I quietly answered.
“No you don't; your p----d off I can tell,” Autumn said followed by. “It’s because of what I did to that b----h isn't it?”

Another fierce gust of wind momentarily swerved the truck’s path as I asked: “Why do you have to attack people you don't even know?”
“That b----h blew you a kiss!” Autumn yelled.

That was it, hearing her repeatedly call Ashleigh that degrading word led me to inspire to escape this evening. “Listen, my head hurts really bad,” I said. “I think I'm going to take you home and call it a night.”
“What!” Autumn screamed in disbelief. “Whatever, fine!”
“To H--l with you!”
“Take me home!”
I did not argue.

I remained silent and turned my truck around for the journey back to her house. Minutes passed and nothing could be heard in the truck except for the faint melody of the radio until suddenly, I heard her soft sobbing which sent rhythmic piercing lashes into my already spinning head. *But what she did.* I thought to myself as Autumn's sobbing became increasingly intense.

I could hear her breathing heavily in between sobs, her lungs wheezing a strange and un-ignorable whistle. Suddenly, she snatched her picture from my dashboard. She gave it one look and then with an angry sigh threw it out the window.

*Simon, don't let your emotions get to you.* I thought to myself. *Don't forget what she did tonight.*
Now, Autumn's weeping was almost unbearable, as it had turned to long and loud drawn out whimpers.

“Listen, we need to tal—” she faded out raging into a violent coughing fit.

“I just need to get some sleep.” I answered coldly.

“No we need to talk!” she yelled getting more desperate for now we were almost to her home town.

“We'll talk after I get some rest.” I answered.

“Nooo!” she screeched her voice cracking into a strange high pitch.

Suddenly, another gust of wind was followed by a violent swerve and I realized too late, that she had grabbed the steering wheel. My truck veered violently out of control and crashed over a curb into a gas station parking lot. I instantly slammed on my brakes and the truck squealed to a stop. Terrified, I looked over at Autumn for the first time since she flicked the cigarette. She was hunched over viscously trembling whether in fear or pure emotion, I’ll never know. I looked toward the gas station expecting a small crowd of observers but luckily, I saw only an old man casually walking to his car.

She wept a while with her head in her hands until finally it came up. Her bloodshot eyes emitted dark rivers across her cheeks. Was this the image I had created through my obsessive longing to charm her? The preparation! The carefully thought of acts I did to provoke her smiles, her laughter—had all slowly led up the horrific scene in front of me.

Did I create this? No, no there was another power at hand—what about the night we drove into the mountains and there was an already lit fire burning for us on the side of the road and no one in sight? Surely fate or God or something but why, why to this? What plan is this a part of? What meaning from this?

I escaped my dark confusion and quietly asked, “What is it that you want to talk about?”

“I-I get jealous.” she said. “It's just I hate being cooped in that house all week...and I love...I love being with you.”

“I understand.” I said rubbing the pulse on my temple.

“So what do you want to do now?”

“Well my friends are hanging out at Deana's Cafe if you want to go get some coffee.” She said wiping her eyes.

When we arrived at the restaurant, she laughed and bounced about with her friends as I exhaustedly stared into my coffee cup. Afterwards, I drove her to her house, while creating an atmosphere of neutral and
distracting discussion to avoid further conflict. Finally, we were in front of her house and I walked her to the door amidst a whirlwind of dust.

“Would you like to come in out of this?” she asked half smiling.

“No, no, I really must get some sleep.” I answered while lightly hugging her. I then turned back to my truck and hastily walked toward it.

As I drove away, I looked in the rearview mirror to see Autumn still looking toward me as she stood below the street lamp in front of that long dirt driveway. When it was apparent that I had no intentions of turning around, again I watched her face fall into her hands.

Just then, my truck was slightly pushed by a gust of wind dropping the rear-view mirror which revealed the reflection of my face. My hair was ratted, my eyes were bloodshot, and my shirt was wrinkled into a mess. Unable to handle this ghastly raw image of myself, I slapped the mirror to the head liner. Suddenly, I felt a warm trickle down my chin.
Flash Fiction Section
"I know this might be difficult, but I'm going to need you to start from the beginning," the detective said, speaking slowly, hoping I'd do the same. He pulled up in an unmarked car, parking halfway onto the lawn. He must have been having lunch right before the call, because he had a bit of mustard glued to the ends of his moustache.

Nervous and unsure as where to begin, I said, "The boy answered the door holding a damp, blue hand towel. His little sister hid behind." She had been sucking her fingertips and dragging her pink fluffy blanket. "Officer, I was a bit irritated when he first told me that his mom was asleep and I'd have to come back for my appointment another day." I couldn't believe she had been sleeping - we had an appointment, after all.

"It's Detective, Ma'am."

"Oh, sorry, Detective. Next I heard a ding and her kids must've too, because off they went - leaving me on the front porch." Stretching my neck in the doorway and looking halfway into the kitchen, I saw the boy carrying more blue towels; only now, steam billowed off them. Ahh. Hot towels being microwaved for my facial. I guess I should just wait. I'm sure Mrs. Beacher will come to the door any minute.

"Then the boy left the kitchen and passed me again," I explained to the Detective while he picked at his moustache, sending little flakes of yellow into the wind.

Then flipping his notepad over, he said, "Go on."

"Again, the boy headed down to the end of the hall and out of my sight."

The boy didn't acknowledge I was still at the door, all while the little girl, barefoot, and dragging her soft blanket along, didn't question what her brother was doing. It was as if the two had an urgent situation and I was in the way. And still there was no sight of their mom. I couldn't even hear a noise from the end of the hallway. "And Detective, like an idiot, I kept waiting."

"How long did you wait?" he asked me, trying not to belch by sucking in, rubbing his apparently full belly. Now, he was picking between his teeth.

"I'm not sure. It felt like ten minutes. Maybe it was really only three."

"Then what happened?"

"The boy - he was yelling for his sister." He had been going back and forth with those towels, from one end of the house to the other, so often his little sister couldn't keep up.

"Yes, then what?"

I called into the house and asked the boy if his mom would come
to the door. Anxiously and unsure of what to truly say, he mentioned that she is up now, but wants me to come back tomorrow. She did wakeup. But why won’t she come to the door? I can’t come back - I work tomorrow. This was a favor to Mrs. Beacher, anyway. I was her fourth facial this week, qualifying her for top consultant of the month. Something was wrong.

“As he walked past the entry once again, I heard him say, ‘Come on Suzy – help me.’” She didn’t follow him, though; instead she stopped on the tiled entry and stared out. Was she looking at me - perhaps looking through me? Her diaper was terribly soggy under her light colored pajamas. Her messy, brown hair fell to the side of her face, covering the milk stained corner of her lip and blocking her green, uncomprehending eyes. I felt as if she was saying something to me, but her lips didn’t move. She was begging me to come in as her body stood still and empty.

"That’s when I said, ‘Sweetie, are those towels for me?’”
"No," she had said, "They keep Mommy warm."

My heart sank and I stood frozen - speechless. The boy turned and stopped right in his tracks then locked eyes with me. He realized that he didn’t need to believe anymore that all his hard work was going to work. Nothing was going to wake up his mom.

“Finally, I came inside and picking up the little girl, the boy crouched to the floor and began to cry.” I think he was relieved.
Mom said I had to wear my Sunday best. I went to my closet and took down my dark blue velvet dress from the hanger, pulled my white tights out of the drawer, and found my black Sunday shoes; one under my bed, and the other in my toy box. I put everything on very carefully, making sure there were no twists in the material, and no buttons unfastened. I took my time. I didn’t want to go out there.

My mom called me into the bathroom to do my hair. She pulled my soft blond curls into a pony tail and wrapped a matching ribbon around the rubber band. Mom stood up tall and looked into the mirror at my reflection. Squeezing my shoulders gently, her long red hair flowing over her shoulders and a forced smile on her face, she asked if I was ready. I said I was, but I wasn’t.

The ride was quiet. No one spoke. The radio had been turned off. Mom and dad were holding hands and kept looking at each other. Not like they normally do. It was different, but I understood. I saw dad squeeze mom’s hand, and mom closed her eyes for a moment.

We were the first to arrive. The building was not big, but it was not small. It had brown brick on the outside. There were beautiful trees and flowers surrounding it. There were seven steps leading up to the double doors. I thought that odd. Dad turned the car off and sat still. He looked at mom again. She took a deep breath and softly shook her head up and down. We got out of the car, stood together looking at the building, and proceeded to toward the entrance.

Dad held the door open for us; as I walked in I was assaulted with the smell of fresh flowers. I didn’t expect it to smell that way. In fact, I didn’t really expect it to have a smell. We were greeted by a man I had never seen before. He led us to an open room. I could see it from where I stood. My heart began to beat faster and I wanted to turn and run the other way. My mom held my hand and bent down to face me. She reassured me that everything was going to be fine, and I believed her.

We all walked up to it together, slowly. We stopped, and my dad pulled me and my mom closer to him. Tears fell down my dad’s face and my mom put her head on his shoulder and began to cry too. I took a step in front of them, my head down, afraid to look up. My hand reached out and felt the smooth exterior of it. It was shiny and beautiful. I ran my hand along the surface, back and forth. It was so little, but so perfect.

I stood there for a moment longer, trying to build the courage, and then I did. I raised my head up more, slowly, very slowly. Yes, it was perfect, as was she. She looked like a tiny porcelain doll. So still, so flawless. She wore a beautiful white dress, long, lacy and full. Sweet
little Meghan. A tear then fell quietly down my cheek as I mourned for the sister I would never get to know.
The air is warm, pungent, heavy with the smell of the coming storm. I can see it as it moves across the valley, feel it on the wind that tugs at my hair. It brings with it the smell of summer blossoms, ripening wheat, and dust.

The first drops strike with random abandon, rustling through the leaves on their way to becoming dark circles on parched soil. Thunder echoes across the sky and I wait in anticipation of the rain. The drops become a deluge, weighing down the branches of young trees, matting the grass, carving furrows in the dirt, overwhelming in its intensity.

My steps slow as the force of the storm closes about me and, suddenly sodden and shivering, hugging my sweater close about me, I stand, head bowed against the wind and the rain. The weight of the world seems to pour itself out upon me with every drop; I close my eyes as that weight presses down. The maelstrom that is my life culminates in this storm and I only want to give way to it, let it simply sweep me away, to wash up on some more hospitable shore. And yet...

As I sink to the grass, my legs tucked up tight and my cheek resting on my knees, I let the rain wash over me. I watch as the dirt and debris of summer are simply swept away with the cold, clean water. Clean water, the power to cleanse. Clean. Cold. Penetrating. Invigorating. There is strength in that power to cleanse. Strength, and healing.

Yes the world may crash around me, the drought of pain may leave me broken and despairing, and just as the parched earth that tries vainly to reject the healing change that storms bring ultimately blossoms with verdant growth, I, too, will emerge—renewed, rejuvenated, empowered.

I take a moment to remember, to mourn; to accept. And I let the rain wash my heart clean.
The wind plucks lightly at the sparse grass and whistles through the driftwood, a calliope singing for the joy of sound. The rain-washed sand is heavy and yielding about our feet as we follow the sound of laughter out toward the waves. This isn’t our own familiar rocky shore, but a windswept beach with gigantic breakers exhausting themselves against the long, flat, endless sands; dancing with our children.

You lean on me as my arm goes about your waist, supportive, comfortable, natural, and we continue to amble across the sand, a ragged trail of entwined footprints meandering in our wake; the spent waves flattened and running to meet our feet. I shiver slightly in the wind and you stop, pulling me close in a warm embrace, resting your chin on my head. I can feel the reassuring beat of you heart, steady, strong, vibrant.

Not far from us the girls have begun to explore the driftwood flotsam. The wind tugging at their hair; long, fine, brown hair tangles with golden corkscrew curls, two sides of our genetic coin. Malina reaches down and picks up a large, slippery mass of kelp, its bulbous chambers translucent brown, its broad flat leaves so much longer than she is tall. Nalani hunkers down to peer at the recently vacated sand.

―Oogie! Look! Look!‖ she squeals, pointing at their feet. Malina tosses the kelp aside and squats down beside her little sister.

―It’s a crab, Moo!‖ and with that she reaches down and expertly picks it up, careful to take it from the back. Its legs and pinchers vainly raking the air, she holds it close for Nalani to study. “See, it’s purple on top, but kind of pink on the bottom…”

Their voices float back to us and you begin to chuckle, a warm rumble I can feel in our embrace.

―Only your girls would play with slimy kelp and crabs,‖ you laugh. I smile too as we watch them release the crab and go back to exploring.

The running waves begin to lap further up the beach, signaling that time is running short; the tide is coming in. “Ten more minutes boys!” I call out.

―Okay, Mom!‖ David returns just as a breaker crashes against his slender chest, staggering him backward while Michael plunges headfirst into it, popping up like a cork just a few feet away.

―That was cool!‖ Michael sputters, flicking water from his face and hair.

―Did you want to go in with them?‖ I ask, but you just shake your head. Today, just watching them is enough.

Among the driftwood Pierce has joined his sisters and together they are pulling at a limb buried at an angle in the wet sand.
“Ready?” he directs, “Heave, ho, heave, ho…” they move to the rhythm of his words, one tiny, two taller, all three a team in their effort. Suddenly the sand capitulates and the limb jumps free into their hands, the momentum of their efforts flinging them all to the ground. They scramble up only to crouch around the limb, rubbing it with their hands and exclaiming at its shape.

“David! Michael!” Pierce shouts. As they turn to him, he motions them over and they are all soon huddled together; a conspiracy in its infancy.

“Should we go see what they are doing?” I ask, releasing you and taking a step toward them. You pull me back into your embrace.

“No. David is probably explaining how trees lose their branches and they are all just being…well, like you.” You laugh at the glare I aim in your direction.

“I want to carry it!”
“No! I want to!”
“You’re too small to carry it!”
“But I found it!”
“Fine!” Michael shouts. “You girls carry it.”
And suddenly they are all marching toward us, the girls dragging their precious treasure behind them.

“Dad,” Pierce says in his most grown up manner. “We think that you should have this. It will make a good walking stick.”

“A Shillelagh,” Michael says.

David takes it from the girls and hands it to you. You run your hands over it, brushing away the sand. It is Madrona. The orange bark peeling away to reveal the limb’s auburn knots and twists; it has a large rounded knob at one end. The wood’s naturally smooth texture feels warm and alive to the touch. You look at their rapt faces and you smile. I take it from you.

“This is the coolest piece of weird stuff you guys have ever brought me!” You reach down and scoop Nalani into your arms from which she scrambles up onto your shoulders.

“Okay,” you shout, “let’s race back; first one to the cabin gets to pick the game!”

“I want monopoly!”
“Let’s play scrabble!”
“No! Mom will win!”
“Balderdash!”
“No! Let’s play Take Off!” And you all go running back across the sand.
I stand here, limb in my hands watching you with them. It’s not a cane. It’s a gift. A gift I will polish and prepare for the time you will need it. A gift from them to you. I follow in your footsteps, just behind all of you, and one step ahead of the ocean’s rising tide.
I watched the plane maneuver its giant nose toward us and slow to a crawl. Fire trucks hosed down the steel beast, a symbol of respect – washing away the war. All around me, throngs of people held up their posters and jumped to get a better view. I pushed my way to the front, unable to contain myself.

I lost my grip on my children, leaving them to the care of their grandparents, and focused on nothing but the plane door. Any second, I’d see him for the first time in a year. I thrust my “Welcome Home” poster higher and squealed as the door creaked open. Shouts assaulted my ears, but they faded when I saw him.

He stepped into the blinding sun. Grinning, he marched with his unit to the General, saluted, and turned to the crowd searching for me.

Security was tight, but the second I saw my chance, I broke through the barrier and raced to him. I jumped into his arms and wrapped my body around his. I buried my head into his neck and inhaled his scent. No one could invade this moment; just us, nothing more. He’d come home.
Mildred Snodgrass, my next door neighbor, had an ongoing nasty habit of outdoing everyone, regardless of the cost. It was not so much that the rest of the neighborhood was jealous of her, but it was the way she rubbed it in that was upsetting everyone, including me.

When the neighbor across the street got a new car, Mildred had to get an even more expensive one. The family down the street remodeled her kitchen; Mildred had her whole house remodeled. The couple next door planted a couple of rose bushes; Mildred has her lawn professionally landscaped. And when I had a baby boy, darned if Mildred didn’t have twins!

Needless to say, the entire neighborhood got tired of her one-upsman-ship, and vowed to find a way to put an end to it. My husband understood our frustration. With a smile on his face, he assured us he would take care of the problem once and for all.

Just before Christmas, he confided to Mildred that he was going to get me a white fur coat. Sadly, he told her he could not find what he was looking for and would have to abandon the idea and get me something else. Of course, he told her that my heart would be broken.

The very next day Mildred went to the local furrier and bought a gorgeous full-length white fur coat and invited the entire neighborhood to a party at her house just so she could show it off. Beaming with pride she pranced around in it, running her fingers through its luxurious fur, and doing her best to make all of us jealous.

With my husband and me standing there, she announced, “I do look good in this, don’t you think? It’s ermine you know. I bet you’d love to have one like this, but I know they are out of your price range.”

Sensing my anger, my husband spoke up and said, “Gee, Mildred, I don’t know why you’d get such a coat. Don’t you know that ermines are nothing more than nasty little weasels in their winter color?”

Mildred’s jaw dropped faster than a sixteen pound bowling ball as she glared at my husband with her cold eyes. Embarrassed, she ran to her car and took the coat back to the furrier. The very next day there was a for sale sign in her yard.

Now the neighborhood is jealous of me. I have something they don’t have—my clever husband.

“Yeah. Yeah, I think I can do it.”

“Okay, here he comes. I’ll be right here if you need me.” Chuck backed away and stood at the next closed register.

As the man approached the counter, Pete’s eyes grew wide. He wiped his sweaty hands down his apron as he rehearsed the line in his mind. The man’s eyes made contact with Pete’s. “Welcome to Beef-in-a-Basket. Uh….”

Chuck whispered from across the counter, “Will this be for here or to go?”

“Oh, I knew that. Stupid!” He looked up at his customer. “Oh, sorry. Uh, will this be for here or to go?”

“For here, please,” the man said.

“Okay. For here,” Pete repeated slowly as he searched for the right button on the register.

“I’ll have a Smokey Burger and a large drink,” the man ordered.

“Would you like fries with that?”

“No, just the burger and drink.”

Pete’s hands stiffened at the keypad, his eyes locked on the man across the counter. Pete’s lip curled and his teeth clenched tight. Stiff hands became taut fists ready for a fight. A look of confusion came over the man’s face. Chuck took notice of the situation and came hurriedly to the man’s rescue.

“What seems to be the problem here?” Chuck inquired in his friendly, managerial tone.

“I just ordered a burger and your friend here got all weirdo on me,” the man said.

“Is that true, Pete?”

“He didn’t want the fries,” Pete answered quietly but sternly as he stamped his foot against the tile. Chuck signaled to the customer to hold on for a minute. He turned to his employee and put his hand on Pete’s shoulder. Pete stared at the ground.

“Hey, remember what we talked about with the fries?” Silence. “Pete. Do you remember what we talked about?” Chuck tried looking Pete in the eyes but Pete only turned his head. “It’s alright, isn’t it? Not everybody likes fries. There are plenty of things on the menu for people to choose from. They’re paying so they get to choose what they want or don’t want, right?”

Pete nodded in agreement.
“Let me hear you say it.”
They repeated aloud together, “Not everybody likes fries.”
“Perfect. See, that wasn’t so bad. Let’s give it another shot, shall we?” Chuck took his position at the other register.
Pete straightened the “trainee” pin on his apron and wiped his hands again. “Anything else?” he muttered, staring at the register.
“No, thanks.”
Pete slowly punched buttons until he heard a beep and the total came up on the screen. “Three ‘o’ six,” he said.
The man handed him a twenty-dollar bill. Pete looked at the bill and then at the total, then at the bill, then again at the total. The man sensed the problem and said, “All right, all right.” He took back the twenty and removed three ones from his wallet and six cents from his pocket.
Non-Fiction Section
“When did this become my problem?”

“Wha-” I stared at my mother. “Look, Mom, I....he just...I don’t know.” I felt myself losing it, and took a deep breath: “He doesn’t understand why you haven’t come to see him.”

“Fine,” she huffed.

We drove in silence. I turned on the radio and tried not to cry.

“What’s wrong?” my mom asked.

“Nothing.”

“Huh,” was all she said.

The roads stretched in front of me, familiar from the previous weeks. I saw the sign: University Neuropsychiatric Institute. The guard at the desk recognized me, briefly glancing up from his game of computer solitaire. I mashed the elevator button to the lock-down ward. Mom followed me down the dim hallway to the magnetic doors, and I buzzed the front desk.

“Can I help you?” the nurse chirped.

“We’re here to see Jeff Elder,” I said into the intercom.

“Alrighty!” I heard the ‘click’ and pushed the door open. “Just take a seat in one of the family rooms; we’ll send him in.”

Mom hadn’t said anything, but she wrung her hands and bit her lower lip. I peered through the little window that separated the ‘sane’ from the ‘insane’ and saw my dad stumbling toward me. His hair stuck out at odd angles, and the salt-and-pepper whiskers only served to darken the circles under his eyes.

“Hi, Daddy.” I hugged him.

“Hey, Honey. How...are you?” He still couldn’t put together sentences, but he continued to improve.

“I’m good. Mom’s here.”

I saw the flash of light in his eyes. He ran his hand through his hair, trying to look presentable for his ‘wife.’

“Come on, she’s in here,” I said as I led him to the family room.

“Karen...” He went straight to her, arms open. She stood, hugged him awkwardly, then sat back down. He dropped in the chair across from her, and I sat between them.

“How are you feeling today?” I asked, breaking the silence.

“Okay. Didn’t sleep much. Roommate....snor.. Doc tried p-p-pills, but...oh well.”

“Is this the guy who stole your bathrobe?”

“Nah, new guy. Fat....crazy sonbitch.”

“Well, that’s good. At least you don’t have to deal with that other guy.”
“Yeah, they thought I’d hur…kill him,” he smiled. That smile scared me because I knew he would have.

“How was therapy today?”

“Fine…art stuff. They wanted me to…draw a p-picture of how I felt…” He rubbed his hands over his face, and I heard the scrape of his stubble.

“Oh yeah?” I nudged. “What did you draw?”

“A guy and a maze. As he got…um…he went….shit…through the maze and his bag kept getting…um…uh…you know…” He pulled his hands apart, and dropped them to the floor.

“Fuller? Heavier?”

“Yes, heavier.”

“Gotta. Sounds about right, considering.”

Silence again. I glanced at my mom; she wasn’t going to start this conversation.

“Well, Dad,” I began. “I brought Mom to help explain. I know you don’t understand, and it’s hard to believe, and you and Mom aren’t married anymore, and…anyway…” I gestured to my mom to pick up from there. She said nothing.

Dad looked at her, pleading for an explanation.

“Mom?”

She cleared her throat, shifted in the chair, then glared at the wall.

“Karen, I just want…I don’t know…they told me…we…p-please…”

“I don’t know what you want from me,” she hissed.

“I just want to know,” he begged. “Everyone keeps saying that we’re…that we…I don’t know…I-I’m so confused.”

“Well, you should be,” she snapped. “It’s all your fault anyway.”

I whipped my head toward her.

“Why? I…w-what did I…um…what did I do?”

“You fucked up, that’s what!”

He jerked back. His face fell; he slumped into his hands and cried. I watched my dad, once so strong, crumble while my mother, his former lover, sat next to me expressionless. I couldn’t speak. I wanted to comfort him, but it wouldn’t have been enough. He no longer had anything to cling to; he’d lost the one thing he knew.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered through his fingers. “I’m so sorry if I…if I…hurt you…for w-w-w…for what I did. I don’t know…I can’t…I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, well, it’s a little late for that.”

He raised his head and stared with empty eyes. “I’m just sorry.”
Agonizing silence followed until the nurse came to take Dad to his room. He gave him his meds. Dad threw them in his mouth and gulped the water.

“What’s he taking?” I asked the nurse.

“Oh, just the usual. And an anti-anxiety ‘cuz he always gets worked up after you guys come. C’mon, Jeff,” he said to my dad. “Let’s go to bed now. Say goodnight.” I hated that condescending voice the nurses used when they talked to him.

“Night, Daddy,” I whispered into his ear. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t worry ‘bout it.”

“I love you.”

“Love you, too,” he muttered into my shoulder. His embrace felt lifeless.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I called as he wandered back into lock-down. After the doors closed, I strode toward the elevator. My mother followed.

In the car on the way home, I couldn’t think of anything to say. She gazed out her window, anxious to get home.

“You know, you didn’t have to be so mean,” I said, although ‘mean’ wasn’t even close to the word.

“Yeah, well…” was all she said.

* * * * *

A few days later, I received the call. My dad hung himself with his bed sheet. He reached the end of his world and couldn’t see a way back.
The room was dark. At least it seemed like a room. A light shone from above and he felt like it was pulling him towards it. Why was he lying down? He couldn’t remember. All that mattered was that solitary light, the dimmed room, and… voices? The voices must be important, too, he thought. He thought that he was certain where they were coming from, but in this daze, it was not easy to be sure of anything.

He tried to call out for help, anything. His voice was muffled! He was gagged! That can’t be it. Nothing was touching his face. He was drugged, completely incapacitated! What did those voices want with him? But where was the panic? The adrenaline was flowing but where was the fight-or-flight response his teachers always told him about? The one time he needed this survival help was now!

A figure in white with what looked like a curled horn sticking out the back of the head approached his side, followed by a language unknown to him but almost how he sounded when he tried to speak. Only one word was discernible: Tyler. How did these unknown beings know his name? The creature raised an appendage to an alien device, doing something unknown to him out of his range of sight. It retreated to the dark, joining the whisperings.

Managing to move his head a little, he was able to look down and to the sides. The table didn’t have restraining devices except for railings on the sides. He also managed to shift around. Something was taped to his side, tubes were attached to his nose and neck, and his shoulder ached. What have they done to him? The thing attached to his side was making sucking sounds.

Some of his memories were coming back. The sucking thing was doing something important, probably extracting fluids and specimens for study. The creatures had put in a tube to his heart, rendering him useless. They had also stabbed his shoulder repeatedly with needles, most likely testing human ability to withstand pain. Was he a test subject for some agency or company? Or was this something more sinister or incomprehensible? Could abductions really happen? To him, this was becoming more of a reality.

Tired, he drifted off to sleep while trying to resist the urge. His last thought before succumbing, Why is this happening?

When he awoke, he was unsure how much time had elapsed. One thing was certainly clear in his head and that was to somehow escape. Escape? Yes, I can do this! he thought, psyching himself up. If prisoners on Alcatraz Island can escape, he certainly could escape from the beings in white. Or is that the drugs talking?

No, he could do this. He had to if he was to live his life again.
He mustered his reserved strength and sat up. They had even left one of the railings off! Escape would be easier had he had all his abilities. Weakly he flung his bare legs over the side of the torture table and began to free himself by pulling the tube out of his nose and throat. He was almost free!

“Ahduontoahath, Tyler!” came a yell in that weird language from an unseen guard in the darkness.

“Let me go!” he yelled. “Let me go! Let me go home! I promise not to say a word about this place! I’ll stay silent! Just let me go free!”

“Ekanthdoahat. Sowree.”

Another guard dressed in white came in and helped the other slide the tube back in. This time, he was strapped to the table. Feeling hopeless to never see his family and friends again, he slumped back into a sleep. Oh... great... more... grugs...

The next he knew, he could sense light hitting his eyelids. It wasn’t the light that was shining above before. This was sunlight! Slowly opening his eyes to make sure it was real, he was even more surprised to see his mother sitting in a chair by his side.

“Oh good, you’re awake, Ty,” his mother crooned. “We were worried.”

“We? Who’s we?”

“Well, myself, the whole family, and the staff here. They told us about last night.”

*Last night? How did she know what the creatures did to him last night?* “What do you mean?” he inquired.

“Wow, you must’ve really been out of it yesterday! They said that you were trying to escape from your bed and the nurses had to put your nasal tube back in. The doctors said that you’re lucky that there might not be any complications from all that activity! What do you remember about the surgery?”
The wailing pierced my heart. I reached my wit’s end. I felt profound disappointment in myself and the abilities I presumed would come naturally. Here I stood, hating my own child. This tiny baby screamed and arched in my arms, but I couldn’t do anything to comfort her.

“Is she hungry?” my husband called from the sanctuary of our bed.

“I already tried feeding her, but she wouldn’t latch on. I’m not doing it right. It hurts so bad! I thought this would be easier.” I started to cry, but her tears outweighed mine.

“What about her diaper? Could she be wet?” He should get off his butt and see for himself! I stormed into the bedroom so he could hear the full extent of her screams.

“I just changed her twenty minutes ago. She can’t be wet; she hasn’t eaten anything!”

“Okay, don’t get mad at me. I’m just trying to help.” He pushed off the bed and slammed the door. I hated him for his ability to break away. I’d gone through nine months of hell; I wanted him to take a turn. He could tune her out and sleep all night long, but the second our daughter whimpered, my ears perked like a bloodhound.

“Come on, Honey. Shhhhh. Shhhhh. It’s okay. Momma’s here. Shhhhh.” I cradled her head into my swollen chest, hugging her body to mine, cursing those stupid books I spent months pouring over. They told me nothing about nights like these. One suggested a mother’s heartbeat would soothe a crying baby every time. Another said that dark rooms and soft humming would quiet them down. None of them mentioned how bad my entire body would ache.

I tried singing to her, but shrill screams sliced through my lullaby.

“Oh, God…come on baby…mommy needs to sleep.”

I remembered the football hold. I’d seen my baby sister hang in a trance for hours in my dad’s arms like that. How did it go? I twisted her tiny limbs around my forearm, cradled her chin in my hands and pulled her tight against my side. She continued screaming, slobber dripping into my palm. Why doesn’t anyone tell you it’s this hard?

“Do you think we should take her to the doctor?” My husband materialized in the room again, with an ingenious new solution.
“We? What’s this “we” crap? I’m the one who’s been up with her for the last week! You’ve been sleeping through everything!” I resumed my game of Rubick’s cube with my daughter’s body.

“Excuse me for having to go to work!”
“Don’t you think what I do is work around here?”
“Just give her to me!”
“No, I’ve got it.”
“Obviously not,” he muttered.
“Fine, you try.” I shoved her into his arms and exploded out the front door. The February chill blasted my face. I could still hear her screams, muffled and almost bearable. My breasts ached into my armpits, my head hurt, and my eyeballs felt like they’d fall out from exhaustion.

I thought about taking a walk, but I knew I’d feel guilty, so I plopped down on the steps. The cold cement felt like heaven underneath the swelling and stitches from childbirth. I pulled my knees into my chest and hugged myself. I buried my head into my knees and moaned. I wanted to curl into a ball and sleep for days, but I unwound my limbs and stood. I started to stretch, but raising my arms sent a shock of pain through my chest. I pulled open the door, took a breath to steady myself, and descended into motherhood hell.

“Here, give her to me please,” I said as I opened my arms to my child.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with her. Nothing works.” My husband looked like he could rip out his hair and run naked down the street. I knew he understood, even if he’d only glimpsed my agony.

“No, she doesn’t need to go to the doctor. Why don’t you go upstairs and get some sleep? I’ll get you when it’s your turn.”

I flipped off the bedside lamp with one hand, balancing my baby in the other, and sunk back onto the bed. I opened my shirt and offered her my breast, but she choked herself trying to scream and eat at the same time. I rolled onto my back and laid her across my chest. I wrapped my arms over her so she couldn’t move, and held her as she wailed. I hummed so she felt the vibrations through my chest, and I closed my eyes. I shut out the noise, and laid still. Within seconds, she fell asleep!

Afraid to move, I held my breath and listened to the silence. Had I really done it? Suddenly, a noise broke the silence. A tiny baby snort, followed by a quick inhale of breath then a loud exhale. This tiny creature who came from me now lay in blissful sleep! Maybe I didn’t need a manual after all.
I grew up in a religious family. We held family scripture study every single night, except weeknights and Saturdays. Mom and Dad would start gathering the family in around 7 pm. Their logic was that it would take about an hour to complete the reading, and at 8 o’clock, all the kids would have to get in their beds and either read or do homework for an hour before lights out at nine. This was the long-standing rule on the weeknights of my grade-school years.

Though seven was the appointed time for family scripture study to begin, us kids had to be gathered from the far corners of the neighborhood. Friends were called, Nintendo’s and televisions shut off, other activities left where they were, and all of us herded into the living room. Twelve kids can take a while to round up.

My toddler sister was the only one ever excited to come. Of course, that’s because my Mom would say something like, “Are you ready to read scriptures, Katie? Hurry and go into the living room before you miss it.” Katie would then rush into the living room, chunky legs slicing through the air beneath her in a way strangely reminiscent of Buzz Light Year, and enter the living room. Once there, she would throw both legs straight out in front of her and land squarely on her rump. I always wondered how she managed to not hurt herself, but I suppose the padded diaper helped.

About 7:45 we would all finally be gathered. The scripture reading would commence.

Of course, other things commenced too.

The reading always had a background murmur of friendly sibling diatribes: “Would you stop touching me!” “Mom, tell him to stop looking at me,” and “Dad, she’s breathing on me on purpose!” There were also the rustling sounds of those not paying attention, soft giggling, siblings being slapped, arguments over who gets to read the longest verse in the chapter, and the crying, screaming, and general tantrum-throwing that comes packaged along with all these things.

And then there were the ways in which Mom and Dad unwittingly contributed. Dad would be yelling at the kids to be good while Mom tried to read spiritual stories over him. Sometimes one dialogue would run into another.

“Boys,” my dad would be trying not to yell, “if you don’t listen…”

“‘Behold,’” Mom would read, “‘I say unto thee, if thou dost not repent—’”

“I’m gonna kick your butts clear up around your shoulder blades!”
“And now behold—” my dad would begin.

“Hush,” my mom would yell.

All us kids would fall into fits of laughter while Mom and Dad gazed around the room with looks of utter bewilderment.

Then there were the outright contradictions. Once my brother, Noah, was lying on the floor, messing around with a toy and not paying attention. Mom told him to sit up and pay attention. He did more than this: he stood completely up onto his feet. My father then yelled at him to sit down.

“Noah,” my mother said crossly, “sit up!”

He stood.

“Noah,” my dad chimed in, “sit down!”

Mom and Dad look at each other and start laughing, which then leads to another thirty minutes or so of upheaval before we could return to the subject matter at hand.

Finally about 8:45 pm we would finish. We’re still on verse five, out of thirty, but we resolve to finish the chapter tomorrow night.

We always left off with a family prayer, during which we all knelt in a circle and held hands. Of course, if there was any bitterness from arguments that started during the reading, there would be fighting about who had to hold whose hand.

The prayer itself would be riddled with giggles, hand-squeezing, eyes peeking open and shut to see what others in the circle were doing, and other general inattentiveness to the spiritual side of things.

Afterward, the tender backs of several heads would be slapped for irreverence. Then the whole gang would be herded down the stairs to get ready for bed. At this point, I generally sat down on the couch and listened to the chaos that was bedtime. Being older, I had the luxury of staying up later than the younger siblings.

The pandemonium continued—arguing, fighting crying, etc—while teeth were brushed, jammies were donned, beds were turned down, and everyone realized with frantic alarm that they weren’t ready for tomorrow’s school day. However, from where I sat it was now a muffled chaos, a problem belonging to a different part of the house.

I would sit back and enjoy the relative silence. We are supposed to have this joyful scripture gathering every day. After each session, however, no one tries very hard to pretend we’ll all do this again tomorrow night. Then, when Sunday comes again, we’ll make our resolutions once more, until that session is over as well.

Blood curdling screams come from downstairs.

“What happened?”
“He hiiiiit meeeeee!”
“Well, he was standing on my shirt.”
“I swear, if you boys don’t stop fighting and get into bed in five minutes—stop biting your brother!”

I chuckle to myself, glad I’m not my parents. Give it a week, two at most, and we’ll all be laughing about this. But only during the times that we aren’t trying to read scriptures.

Sunday school tells us that the scriptures were written for our day; that the olden-day prophets saw our day and wrote the scriptures for us. I can’t help but wonder if they saw scripture study such as my family had. Maybe this is precisely how they saw it, and the joke’s on us.

Somewhere, a great many wise men from another time are having a fine chuckle at our expense.
I first met her in the hospital. I was having surgery, she was having trouble breathing. It was a small local hospital, not prepared for the difficulty she was having. She needed to be transferred to another location, where they could more properly care for her. I watched as they wheeled her away, and for a moment, our eyes met. No words were spoken, but we knew: we would never forget each other, no matter what happened.

A few days later, I went to see her. She was sleeping, not moving at all. She had wires leading from her chest to the monitors, watching for every sign of life. She wasn’t breathing on her own. There was a huge machine next to her, pumping air in, pumping it out, pulsing rhythmically with the beeping of the monitors. She was alive, and I was relieved. I watched her there, day after day.

After a week, they thought she should breathe on her own, so they removed the tubes. Help! She’s arrested. CODE BLUE! Nurses rushing, the doctor is there! Where’s the tube? Force it down. Force it! Keep trying! There. She’ll be okay.

Back on the breathing machine. Pumping air in, pumping it out, pulsing, pulsing. She looked so small. Tubes to breathe, tubes to eat. She still can’t move, can’t see. But I notice something...she is crying! I reach to touch her hand, to let her know I’m there. She puts my hand on her head. “My head hurts,” she seems to say. I rest my hand there, touch her, let her know things will get better.

They do. Days come, machines go, and she is ready to go home. I help gather her clothes, her things. I softly kiss her, and feel the pulsing, pulsing of her heartbeat. My baby girl! I wrap her up, safe and warm, and bring her home with me.
Poetry Section
I hadn’t forgotten the pain,
but you had remembered it best;
with those cuts on your arm and
curling iron burns on your wrist.
I knew better than to wonder
how you used the iron; you never curled
your hair—never burned it
into grasping, crisped spider-leg
submission; it was always straight,
plain like your sad, unsmiling face.
Tall grass rises past white lines—
tangled, wild,
    a child’s hair—
her hair, blowing
    in the breeze,
brushed by smoke and CFCs.

Paper sign: ripped, shredded at its fringe,
meaningless
babble,
philosophy about economy,
    held between two tall metal spikes,
urging her to ignore the patriot calls of sunflowers,
dreadful
in the dirt; nourished by old flesh
and a black trash can, saying
THANK YOU FOR NOT LITTERING—
though the wrapper-riddled ground
is dusted with Hiroshima’s ashes
and a burned Talmud
brimming with suicide.

Who cares any more?
The bus passed, she was late,
and now the stop is meager comfort:
Her toes curl with the burn
of wishing for weightlessness—
the sunflowers have stopped screaming
    their endless banter—
or maybe she forgot to listen as she
    walked on.

She wipes dusk from her eyes—
a white car passes—
two trucks, one red, one
    a dry-water blue.
A dozen minutes when nothing matters,
    step
        after
    step
after
step,
and the sunflowers have gone to sleep,
dreaming of white signs

with black letters
and bloody reasoning.
Then a haircut swings by
in a convertible
    Top-down,
    with a slice of American radio—
no Spanish intended—
hers own headphones dead,
hers ears empty of needed noise,
    replaced by
billboards that she reads five,
    no, seven times,
she walks so slow.

But she persists
on that little black strip
    be-tween
the fading white line
from Southern California to Maine
and the matted grass,
like a child’s hair;
    no, like her hair;
long and beautiful,
coffee with cream,
cinnamon with peaches,
cherry blossoms with cyanide,
all the things she’s missing walking
    on the side of the road.
Go, children, and tell me what you see; 
while the trees still stand; 
while rivers walk, and before they run; 
while the grizzly feasts and salmon swim in friendly spite; 
go, children, from under the street lamp, and tell me what you see.

Do you see the goddess as she lifts the apple and eats for you? 
Do you see the terror flee from your faces as she falls from the sky? 
Do you see the champion dying? 
Do you see the Goddess?

Tell your mother, children, and whisper to your father. 
Wonder about your own children and yell. 
Shout to your father and whisper a smile to your mother.

Do you see the feeling, children? 
Or do you only feel the seeing? 
Is there a heart, child, deep in the woods? 
Or did it fall into red slumber from the bullet that grew in its spine? 
Answer this, and tell the others.

So rest, children; dream of running; dream of playing; rest forever, and be children of a beautiful woman no more; frown because of a hidden memory; cry for an unknown future. Dream, children. The Goddess is here, hidden in the invisible constellation.
After a winter so wild your beautiful blossoms lay nestled in a luscious bed of green grass. The stark contrast of your brilliant yellows strewn across a carpeted floor of kelly green stir my senses and make my heart soar.

Alas, here comes the man with his spray bottle of evil to drive you from the safety and comfort of your home. He desires the mundane, the severe, unbroken view. His neighbors must look upon his lawn with awe and not the disgust shown the yard down the street.

But ha! Drifting, twirling on the wind, lighter than a feather the fluffy seed of hope hears the death knell of his brothers and lands. The man has lost this round.
It hurts him every time he stands on it and remembers what it was like to run.
His memory hurts more than the pain.
Deep cut and swollen timbers, they say that the valley was filled with cottonwoods before the storm.
Swollen orange river rages over rock and silt washes away.
Fleeting flashes of maroon and white, glimpses of courage forgotten in newspapers and time.
Paralyzed by melancholy with every footstep, in agony he climbs.
Creaking, snapping, crushed brown door pushed aside.
His light clear blue meets the lavender.
Shadows of gray moving with the wind, he sits and remembers and cannot move.
Coverings made by unknown hands drape wire lines.
Swaying with her movements they seem to smile.
She tells me that she likes to hang them.
They hang for hours in the shade of the Populus Alba and talk.
She listens while they talk to her.
They grant her memories and she cleans them, holds them and then folds.
Her wicker basket fills and then she leaves her haven of drooping trees and weeps.
Two hours

He lay naked in his mother’s arms, on the damp hospital bed
Surrounded by smiling faces
His breath came in gasps
Tiny mouth open like a fish’s
His skin was warm, wrinkled, and red
She raised his head
The light shone on his closed eyelids
His arms twitched uncontrollably
His skin hanging off his thin arms
His navy, not baby, blue eyes opened briefly
The light reflected off his eyes, tiny golden dots
He stretched out on his back
Arms open, fingers spread, he soaked in the warmth of his mother’s arms
His whole life stretched out before him
He was young, fragile, innocent
Everything was new, fragile, wonderful

Seventeen years

He lay naked on the cold wooden dock, on the deep glacier lake
Surrounded by vast green forests
His breath came in gasps
His mouth open like a fish’s
His skin was icy cold, rigid, and red
He raised his head
The sun shone on his closed eyelids
His arms shivered uncontrollably
His skin tight on his strong arms
His navy, not baby, blue eyes opened for a moment
The sun reflected off the lake, a long golden stream
He stretched out on his back
Arms open, fingers spread, he soaked up the warmth of the summer sun
His whole life stretched out before him
He was young, restless, innocent
Everything was new, restless, wonderful
Her

He lay naked in her arms on the soft, warm sheets
Surrounded by her sweet smell
His breath came easy and slow
His mouth open like a fish’s
Her skin was soft, smooth, and pink
He lifted her head, kissed her closed eyelids
She trembled slightly
His hand on the skin of her arm
His navy, not baby, blue eyes held her for a moment
Light burned between them, a soft gentle passion
He stretched out on his back
Arms open, fingers spread, he soaked up the her warmth
Their whole life stretched out before them
They were young, dreaming, together
Everything was new, hopeful, wonderful

A lifetime

He lay naked in his patient gown, on the hard hospital bed
Surrounded by sobbing faces
His breath came in gasps
His mouth open like a fish’s
His skin was, clammy, wrinkled, and pale
He raised his head, the light shone on his closed eyelids
His arms trembled uncontrollably
The skin was thick on his tired arms
His navy, not baby, blue eyes opened for a moment
A light shone from his eyes, a fading golden glow
He stretched out on his back
Arms open fingers spread, he soaked up the warmth of the loved ones around him
His whole life stretched out before him
For a moment he was young, peaceful, innocent
Everything was wonderful, peaceful, finished.
Through her icy
stare past
her pressed lips

Across the table to her
tiny trembling
hand

Down her damped cheeks
and across her still
smiling
lips.

Into her eyes where
I sleep
starving

back to some happy day
that she won’t
want
to remember

to the lonely hour
in time somewhere
where she
won’t care
to linger
She slowly enters cubic rooms
where stale bleached walls
may disappoint.
She shakes his hand; the practiced man
she’d never met
nor will again
– hiding behind sterile veils –
to end what she began
in haste.
Linoleum speckled with her life:
to haunt her . . . only in
her dreams;
As silent sobs choke through her core.

She leaves the tainted, erased walls
where faulty mirrors never hang.

She rushes in this sunlit room,
wallpapered with pink welcome beams.
She holds his hand, this loving man
she’s battled with –
and will again.
Revealed before a scrubbing green;
begin new breath,
end anonymous. (her pain)
Tiles hidden with a budding life,
to wake her in
a wishful slumber;
cries complete the entwined souls.

They leave the painted wholesome walls;
the vibrant new visage reflects.
Time clicks slowly by in a never changing view
Seconds, by minutes, by hour, by day; frozen
Start to finish, finish to start, no change
Release evades, freedom eludes, capture maintains
Yet soars my soul to a distant plane
Where time flows free, dreams float soft, emotions transform
And I find me.
Lightning strikes the Kremlin Wall
A baby wails at birth.
Learns survival, climbs through intrigue, hides in deceit
The infant cries

Village- pillage; innocent-ravage
Young animals on spikes
The child laughs

Love. Matrimony.
Tranquility is almost skin deep.
Loss is rage, rage is frenzied brutality.
The building blocks of Red Square bleed.

Games of torture—play in Novgorod
Bodies swim through red water
The River is clogged.
Oiled frying pans and human skewers
Blood and steam and death and heat
The man laughs.

War against foe.
War against friend.
There is no friend or foe, only war.
The autocrat kills.

Son follows father.
Anger begets anger begets death.
Death of the royal line, by the king’s own hand.
The father mourns.

No heir—will be the Trouble of the Times
The Tsar breathes harder.

Pieces in motion on a pious chessboard.
And the man dies.
I begin this story with simplicity because I want to understand. I want to lead the situation, but I know it will be difficult. I run and I run until I believe that I transform into a silhouette. I say, “Hello, how are you?” to the sun, but the sun is silent with reds, oranges, and yellows. I sleep under the sun and I bathe in its beauty. I write in the ground – I love you sun, I love you - but the sun says nothing. I send a message that is attached to a balloon. The balloon is a frog that looks like a balloon. It is round, it is light, it sings, and it is green. I hope that my message arrives to the sun, but I don’t think that it matters because the sun knows my feelings. The sun sees me smile. I am the silhouette of the sun.
When the full moon sets
the sun also rises.

The middle ground is full
of
silvers and gold.
Bold tales are told -
Dionysian dreams
stop time
and
capture moments.
moments only found
in between
setting moons
and
rising suns.

The only realm
for dreamers.
I can redirect you to NoWheresVille.

You ask, how do you get to NoWheresVille?
Well, my friend, it's a very simple road.
First head on down until you see a light.

Just turn around.
Up ahead will be a fork in the road.
The right when you don't care anymore.

Folks youwill, and sometimes you'll feel lost along the way.

Just keep head North. Will move pretty quick, but don't worry, once you hit social awkwardness, go Left.

Don't get distracted.
But if things get you.

Folowing thatSweet.
Towards the West.
You might die, but there -
Sun, Sea, and Gin.
Paradise for a fool and a large dream.

The Right goes up to a lake called, Son Earth.
Ended up there because it's a deep lake.
I reckon lots have dippd in that there lake.
Both roads lead up there.

Yes, ain't nothin in life but the Big 3.
But they can only help you if you want.
Till, I ain't so spiritual at heart.
I can tell you this -
In winter
The Aspen is a naked statue.
   A graceful silhouette
against the white crystals
   of a cold steel sky.
Stripped of golden raiment,
She reveals delicate limbs
   of feathery plumes
in beautiful asymmetry
   Reaching for the sun.

Beside her
The Russian Olive writhes in shapelessness
   With gnarled branches,
   Like arthritic fingers,
That claw at each other in a tangled mass
   Heavily bending to the ground.

Winter’s solitude strips all private pretences.
What lay beneath the surface
   is exposed to view
In the stark stillness
   Of a long winter.
There is no room
in our sexed society
for platonic love.

No more can I embrace
my friend without the world
assuming.

No more the friendly cheek-kiss
between brothers
in faith or family or friendship.

No more hand-in-hand or
arm-in-arm
across the campus.

No more Green Gables—
No more Anne Shirleys and Dianas.

You’ve forced us in the closet.
Mark 12:44
...For they did cast in of their abundance; but she of her want...

She sits with Einstein eating bagels on Sunday.
The paper unfolded in reckless piles on a small, round table.
Banks and Presidents
mixed with Obituaries and Movies
spread more easily than the cream cheese
from her stuttering hand.

Yesterday, her prodigal son – tan, bald, and inspired
by yoga’s Third Warrior – told her she was
crazy.
So crazy
that she was driving him
insane.
So insane
that he fired up the lawnmower and cut the shape of an arrow
pointed toward the house with the letters F.B.I.
out front.

Her skin, marked like a map of America’s Highways, trembled then.
Everything about her came in fives – her shoes, her clothes, her height –
the finger lines stinging red on his left cheek
when she scolded him and sent him to his time-out place.
Luck brought him a chair and a stereo
to drown fifty years
of her generosity.
If, at the end of a day in spring, you should smell like dirt from the seedbed in the garden - a window to earthworms and escargot – what then, at the end of a winter’s day when the chill, full-grown, has sealed shut the unblossomed pheromones?

Do you smell of woodsmoke and cedar or soup and bread? Has your skin grown acrid in cigarettes and whiskey? Or does water follow you in the wings of snow angels trampling on boots?

Beloved, when you return at the end – our beginning – can I, like Tink, sniff you out of your Peter Pan sweat – socks soaked in old grease and fried chicken? Or will my nose, misled, forget the day my freckles sang?
Two-by-two we rise
over head and feet of a standby coffin
packed in ice
while Kodak Moments become surreal
framed in pine
and the faces of the fallen.
Laughter stilled.
Tears frozen behind eyelids permanently shut.
No white flowers
will burst forth here on this landscape
too dry to spin
a spontaneous crown of anything but thorns.

We bury our dead.
We give them wings
because the desert browns cannot camouflage
blood or a body
glowing in political flames unforgotten
nor left behind
to be desecrated by sand and scorpions.

The whispered prayers
become the updraft under metal wings -
words we heard crisp in our heads
as children
when letting the new kid play was the bravest
thing to do.
And now, a glass-chill made cooler in the rounded
heat of our hands.
We ask for ice,
one cube,
and place it in the hollow between our teeth.
Our tongues curl,

Our cheeks suck in as it melts,
and the cold drips
down the back of our throats.
We cannot escape
the heat of the day or the knowing.
Why can’t I be a poet-ess?
Why can’t my sentences possess
The curves and flows my body shows
And in my double chromosomes the exes that have filled my home
With hugs and kisses, what I miss is
Moving in the swirls and swishes.

Must I be a he—slash—she?
Why is it that my words must be
As narrow and as barren as the bars on darkened Alcatraz?
Why can’t my voice be soft and sure
And sweet and strong and kind and pure?
Why must I leave X on the floor,
Abandon it for
Why?
A soul on paper
though a pen
humans express
what’s dear to them.
To confide in a friend,
to talk without judges,
to create and explore
worlds without end.
This is why I write.

To tell of moments
frozen in time,
the kind you’ll never forget.
To tell of the beauty
of the land that we walk
the mountains forever rising.
This is why I write.

To tell of the things
that only I’ve seen.
To feel the freedom
only fresh paper brings.
This is why I write.
The pencil journey, created by reader and writer—equilateral. Unconscious without your will to read—survive. with me and I you—we will cohabitate on the page. One line at a time.
Crunching, crispy crust
invites my footprint.
Arms of naked beauty
reach toward cotton skies.
A tear runs down my cheek-
it isn’t mine.
Frozen faeries fall
from the sky-
kissing eyelashes.
Cold lonely earth
asks for warmth-
patience is the answer.
When bristles of green sprout
from the earth-
then your arms will be full,
and I will have
apples.
Tell me, my friend,
have you found the threads
of your song on the end of a cat's tail
or in the stream of a gutter on a turquoise day?
We know what it means to be searching, you and I
In the soft quiet andante of music notes,
the salt crusted shores of pink seas
and the symmetry of flight feathers
we are looking for our psalms, our melodies.
But half the ballad was already written,
it began the first day I saw you
covered in ash and sparks.
Between the equinoxes and the lavender winds,
and the spaces between words
I am waiting for you there,
as I have always been
even when worlds and time serrated
our skins and blew our paths apart.
I have always been beside you, friend.
Our atoms stretch across eons of time,
our first parent was a star.

City of echoes,
I will mend the places where you are broken
and everything that is beautiful in me
is brought to light because of you.
We came in search of Vikings,
We found them in the museums selling chocolate
and in the streets, sailing on skateboards.
Their village a charming warren of reds and greens
and tiny gardens of basil and lilac.
Pale, pale hair and sapphire eyes.
The recovered ghost ships printed in their DNA.
She is a Raven
This girl
As an eagle
It works
Soaring through
Atmospheres of
Lust licking
Each others
Feathers
Birdlike
Tongues
Moistened
Editor Section
The street was deserted. Cord saw a blur around the one street lamp that was producing light. The blur was probably not really there, but was the result of her not having slept in more days than she could remember. The glass bulb was cracked and jagged like a broken tooth. The moisture from the snow made the light flicker. Cord’s eyes tried to adjust to the unsure light.

She heard the flag at the high school flapping in the winter wind, but she could not see it in the dark. Someone whose only job was to turn the light on to illuminate our Star Spangled Banner had possibly started drinking late or early in his workday and failed to fulfill his seemingly unimportant task. Maybe he was just sick and tired of flipping the same damn switch day in and day out with no recognition. Maybe he just wanted to see if anyone would notice if for once he didn’t flip the switch. Cord noticed. She probably wouldn’t have noticed the school or the flag had the light been turned on, but the absence of it caught her attention. She thought of her own high school 1700 miles away in the unknown Louisiana town. Bunkie High School Class of 2000. Who names a town Bunkie? No one had really noticed her absences from school in her senior year until they reached ten and threatened her graduation. But she’d pulled it off at finals, barely. Cordelia Lucas, the first to graduate in her family. Some accomplishment. The class of 2000. They were supposed to be something special because they were the class of the new millennium. Cord didn’t feel special. The clock on the front of the high school struck two.

Cord walked down the snow-covered sidewalk in no particular direction. Her head was maybe not quite as bowed as it would have been had there been people around, but she still got a very good view of the ice-covered sidewalk. She was walking in a very definite direction: forward. She simply didn’t care or even notice where that “forward” was taking her. In the past week, Cord had started taking these midnight walks every night to avoid the putrid, cat pee smell of her apartment and the lumpy mattress’s accompanying nightmares.

A few blocks from the apartment she’d been forced to move into there was an oversized, knot-riddled maple tree. Its branches were painted with a layer of snow and frost that covered its ugly black nakedness. The trees behind it looked like angry porcupines. There had been a few brave leaves hanging onto the branches of the maple tree for the past few weeks, but in the nights since she’d been taking her walks, there was only one. One leaf clinging to the brittle, frozen branch of the maple tree. The leaf itself was brown, crumpled, and frail, shaking perilously over the street below. Cord wondered how in the winter wind it could still be attached to such a fragile branch. Maybe it was stuck, not really attached anymore by
living fibers, only frozen to the branch. Perhaps with the next thaw, the leaf would fall. The next few days would surely bring the leaf’s freedom and hers.

Cord was calm, somehow peaceful with the decision she had made. She wasn’t even sure what had prompted the actual thought process and subsequent decision, but it was now set firmly in her mind. It must have been that old story she’d read in high school. Strange the things we remember. What was the name of that story? Something about a leaf. Cord rifled through the files in her mind, trying to pull out the name of the author: O’Hara? O’Malley? O. Henry! That was it, O. Henry. Maybe her high school education had paid off after all. The thought of this last leaf had brought that story to the forefront of her mind, meandering through the broken pieces of her past. When the final leaf took the dive, so would she. She would jump from the 25th St. Bridge across town and see if anyone would notice her absence this time. She liked the idea of being in control of her death but not of the time. She had to leave something up to fate. She had only to wait for this sign from the universe that it was time for her to finally and mercifully let go. There would be no artist here to paint the leaf into immortality as there had been in O. Henry’s story. No one to stop her descent.

The cold was biting and eating through Cord’s thin gloves and oversized coat. Her hands were numb in her moth-eaten pockets. The needles of ice and chill could no longer hurt her through the merciful numbing that had come with the passage of time. Her apartment was unheated and afforded her little comfort. At least walking out on the street, the walls didn’t close in on her and the air was somewhat cleaner than the dusty, asbestos flavored soup she was expected to breathe in her apartment. She watched the leaf blowing in the canyon breeze and wondered if it would finally detach itself from the tree and fall to the street below.

“My dolly’s gonna fall, Daddy, catch it.”

Crash. Dolly’s loud. She makes too much noise when people are sleeping. Daddy’s clumsy. Daddy’s always clumsy in the night time. Silly. He plays games.

“Daddy, made an uh-oh, didn’t he, Princess?”

“Daddy, I’m not a baby. I know how to say accident. It’s not an uh-oh, Daddy. I’m a big girl.”

“Yes you are, Princess. You’re a big girl. My big girl Princess Cordelia. You’re my special big girl Princess, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Daddy.”
“You’re a big girl who knows how to play big girl games.”
“I don’t want to play tonight, Daddy. I’m tired. It’s time for
sleep.”
“Not just yet, Princess. Games first, sleep later, remember the
rules?”
“I don’t like the rules, Daddy. I don’t want to play. I want
Mommy. Where’s Mommy, Daddy? Where’s my Mommy?”
Daddy doesn’t like it when I cry. But I can’t help it. He doesn’t
listen. I don’t like these games, but if I don’t play, he gets mad. Daddy’s
mean. But Daddy gives me pretty dresses to wear. Daddy’s nice. I love
my Daddy. He’s just a silly.
“Come on now, Princess. Don’t you want to help me find Mr.
Tickle?”
I hate Mr. Tickle.

Headlights illuminating her face and blaring car horn told
Cordelia that she had walked into the middle of the street. What were
people doing driving around at two o’clock in the morning anyway? Jerk.
Princess Cordelia, he called her. Cord hated her first name. Cordelia
sounded so old fashioned. She hated her nickname more; it reminded her
that she was from the hick-town Bunkie. She wished that her parents had
just called her by her middle name. Megan was so much more…more
what? Normal. It was just Megan. Why couldn’t she just have been
Megan?

In school, she’d always tried to get her teachers to call her Megan.
But “Cord” always stuck. She remembered how the kids used to tease her
about her name, especially the boys. She pretended not to care, tried to
play tough. She told herself she could take it and that it didn’t matter. All
that mattered was getting through school and being the best. Maybe if she
was the best in the class, her mom would love her more, be with her more,
protect her more. Cord glanced at the darkened elementary school adjacent
to the park. In frustration and boredom, she picked up a jagged chunk of
ice like a dagger and threw it in the direction of the school. Cord heard a
loud ping from the light pole she’d managed to hit. It sent a ringing
through her ears that penetrated to the core of her spine.

The bell is so loud. I don’t like it here. Who are all these people?
Scary strangers. I’m not supposed to talk to strangers. Why did Mommy
bring me here? She doesn’t love me. She wants to leave me. Bad things
happen without Mommy.
“Mommy, no. Don’t make me stay here without you. Bad things.”

“Honey, nothing bad is going to happen to you. It’s just school. You like to learn. You’re a smart girl. You’re a big girl now and it’s time for you to go to school.”

“No, Mommy. I’m not a big girl. Bad things happen when you’re not here. Don’t leave me alone, please.”

Have to be a big girl. But can’t stop crying.

“Sweetie, let go of Mommy’s leg and give me a hug and a kiss. I’ll be back to pick you up this afternoon. I promise.”

Maybe if I don’t kiss her, she won’t leave.

“No, no kisses. You stay with me, Mommy, please.”

Mommy’s face is wet. Why is she crying? She’s leaving me.

“Don’t go, Mommy.”

“Bye-bye, Sweetie. Mommy loves you bunches and bunches.”

“Mommy!”

I don’t care who hears me or sees me. I want my Mommy. Bad things only happen when I’m not with her.

The leaf still hung on. Damn it. Cord turned to face the park across the street. She jaywalked. She didn’t feel like walking the half of a block to the legal crosswalk. The houses surrounding the park were dilapidated, but brightly colored with peeling paint that changed colors with the blinking of the neon sign of the liquor store on the corner. Drug houses the girls at the store said. When did she start listening to the ridiculous girls that she worked with? Her mind, yet another casualty of her unnoticed absence from the real world. She was losing her intelligence to her pitiful surroundings. Soon she’d be one of them, those mindless girls who work in liquor stores and gas stations and talk about the slut on the corner who stole their boyfriends. Who was she kidding? She already was one of them.

Cord shuffled down the street. Slipping occasionally on the ice, she’d have to catch her balance to avoid falling on the cold concrete. The filth in the street disgusted Cord only a little less than the filth she was escaping. Empty, soggy cigarette cartons blended with the mountains of blackened snow that was slowly melting since the last storm. A newspaper tumbled and flitted across the street in the wind, and pasted itself to a fire hydrant almost obscured from view by the piles of snow. A siren a few streets away blared above the sound of the whipping wind. From the house next to the liquor store she heard a door slam. “Get out, you freakin’ jerk! Don’t you even think about steppin’ yo’ ugly ass back up in this
“Why is she looking at me like that, like I’m some sort of monster or like I’m the one who has betrayed her? She’s only read the first page. My hands are sweating. It’s so freaking hot in here. Sweltering. Where did I read that word? I have to stay calm. Dr. Ross said to stay calm, just state the facts plainly. She has to understand.”

“What? How could you say that, Cord? I can’t believe that you would say that about your own father!”

“Mom, please listen. I’m not making this up, I swear. If you’ll just keep reading…”

“No, I can’t. I can’t even look at you, Cord.”

She can never look me in the eyes, even when she’s not mad. The letter crushed in her shaking hand.

“I wish you wouldn’t call me that. I’ve asked you a thousand times to call me Megan. Cord sounds like a hick.”

“That’s not the point, Cor…Megan. I want to know where you thought up these lies. It’s that trash you’ve been reading.”

The tears won’t stop flowing. Nose running. I’m a wreck. Why can’t people ever look decent during these moments? Why does emotion have to be so ugly? I thought I was ready for this. I knew she wouldn’t be happy about what I said. What did I expect?

“Mom, you’re not making any sense. This has nothing to do with anything I’ve been reading. I’m telling you the truth. Dr. Ross said I needed to tell you the truth. It was easier to write it. You think I like saying this about my own father?”

“Oh, so it’s Dr. Ross. She’s the one. I knew that no good would come of seeing that counselor. There are some people who are just meant to be different. You should just accept that you’re different. No counselor can help you.”

“Nice, Mom. Thanks.”

There is no talking to her like this. I should just try to calm down. I’ll go see Dr. Ross tomorrow. She’ll know how to handle this.

“I didn’t mean it like that and you know it. I just mean that you don’t need a counselor because nothing happened to you. You listen to me, young lady. I don’t want to hear another word about this ever. I’m not going to tell your father about this conversation. One day I pray that God will wipe from my memory the trash that you have put there.”
“Not going to tell her father what?” He’s home. Crap.
“Nothing, Darryl. It’s not important. Just some more of her silly ideas.”

“No, Mom. You’re not going to blow it off this time. Dad, I told Mom the truth.”
“The truth about what? What are you talking about, Princess?”
I wish I had a knife. Fists clenched. I’m going to throw up.
“Don’t you ever call me that again. I told her what you did to me.”

“I really don’t know what you’re talking about, Sweetie. But I’m tired. Can we talk tomorrow?”
“No, Dad. I want you to admit it. Tell her the truth!”
Yelling. Can’t stop it. All-consuming anger, here it comes. My cheeks are on fire. I can’t breathe. Rushing waves in my ears. Throat thumping. Tight.
If I’m going down, he’s coming with me. I have to make Mom see him for what he is. She has to believe me.
“You know exactly what I’m talking about. You can’t lie anymore.”

His blurred and grotesque face through my tears.
“The games we used to play late at night in my room. It was secret you said. ‘Don’t tell Mommy. Big girls are allowed to have secrets. This is our special secret. Help Daddy find Mr. Tickle.’ I couldn’t…”
Breathe. “I didn’t…” Breathe. “How could I know any better?”
Mom’s face twisted with tears and the ugliness of what she was hearing. Dad’s face set like stone.
“How could I know? I was just a little girl! Four! Four years old! Five! Six! Tell her! Tell her how long it went on!! How could you do that to your own little girl? You bastard! How could I? My God!”
My hands flying, hitting, blind rage. Fire in my eyes and throat. The room is burning. I can’t breathe.
Hours, maybe minutes. “Get out. I want you out of my house, Cordelia. You are not my daughter if you believe that I would ever do those things to you. You can pack up tonight. Sherry, it’s time for bed. Say goodbye to Cordelia. We won’t be seeing her again…ever.”

He’s so calm, like he’s conducting one of his business transactions. What just happened? Dr. Ross doesn’t know what she’s talking about. Truth. She doesn’t know anything about truth or its
ugliness. Why won’t Mom say anything? Why won’t she tell him to let me stay?

No, Mommy. I’m not a big girl. Bad things happen when you’re not here. Don’t leave me alone, please.

“Mom?”

I can’t stop crying. I can’t breathe. I don’t care who hears me or sees me. I want my Mommy. Bad things only happen when I’m not with her.

She’s seriously just going to walk out of the room. The family picture fractured on the floor.

The ice cracked on the ground underneath Cord’s feet as she walked to the swings. The cold wind hit her firmly in the face. It felt like a frosty slap, but less painful than the fiery slaps of her father. The swing that she sat on took a few minutes to warm up underneath her and adapt to her body temperature. It squeaked rebellion with each swing. The swing set rocked. Cord went higher and faster. Higher and faster. It was colder swinging than just walking, but she liked it. It kept her awake, kept her in the present. She watched the leaf, it moved closer and farther away with each swing, but still it hung on. Cord held on backwards to the swing chains and got ready to jump just like she used to when she was a kid. She counted down, three, two, one…

“That’s twenty-three, twenty-four, and twenty-five, Mr. Robinson. Thank you for coming in. We’ll see you next week.”

Why does money have to be so dirty? It’s worse in the summer. His money always smells of too much cologne mixed with sweat. But there’s a man with a routine. That’s what makes life livable, normal. Banking hours. Routine. That’s normal.

“Megan, can you close your window for a minute? I need to speak with you.”

“Sure, Mr. Fielding.”

“Megan, you’ve been late three times this week, and last week you missed two days of work without calling in. I warned you that this behavior could not be tolerated. This is a bank, after all. We have rules and routines. Our customers count on us. I’m sorry, Megan. But I’m going to have to let you go.”

The fan does no good. It’s just moving the hot air around. Mr. Fielding should really consider not wearing a dark colored shirt if he’s going to sweat like that. He can’t seriously be firing me.
"But, Mr. Fielding, I tried to explain to you, I’ve just been feeling a little under the weather lately. It’s this heat wave. I think I’m coming down with something. I’m sorry about being late. I promise it won’t happen again.”

He’s not really going to fire me. Who would take my place? I can’t lose this job. I need this. I can’t go back home. This doesn’t make sense. Where was I the other day? I didn’t think I’d missed any work. He’s losing it. It’s the heat that’s making him crazy.

“I’m sorry, Megan. Please clean out your station. Your last paycheck will be mailed to you.”

So cold, like a machine. Like Dad. I can’t go home. I won’t go home.

A leaf brushed Cord’s cheek before it landed on the ground. She looked up quickly to see if it was her leaf from her maple tree. Was it time? No. Her leaf still hung on. Cord turned to go back to her hell hole. The sun would be coming up in a few minutes, and she’d have to start to work. Another day, another dollar. People had junk food and liquor to buy. What would they do without her? What was the point?

Cord looked at the ground as she walked, vaguely aware that the streets were starting to be peopled. She shoved her chapped hands roughly in her pockets to protect against the coldest hour of the morning. The dawn escaped from between two mountains, torturing Cord’s dark-accustomed eyes to the newly polished sun of the morning. She looked briefly over her shoulder at the tree one last time. Just as she did, her leaf detached itself from the branch. No wind had blown it. The branch didn’t move.

As the leaf started to fall straight downward, it caught hold of a bit of breeze blowing out of the canyon. The breeze lifted the little leaf over the busying street. Cord watched with relief as it floated freely through the air. Just as she would freely fall from the bridge into the river, no more pain, no more worries, no more connections tying her to her unwanted past. The leaf turned and twisted beautifully in the half-light. It passed the old man on the corner in the bright orange vest preparing to walk the kids safely through the crosswalk to the school. It passed the street light still flickering and dripping thawing snow from its cracked bulb. It flitted over a patch of brown grass that would soon start to be green, finally landing on the sidewalk at Cord’s feet. She looked at its frosted edges, the twisted brown skin of a life drained of all feeling and connection. Then she saw beyond the leaf the feet of someone standing directly in front of her. She looked up, startled. A soggy letter was clutched tightly in the person’s gloved hand. The first morning rays caught
the varying shades of graying auburn hair and illuminated familiar eyes. Hazel eyes washed with pain and tears, a few more lines around the edges, but still familiar, and beautiful. Eyes that looked deeply into Cordelia’s eyes, meeting them for the first time with understanding and pleading for forgiveness. Cord’s eyes began to fill with tears of her own.

“Mom?”
The machine keeps a constant flow
of poisons into the vulnerable places.
This liquid platinum fills in specified voids
along the disputed front,
conquers mutation but decimates breath.

For an instant, equilibrium
pounds into the open spaces.
Dry longing,
this sacrament is poured
through plastic tubes into lives
desperate from and for this ritual of renewal.

Just a hundred years ago
men bent their heads,
reverenced the scry stone
to read the fire air that formed
in shadows and ghosts.
They peered into the unknown to achieve
some new equation.

Yet here in Wing 4
of this Cancer Center,
men and women grasp for infusion—
a scientist sanctioned sap
eases life into the stream
while it extracts the very base.

We discover alchemy.
Big red numbers on my alarm clock read 8:20. *Late again.* Moaning in frustration, I shoot out of bed and trip over the homework I fell asleep doing.

“Shi…ugh… who left that…” I kick the homework and cross the hallway. Cold water from the bathroom faucet serves as my moisturizer. Thrusting my toothbrush through my mouth, I curse as I realize the paper I fell asleep writing is due today.

Back in my room, I sniff the jeans I snatched out of the pile from the floor. *Good enough.* My mascara wand stabs me in the eye. Again. My stomach vents its anger at being neglected. “I know. I know!” I rub it reassuringly as I half-sprint down the stairs.

Raking my fingers through my unkempt hair, I rip open the front door, and glance at the clock. A smug grin crosses my face as I hop in the car. 8:27—a new personal best.
Ines closed her eyes. The heat on the crowded bus was more than she could bear. She was headed from the beautiful city of Mar del Plata, Argentina to el capital – Buenos Aires. Life had not been fair with Ines, but never a word of complaint could be heard. She squeezed the hand of ten-year-old Cuchi who sat cramped between herself and the heavyset man, while also being buried in the weight of her sleeping sister. A look passed between the two that both comforted and frightened Ines. So young, so brave; still trying to carry her mother’s burdens. Ines felt a surge of love for Cuchi, a love that threatened her composure. She laid her chin on the head of her other sleeping baby and focused on the passing countryside. She watched as the fields of green blended into one with the occasional tree in the distance. If she tried hard she could turn that green into blue and that tree into a rock in the wave filled ocean, and comfort would come. Comfort was what she needed and always seemed to be seeking but like that distant tree, it was just out of her reach.

She was born into poverty. Her mother had been raised in a Catholic orphanage and she never knew her father. Her birth was the shame of her mother’s life. The fire and damnation that the nuns had emblazed into the heart of her mother, especially after her mother’s mortal sin, had been laid upon her – the product of that sin. It took her a long time to understand her mother and not judge her often times callous actions. What she had begun to see was that bitterness leads to bitterness and that was one trait she vowed would not be passed to her children. One thing her mother did give her was the joy of the ocean. From her infancy she was taken to the beaches that lined that beautiful resort town and that stretched, from her child’s eye, from one edge of the world to the other.

As a young girl, the beach was an equalizer. Those porteños, the rich kids, who lived in those high-rise plazas could not own the water, the sand or the joy. She was alive and that gave her every right to splash through the breaking tide. As all children come to find out, there comes that moment when innocence and childlike oblivion are stripped from their view, like the peeling of a fresh orange, and in its place is the clarity and understanding that childhood is over. That moment came early for Ines. She could still hear the high-pitched laughter that rang out of the children as they crowded her and began a first of many afternoon tauntings. She never knew that being poor was different and bad until that day. However, even in that moment she found refuge in the sound the water makes as it crashes towards land and the feel of the small drops of water being carried by the breeze that softly kissed her closed eyelids.

The beach was also where she met Miguel. Tall, with big everything – nose, hands, feet, personality. Always the storyteller, she could hear his
animated voice get louder as he talked about his passions and the way his words seemed to flow, even in an argument, in a way that hers never could. She remembered how he had noticed her during that first night and how much she had liked that. She was leaving when he finally approached and even now she couldn’t remember what he had said only that she, at that instant, was his.

As it does when love is involved, time flew. He had a way of seeing her, of loving her that no one had ever done before. He didn’t mind that her circumstances of life were different than his own. She naively thought that no one else would. She could recall the cold embrace she received from his mother and sister. They looked at her and she was a child again. The dividing line that she had thought was thinning as she aged was now the length of la Avenida de Julio. Miguel didn’t let that deter him; he was in love.

She remembered the quiet ceremony in front of the judge, the two of them alone. It was empowering to think she had someone to take on the world with. Her mother didn’t say much the day she told her they were to be married, “They will never accept you, querida. I wish for nothing more than your happiness but all I see for you is sorrow”.

Like all young love these words fell upon her ears and she misunderstood her mother’s wisdom for cruelty. She felt that every song she had heard about love was true and that every movie that she had seen of lovers beating the odds together was going to be the story of Miguel and Ines. It was their story, for a while. Miguel had dreams of following his father into the radio and movie industry. He was a thinker, a writer, an activist, and a poet. She would often listen to him and marvel at the man that he was and the fire he possessed. She can recall the moments in their little apartment when the problems of the world were solved over maté and pastries. Her mind went to the moment that she told him she was pregnant. It was raining; they were making their way to a dinner party. She had known for two days but it seemed as if the words wouldn’t come out. She had run to his office from the clinic that first day but at the door had felt overwhelmed and turned away. She had lain awake wondering what it was that was holding her back. It was as if a vice was turning her mouth closed tighter and tighter each time she tried to tell him. They had made it to the bus, and Miguel had stepped on to pay, thinking she was climbing on behind.

“You’re going to be a father”, she said, standing on the ground as the rain soaked into her blue satin dress. She didn’t know why or how it had come out but relief flooded her heart to know it wasn’t her secret
anymore.

He paused, and her relief vanished.

“Miguel, you are going to be a father.” Staring at the back of his head for those few seconds still seemed to her as the longest seconds anyone on earth had ever experienced. Then, he turned. He stepped down to embrace her as the bus drove off leaving them laughing and kissing in the rain. They made their way home not caring – not caring that their clothes were soaked and that people were staring, not caring that they were missing a dinner party, not caring what their families would say – they began to dream together. She thought of the trips to the ocean and the tiny footprints in the sand and he of the good night kisses from a dark haired little girl that was the spitting image of her mother. It had touched her that he had wanted a girl.

They did get their dark haired beauty one day in December. Perfect was all that Ines could feel that day. They had named her Maria but she soon became her father’s little “Cuchi” and that name fit. From the time she was an infant, Cuchi had done what Ines had done many years before – become completely and utterly Miguel’s’. The sound of his voice, the way he kissed her twice on the cheek before putting her in bed and telling her some fabulous story about his day, those were the things that Cuchi lived for. While happiness was with them for most of the time, darkness began to creep its way into Ines and Miguel’s lives. That darkness came in the form of his family. They disapproved and nothing was simple anymore. Miguel lived life on the defensive and sadly he began to let his wall of love for Ines slowly chip away.

Things had been good for a little while after little Susana was born. Susana was happiness and energy. She was affectionate and often trailed behind Ines just to be with her. Ines felt that God had seen her families emerging struggles and had sent Susana especially for her. Things had begun to be hard with Miguel. She knew that he loved her but also knew that the love they had was slipping. She treasured the little arms of Susana that seemed to find their way around her neck more often, as if she knew, as if she could feel her mother’s pain.

Dolor. Pain. That word became the life of Ines. Remembering this part was harder than she cared to admit. It had begun to rain the morning that Miguel finally left. She had lain awake all night frozen from sorrow. She played in her mind the movie of her life with Miguel, trying to find that moment. It never came. Anger for Miguel was also absent until he spoke to the girls. The rain pounding on the window was almost drowned out by the pounding of Ines’s heart as she sat with Miguel and
talked to her little angels. Shock overwhelmed her when he began to speak.

“Girls, my sweet girls. You know that we have talked about your mother and I not being together. You know that we both wish it were different. You are my angels, my darlings, I will always love you. I need you to listen to me. You have two choices – if you choose to come with me you will have the best of everything. The best toys and food and education and everything that you could want but you can’t see you mother –”

It seemed that after this announcement, the only one not shocked, was Miguel. Time slowed as they looked from one to another. Cuchi’s eyes grew big under her glasses and she watched Miguel trying to see if he meant what he said. Susana’s eyes were filled with hurt and sadness. She was struggling as any 5 year old would to understand what he was saying. Ines could only breathe. She never imagined that the man she had loved could say such a thing. She wanted to grab him and rip the mask off his face and have Miguel back again.

“–Do you understand? If you choose me, I will give you the best of life; if you choose your mother I will give you nothing.”

Miguel sat there looking into the eyes of his darlings with a calm complacent look on his face as if he had won the battle. Anger surged into the heart of Ines and as she began to speak, a voice little interrupted, “I choose mama.” Again, shock and silence fell upon this little family as all looked at Cuchi. Susana quickly followed the example of her sister and the choice was made. Ines, Cuchi and Susana clung to one another and didn’t let go until long after the sound of Miguel’s shoes against the hard floor had blended in with the drumming of the rain.