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Science Center 346 (Healing Tree)

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Science Center 346 (Healing Tree)

Author Bio

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Science Center
346 (Healing
Tree)

Oil on wooden board

ZOE YEOH



The Elephant
Family
Charcoal

NATALIE ORGA

Mechanisms of the Mind

Just breathe.

But what can you do when
the air burns like smoke,
and the smoke feels smoother than air?

Inhale.

Hold it.

Let the body take control.

Let the heart's pulse increase.

Let the pulse's growing intensity be felt in your veins,
throughout the body.

When your throat begins to silently scream,
when your toes curl, your fingers twitch,
and emerging from every nerve is shooting pain.

Hold it.

To figure out which reigns,

Hold it.

The mind or the body?

Exhale.

Was it a choice?

Sick

It took moving an ocean away from my family and my home for me to begin to feel the need to reconnect with my mother. One of the most soul-nourishing activities to do, tucked up under my bedcovers or walking through Gettysburg at nighttime, is to listen to a recording I have of her singing to the *Wizard of Oz*'s "Somewhere over the Rainbow." She's horrible at singing. Objectively awful. But interspersed between her off-tune screeching is one of my favourite things to listen to: hysterical laughter with her best friend. I can picture the moment: she's wiping tears off her cheeks and desperately trying to catch her breath to get the last words of the recording out, "Please don't put this on YouTube!"

My mum told us that she was sick on a Sunday afternoon in the middle of July. I know that it was a Sunday because the whole family was sitting outside eating lunch together. I know it was July because it was a beautiful day, such a beautiful day, and I could feel the sun through the vine leaves above me on our *pergola*.

We ate lunch together every weekend, but Sunday was a special day. Growing up in Italy meant that food was what the day revolved around, and I was taught from an early age that lunch was the most important meal of the day. A Sunday lunch consisted of piles of vinegar-soaked cherry tomatoes folded together with hunks of mozzarella, slabs of bread drizzled in olive oil, and thick, sizzling sausages straight off the grill. My dad was always in charge of the grill. I would sit at the table and watch him battle spitting oil from the meat, all the while with a cigarette in his hand. My dad always had a cigarette in his hand, making sure to hold it high above his head when he was around my sister and me in a futile attempt to keep the smoke from creeping into our young lungs. Smoke that was the same colour as his aging hair, although he tried to convince everyone that he met that it was still brown.

My sister, Blanca, was just seven years old, wearing a neon bikini and piling food onto her plate. I remember because I complained to both my mum and my dad that she was being greedy--"Save some for me!" was my cry. Her bleach blonde curly locks hung damp around her shoulders; we had just ended an immense morning of chasing each other around the garden with buckets of water and the hose. Being the older sister, I had used my considerable size advantage to ensure that I stayed relatively dry.

In line with Italian family traditions, it was well past two o'clock before we sat down together in our usual seats. Without fail, for every meal, I sat opposite my mum. I can't remember a meal from my childhood that didn't include her bouncing brown curls, her infectious smile, and her reluctance to take a second helping because she was "on a diet." This Sunday lunch in the middle of July was no different, and I remember catching her eyes and smiling really big before my dad skewered two sausages onto my plate and I was distracted by the dance that was plating food. After a chorus of *buon appetito*, we all dug in. It was a hot July day, but we were sheltered from the unforgiving Italian sun by grape vines, draped lazily over the wooden beams of the *pergola* that my dad and uncle had built years ago. Even with bloated stomachs at the end of the meal, not one of

us could resist reaching across to a bunch of dark purple grapes and popping a handful into our mouths.

It was in this post-lunch stupor, as Blanca and I were squabbling about whose turn it was to wash the dishes, that my dad stood up, poured himself and my mum another glass of wine, and asked my sister and I to sit up properly. I remember feeling the food sink to the bottom of my stomach, now an unpalatable rock. One look at both my parents' expressions, and I knew that something was going on. My sister was still apparently oblivious as to what was happening.

"I'm sick," said my mum, somehow managing to keep her smile on her face, as she squeezed my dad's hand for support. "I'm going to get sick like Auntie Pat." I remember thinking about the past six months and my mum's best friend, Auntie Pat. I thought back about hushed conversations, conversations that as a child I certainly wasn't allowed to be a part of. And of visiting her in a darkened room where she wore a brightly colored scarf wrapped around her head. I remember that she hadn't been teaching in school for the past six months and that people got quiet whenever I asked about where she was. But, I reasoned to myself, it can't be that bad. My mum explained to us that she was going to be losing her hair, that she was going to have to be in and out of hospital, and that she was going to be staying home from work, all the while dancing around the word which I would come to fear: cancer. My mother had developed late-stage breast cancer, the fault of the BRCA II gene, and six years and one month later it took her from us.

But at nine years old, I was totally immune to the idea of cancer and what it meant for her to become sick. My reality of her sickness came in bursts. There was hair loss and staying at home. For my sister and me, that meant joking about different types of comical clown wigs that my mother would try on before finally settling on one that our oblivious neighbour decided was nicer than her old hair. For my mum, it meant pottering around the house, catching up with old friends, and plotting for the moment when she could pounce at us from behind a corner, using the few greying hairs clinging to her scalp to her advantage. I have never fully been able to understand how she remained so unselfish and cheerful during this time, but she made sure to keep my sister and me young, something that I will always be grateful for.

And the Sunday meals continued. Those meals were where we celebrated her remission, clinking glasses filled with bubbling *prosecco*. We ate the same cherry tomatoes soaked in olive oil and vinegar, and my dad still cursed under his breath when he was burned with fiery globules of fat from the spitting sausages. Blanca and I had the same arguments about who was eating the most food and who got the last sausage on the plate. And as we grew older together under those drooping grape vines, it seemed for a moment like the world had resettled. Blanca's once bleach blonde hair had now developed into a dirtier shade and, much like her tempestuous personality, frizzed stubbornly upon her head. I, in my foolish youth, had opted for a short bowl cut. And my mother's had grown back out into her familiar bouncing brown curls. She even ventured beyond her usual locks.

I remember one evening, after our cherry tomatoes and sausages, when the wind was cooling down just enough to bring a shiver, that my mum announced that she was going to dye her hair. We lived in a tiny village, twenty

minutes from the nearest hairdresser, so it was no surprise to us when she pulled a carton of Do It Yourself dye from underneath the table. What ensued is one of my favourite memories of my family. While my dad pulled on the flimsy plastic gloves, I sat on the toilet seat and read out instructions: "Pour this, add that, squeeze the bottle." Blanca was perched on the tiny windowsill, knees tucked underneath her chin, and my mum was crouched over the bathtub, hair dripping. We laughed and joked our way through forty minutes of waiting for the dye to set until it was time to wash it out. The result was a colour that was matched only by the same cherry tomatoes we had consumed earlier. My mother's beautiful curls had been transformed into the garish looks of childhood icon Ronald McDonald. She bravely laughed through three work days of her new hair before eventually giving in and traipsing into a hairdresser where a woman, suppressing her own laughter, carefully stripped my mum's hair back to her normal brown.

It was on a Sunday in early spring, too early and cold to sit outside for a meal but nice enough to gather all together out there to read one afternoon, that Blanca and I were told that my mum was no longer in remission. That was the same night we were told we were moving to the Netherlands. I was eleven years old, and I remember looking up at the *pergola* and the now-naked vines and breathing in the cool Italian air. We all tried desperately to keep a sense of normalcy over the next few months. We went to the beach on Saturdays, had lunch on Sundays, and went to school during the week. But my mum's frequent visits to the hospital were a constant reminder that she was sick and only getting sicker.

We went on holiday to Lefkada, Greece that summer, a final hurrah before we began our life in the cold North. We didn't have our *pergola*, but we made do by sitting around in the sunshine eating bowls of fresh fruit and taking dips in the pool. What the books don't tell you about cancer is that weight fluctuations are to be expected. At this time, in part due to the chemo and in part due to the carbohydrate-heavy Greek food, my mother was overweight. She was conscious of it but not so careful to the point that it would detract her from joining us in our feast of said Greek food. On the third day of our holiday, my dad announced that it had been his lifelong dream to drive a motorboat, a lifelong dream coincidentally triggered by an advertisement in a pamphlet the day before. So we all packed our bags for the day and drove down to Nidri where, to my father's delight, we rented a little motorboat and set off in search of adventure. My mum took a backseat that day, and I remember watching her trailing her hand in the crystal blue water of Greece. We quickly learned that riding in a motorboat was not as sexy as that pamphlet said it would be. Docking for the first time, my dad jetted into a quiet harbor of a sleepy island, misjudged the distance from the moorings, and noisily crashed the boat. We departed quickly, after reassuring locals that we were capable of staying afloat, and never showed our faces there again.

Later that afternoon, in the privacy of waters off of an uninhabited island, we anchored our little vessel and spent two hours snorkeling and snacking on packed goodies. My mum was the last to get in the water, and one of the last to get out, but not for lack of trying. The tiny ladder supplied by the boat was enough to support the nimble legs of Blanca and myself; even my father could

unceremoniously clamber onto the boat. But my embarrassed, pleasantly plump mum could not begin to bend her legs into the contortion required to get on. In a moment she liked to pretend never happened, my dad stood on the boat, bracing his legs in a wide stance, holding onto my mum's hands. I was ordered back to the waters where I was instructed to use my arms and what little upper body strength I had to push my mum's arse on the count of three. In an act of pure comedy, Blanca, who had been sitting on the side of the boat and watching in amusement, picked up our family camera and captured several unflattering pictures of this moment. Needless to say I thank her to this day for those instincts. They provide a necessary dose of comic relief to the rest of us while we pore through family photo albums all these years later.

About a year after driving from Rome to Maastricht, the Netherlands, my mum had to start using a wheelchair. It was at this point that I noticed the biggest change in her demeanor--she started not to care. There's something truly magical watching your mother, who for her whole life remained composed and polite, transform into a comedic hero before your eyes. She was shameless about using her wheelchair to get Blanca and I first onto the rides at Disneyland when we visited, even when she herself wasn't coming along. She talked at the top of her voice about passersby and laughed loud and long. One of my fondest memories of this time was during the winter of our second year in Maastricht, the coldest winter that any of us had ever experienced. The Dutch, despite being citizens of one of the smallest countries in Europe, are a resilient folk and exhibit an odd behavior during the winter: sitting outside in the freezing cold for meals. My family, coming from the lavish warmth of northern Rome and the oasis of our vine-covered *pergola*, was bewildered by this behavior. But nobody was more confused and outraged by this behavior than my now-unfiltered mother. One weekend, my mum and I had decided to venture into town and do some shopping before settling *inside* one of the café's lining the main square. Shivering and footsore, I pushed my mum around a corner onto the square and past rows and rows of Dutchmen and women huddled around electric heaters and blankets. I paused, scanning the menu of a café, when I heard my mother scoff, then break into full laughter and say at the top of her voice, "They're all fucking mental!" I froze, mortified at what my mother had just said and what nearby patrons of the cafés had definitely heard given their hand-to-mouth expressions. In blind panic, I gestured to her wheelchair, wordlessly begging for the internationally-understood sympathy and forgiveness for someone disabled.

One day I will have to tell my half-brothers about how my mother isn't here anymore, that their mother is not my mother. But I'll tell them this story. I'll tell them of how I never thought of my mother as being sick. Technically, she was sick for almost half the time I had with her. But she was always just my mum, my crazy, beautiful mum, who just so happened to be sick.

Sweet

One day,
They shall lay me down
And slice me open,
And finally discover that all this time
My heart has been pumping jars and jars
Of raspberry jam.

Interview with the Greatest Trumpet Player in the World

FADE IN:

INT. TELEVISION STUDIO - EVENING

INTERVIEWER

With me on set today, I am pleased to welcome Robert Morgan, world renowned trumpet player and musician extraordinaire.

ROBERT MORGAN

It's a pleasure to be here.

INTERVIEWER

The pleasure is all mine. So, Mr. Morgan, you performed with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra from 1994 to 2017, is that correct?

ROBERT MORGAN

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

What was the audition process like in 1994?

ROBERT MORGAN

Well, actually, I first auditioned for an open position in the trumpet section in 1992. I didn't make it in, but I was not discouraged in the slightest. I was twenty-four at the time, so I knew I had my whole life ahead of me, still. When I got the news that I had not placed into the orchestra, I immediately increased the rigor of my practice pattern tenfold. I would start with three hours of focused rehearsal every morning after I woke up, then a short break for lunch and reading of music literature, during which I would go over finger dexterity exercises and mental scales constantly in my head. After lunch, I would practice for another three hours, this time switching to my left hand as a challenge. Right before bed, I would finish with a steaming cup of Egyptian chamomile herbal tea and an extra hour of rehearsal, this time playing as silently as possible, to the point where my sound was almost inaudible. By the time the 1994 auditions were approaching, I was much more refined in every aspect of my playing. The audition took place in the Royal Albert Concert Hall. There were three judges, separated from me by a thin screen so that there was no prejudice in the selection process. The audition consisted of three aspects: scales (major, minor, and chromatic), a performance piece of my choice, and sight reading. Naturally, I executed each piece of the audition effortlessly, thanks to my training.

INTERVIEWER

In which chair were you initially placed?

ROBERT MORGAN

I started out as the fourth trumpet, but that didn't last too long. I quickly rose through the ranks.

INTERVIEWER

Your rise was unprecedented in the history of the group, and there has been a fair amount of controversy regarding the means by which you obtained the rank of principal trumpet player in just six months. What can you tell me about Lois Gilberto, the third trumpet at the time?

ROBERT MORGAN

Well, Louie was only there for a short amount of time after I joined. From the few rehearsals I spent next to him, I remember he had the obnoxious habit of tapping his foot loudly and off tempo all the time. His shoes were well shined, but he would never tell me which polish he used. He was let go from the group after he missed our performance in the Konzert Haus during the European Tour. Thank god I knew both of our parts, so I was able to cover the third trumpet for him.

INTERVIEWER

Why did Louis Gilberto miss the concert?

ROBERT MORGAN

As I recall, we were sharing a hotel room in first district of Vienna on that tour. When it was time to get up, I couldn't wake him. I splashed water in his face, and I even shook him, but it was no use. It was unbelievable, I've never seen such a deep sleeper. Eventually, I had to give up, because I figured that there was no use in me missing the concert when I had woken up on time.

After that concert, I moved up to take his position.

INTERVIEWER

When we asked him for comments regarding the incident, he claimed that he is a very light sleeper. He contends that you deliberately snuck out without waking him up so that he would lose his position. Do you care to respond to this, Mr. Morgan?

ROBERT MORGAN

Who can really say what happened that morning? It was so long ago, and we had all been drinking at the hotel bar the night before. To tell you the truth, I suspect that he was a drunkard by the way his pitch swerved up and down when he played. He was most likely just hung-over that morning.

INTERVIEWER

Let's move on. Can you tell me what happened to Eloise Ray, the second

trumpet at the time, shortly after Louis Gilberto was expelled from the group?

ROBERT MORGAN

Oh my, it's hard for me to remember so far back. Can you refresh my memory?

INTERVIEWER

There was an incident involving factory machinery.

ROBERT MORGAN

Oh yes, we visited an assembly line together where they mold brass into various instruments. Eloise reached out for something, and her fingers were crushed by a machine. It was a shame; she had just gotten her nails done in a beautiful shade of magenta the day before. When she got her hands out, all of her fingers were unusable. Unfortunately, you can't play trumpet without fingers.

INTERVIEWER

After the loss of her digits, she was forced to retire, and you became the second trumpet. She alleges that you pushed her arms toward the machine. What do you have to say about that?

ROBERT MORGAN

Nonsense! Why would I ever do that? We were on a lovely date.

INTERVIEWER

Don't you find it strange that tragedies befell all of the trumpet players in the orchestra that you interacted with?

ROBERT MORGAN

You forget that Wally is still fine and well.

INTERVIEWER

Wallace Murray, the fourth trumpet who filled in your position after you moved up to the third chair? He was never in the chair above you, so I think your point is hardly valid.

ROBERT MORGAN

I maintained my position in the trumpet section through a strict regimen of training. I don't like what you're insinuating.

INTERVIEWER

You don't have to like anything I say, Mr. Morgan. Lastly, I'd like to ask you about Klaus Stevens, the first trumpet player in the group who preceded you. What can you tell me about him?

ROBERT MORGAN

Klaus Stevens was a greasy man with a bushy white beard. He was quite the

opposite of myself; I was lean and skinny, and he was round and fat. As for his sound, it was weak, like that of a deflating balloon. His intonation was out of control, as were his eating habits.

INTERVIEWER

How did you react to his untimely death, which occurred so shortly after you became the second trumpet?

ROBERT MORGAN

Oh, that was so emotional for me. I felt such a strong bond with him, like a brother. What a shame that he choked on a Christmas sausage shortly after our winter concert. I guess he bit off more than he could chew.

INTERVIEWER

He died during a dinner at the Murano, at which several other members of the orchestra were present. Where were you when he died, Mr. Morgan?

ROBERT MORGAN

If my memory serves me correctly, I was in the restroom having an unpleasant experience myself. The rabbit tortellini did not bode so well with my sensitive stomach.

INTERVIEWER

After Klaus passed away, you became the principal trumpet player in the orchestra. Did you ever suspect that there was any foul play involved in the incident?

ROBERT MORGAN

Never! Never! It was a fine orchestra, not a fight club.

INTERVIEWER

Other members of the orchestra said they saw you touching Klaus' plate that night.

ROBERT MORGAN

Who told you that? Was it a trombone player? Yes, I sat next to Klaus that night, but he offered me to try a bite of his dish. Perhaps I forked an extra bit of sausage off his plate when he wasn't looking, but I can't really remember. If I did do such a thing, I apologize sincerely, although he never finished his dinner anyway.

INTERVIEWER

Did anyone ever challenge you for the position of first trumpet?

ROBERT MORGAN

Eloise returned at some point with prosthetic fingers, but she could not play well enough to surpass me. People in the orchestra fear me.

INTERVIEWER

Why is that?

ROBERT MORGAN

Because they know I will not stop at anything to be the best. They wish they could be me, but they can't.

INTERVIEWER

One last question for you, Mr. Morgan: Have you regretted anything that you've done in your journey to become the best?

ROBERT MORGAN

Everything I have done, I have done for the love of music. It was done for the sake of the ensemble. Weak players must be weeded out so that the ensemble can perform at the highest level possible. To get to the top, you have to step over some others, and in the process they may get trampled. It's easy for you to sit there and criticize me, but I know you didn't become the number one interviewer at your network by being a considerate, friendly person. You had to beat your competition, and sometimes you really hurt them. Marathon runners elbow the people that get close to them in races. Soccer players aim for ankles when they slide tackle their opponents. Politicians drag the reputations of their opponents through the mud. The anchor before you who interviewed me two years ago. What was his name? Jonathan? Jacob? Jeff? What happened to him? Why isn't he interviewing me today? I recall he was wearing a sharp red tie with a paisley pattern that day. His wife called before the interview to let him know that their son had skinned his knee on the playground and was crying for his daddy. Are you really a better interviewer than he was? When the next "great" interviewer comes close to you, what will you do to keep your job? Once you're on top, it's hard to give up.

The interviewer sits in shocked silence for a moment, mouth agape, unsure of what to say. His eyes stay locked on Morgan's eyes. He snaps out of it and puts a smile back on.

INTERVIEWER (Stuttering at first)

Isn't that something? Well, that's all the time we have for tonight. Thanks to Robert Morgan for coming on the show. Tune in next week when I interview Jeremy Carlan, the comedian, about what it was like joining the late night sketch show, Saturday Night Live, in 1984.

FADE OUT.

The End

Nirvana

One of those “Weather Warning!” notifications appears on my phone. It’s 4:56 a.m., and my alarm is set to go off at 4:59 a.m. I switch off the alarm, immediately grab my laptop, and log onto “magicseaweed.com.” I learned about this website from some locals, and it has been bookmarked on my laptop ever since. I type in Ocean City, NJ, and hope for the best. I scroll and scroll and get to the forecast.

12-14 foot swells, 11-second periods, 10mph wind.

My face smiles, but my heart sinks. I want to, I think to myself, but I don’t know if I can. I’ve only been surfing for a couple of months. I’m not ready for this.

I take a picture of the forecast and send it to my friend Rich, hoping he will tell me the storm is too strong. I get up out of bed and open the blinds to look outside my bedroom window, or should I say into my neighbor’s kitchen.

My neighbor’s house is this gigantic, elevated white beach house, while my family’s beach house is more of a small cottage. I don’t mind, though; as long as I’m at the beach, I don’t care where I sleep. It’s dark, gloomy, and spitting rain outside. Not a smidge of sunshine is peaking through those black clouds. I knew the storm was coming, but I guess I was hoping it would be too dangerous to surf in.

My phone buzzes; it’s a text from Rich. “Holy shit. Be over in 10,” Rich says. I go to high school with Rich, and his family has a beach house right down the street. Since both of his parents work back in Philly and only come down on the weekends, Rich spends most of his time at my house.

I quietly open the door to the hallway and tip toe into the communal upstairs bathroom so that I don’t wake up my mom or sister. I brush my teeth and then tip toe back into my bedroom to get ready.

Whenever I walk downstairs, I always walk straight through the living room, past the kitchen, and immediately to the backdoor to unlock it. I’ll then walk back into the kitchen and start making scrambled eggs. After a few minutes, I hear the back door open. I can hear the wind hollowing through the trees and the rain slapping against the pavement. Rich walks through the back door and sits down on one of the high top chairs at my kitchen counter.

“It’s nasty out there,” he says, as he’s trying to catch his breath.

I look over at him, and he’s dripping wet.

“Rain must’ve gotten worse,” I say to him in a disappointed tone.

“Britt and Fran said they’re on their way,” Rich says to me.

Britt and Fran are two other kids we go to high school with, and they spend their summers in Avalon, NJ, just a couple shore towns over. They’ve been surfing since they were kids, while Rich and I are still pretty new to the sport. I was never a huge advocate for them to come surf with us today, since they are obviously a lot better than us. I think I just don’t want to be embarrassed.

I finish making the scrambled eggs, divide them up onto two plates, and hand one plate to Rich. His parents normally don’t leave him any sort of money

or food for the week, so he'll come over here for most meals. As Rich starts feasting on his eggs, I look down at mine and begin to feel a little queasy. I poke at them a little and then just hand them over to Rich.

"You're not hungry?" Rich asks me.

"Nah, don't feel too good. Must've been those tacos last night," I explain to Rich.

While Rich finishes up stuffing his face, I go out back to get everything ready. I pick up my backpack and make sure I have a towel, water bottle, and wax. I walk into the shed and grab my wetsuit hanging off a hook and my surfboard. That damp, musty smell from the shed always wakes me up. When I walk back inside, I notice my mom walking downstairs. It's around 5:30 a.m. at this point, so I'm not too surprised she's awake.

"Good Morning, Mrs. Rava!" Rich says to my mom.

"Morning, mom," I say to her next.

"Morning, guys!" she says with a bright smile as she walks over to give me our routine morning hug. "Be careful today, ok? Don't try anything you can't handle," she whispers to me and then gives me a kiss on my forehead. I normally just respond with a soft smile and say, "I know, mom."

Rich puts his dish in the dishwasher, I slip into my flip-flops, and we're out the door. We hop on our bikes, using our left arms to hold our surfboards and our right arms to steer. I look at my reflection in the puddles as we ride through them, just to make sure I don't have a nervous look on my face. We had to take a few detours to get to the beach because Ocean City streets flood easily. As we get closer and closer I can hear the waves crashing, the seagulls chirping, and the little voice inside my head telling me to turn around. The fog begins to thicken as we pull up, and I can barely see the entrance to the beach walkway. There are two other surfers locking their bikes together when we get there. They look back at us and give us a death stare...must be locals.

"Where are Britt and Fran?" I ask Rich.

"They just texted me. They are having trouble getting through the island because of all the flooding," Rich responds.

We ride our bikes up onto the sand, and my heart begins to beat faster and faster. I try locking our bikes together, but my hand keeps shaking.

"I'm shivering, it's freezing out here," I tell Rich in an attempt to hide my nerves.

I take off my flip-flops so that my feet dig through the sand as we make our way over the sand dune. The feeling of soft sand normally calms my nerves, but the rain has made the sand damp today, only making matters worse.

We get over the dune, and the first thing I see is a 10-foot white cap barrel over another wave. My stomach flips; I think I'm going to be sick. I'm going to die out there. There is absolutely no way I can surf this. There's that little voice in my head again: "Turn around, Jon." I'm going to do it, I'm going to turn around, until Rich says, "Don't worry so much, man, what's the worst that could happen?" with a little smile on his face, and then a chuckle.

I immediately think to myself, are you kidding? What's the worst that could happen? I could think of A MILLION bad things that could happen. Yet, that little smile and chuckle on his face somehow calms me, and I gain a tiny bit of

confidence.

Rich and I walk over to our normal spot against one of the sand dunes, and put our stuff down. I take off my sweatpants and sweatshirt so that I can squeeze into my wetsuit. I keep looking up at the waves, especially the ones crashing into the jetty, to remind myself not to get too close.

"There they are," Rich says.

I look back at the pathway and begin to see Britt and Fran peek through the fog, holding their surfboards. Both are wearing their wetsuits pulled halfway up to their waist, with a sweatshirt over top. They walk over to Rich and I to put their things down, and the four of us perform our typical "dap" of a handshake.

As we all stand looking out towards this raging monster of an ocean, I think we all begin to take in different nerves. While Britt and Fran may be feeling eagerness and excitement, I feel butterflies and turbulence.

"Let's strap in, boys," Britt says. And with that cue, we fasten the Velcro straps to our ankles and run into the water.

I purposely take a minute or two to strap the board to my ankle and let everyone else go ahead before me. I watch the three of them run into the water, jump onto their boards, and paddle out into this violent abyss.

There is only so much more I can act like I am doing before they notice I am just chickening out. I pick up my board, take a deep breath, and just start sprinting as fast as I can into the water. I immediately jump onto my board and begin to paddle through this vicious current. The first big wave is approaching, and I adjust all of my weight to the front of the surfboard so that I can dolphin dive under the wave. I pop up on the other side of the wave, gasp for air, and start paddling again. I only get in a few more paddles before I am approached with another wave. Once again, I shift all of my weight to the front of the board, and dolphin dive underneath the wave. I pop out on the other side, gasp for air, and begin to paddle. This becomes my routine for the next ten minutes. After about the fifth wave, I pop out on the other side to look for everyone. I see Britt and Fran, but no Rich. I look back at the beach and notice the current has already moved me down two beaches. When I look back out to the ocean, I immediately get hit by a wave and am taken back about fifteen feet. When the wave finally stops carrying me, I use my strap to pull my board back to me. I hop back on and continue to paddle. My mouth tastes like salt water, I'm exhausted, but I have come too far to turn around now.

As I resume my dolphin dive routine, I notice something. I am no longer nervous. I am no longer anxious. I am no longer fearful. I got this, I tell myself. With this newfound attitude, I continue to push myself physically and mentally.

Finally, I make it far enough where the waves aren't as close together, and I can rest in between sets. This is known as the Promised Land for surfers. It is where we sit and wait for our perfect wave, the one that will instill both terror and adrenaline within our mind and bodies.

I see Britt, so I paddle over to him.

"Rava, you made it, my man," Britt says to me with a surprising look on his face.

“Yeah. That was brutal. Where are Rich and Fran?” I ask Britt.

Britt points to our left, and I see Fran about a hundred yards away from us. He’s sitting on his board, waiting for a wave.

Then Britt says, “Yeah, little Richie never made it out. A wave took him back in, so I think he’s going to rest for a little and then give it another shot.”

I look back to the beach, and I see Rich sitting with our things. That could have just as easily been me...but it wasn’t.

Just when I think the hard part is over, I remember that I still have to ride a wave. As minutes pass, and I sit there patiently, I go over the pop-up routine in my head. I keep thinking to myself, *hands under shoulders, push up off legs and toes, one foot in front of the other.*

Suddenly, I hear Britt yell, “THERE HE GOES!”

I look over to where Fran was waiting, and I see him paddle with a wave as it forms, slowly rising a few feet per second. Eventually, Fran rises about ten feet on top of the wave, and the wave breaks into a barrel. It looks like a giant tube, and Fran is surfing right in the middle of it. He pops out on the other side of the barrel and continues to ride the shoulder of the wave into the shore. It is incredible.

Just when I think there is no way I have the ability to do that, I remind myself that I have made it this far, and there is no turning back. Therefore, I turn my board so that the tip is facing the shoreline, and I wait for my perfect wave. After about a minute, I begin to feel the water start dragging out to the sea, and my board lowers into the water; this means a wave is coming. I turn my head around, and see the formation of what is either going to be the life or the death of me. As this gigantic beast forms, I cannot stop thinking to myself, *hands under shoulders, push up off legs and toes, one foot in front of the other.*

I feel my board being picked up by the wave, and I give myself two more power strokes. The wave starts to break, and I pop up, pushing off my legs and toes. I put one foot in front of the other. I feel like I am on top of the world. I stay focused on my footing as I lean my weight back and forth in order to surf the wave. I keep riding the shoulder of the wave, and after a few seconds, I finally realize that I got this. I pick my head up and look at the beach. Rich is standing up, and it looks like he’s cheering. I have the biggest smile on my face and become filled with emotions of surprise, adrenaline, and pure happiness. Nirvana.

When I get close enough to shore, and the wave begins to die down, I hop off the board into the water. I pop up out of the water, and slick my hair back as I try to hold back my smile. Rich runs down to the water and gives me a giant hug. I pick up my board, and the two of us walk back up to our spot on the beach.

As I sit in the sand and look out into Mother Nature’s work of art, I reflect upon what today meant. Today was not about finding the perfect wave. It was about overcoming my fears and believing in myself. Up to this point in my life, I have never been faced with a challenge as tough and as frightening as this storm. Today was a rite of passage, and this experience will serve as a reminder that I can do anything in life as long as I stay motivated and believe in myself.

Splashes Unheard

Why don't you come on down from there?

He has never felt this high before. Looking straight out, he can see over the dangling sun on the horizon. It would be high, he has known, but *this* high? Everything below him has transformed into a distant mass, like a painting seen from afar: one rolling, gray-blue surface. From this height, he can barely discern the tips of the tallest rocks.

He hears his heart's squelchy thumping.

Cars behind him sit empty, some with doors left open and engines running. People have crowded in huddled groups behind the barricades. They watch him. Some faces look pained, pinched. Others have phones shielding their expressions. One woman sobs loudly into a man's coat shoulder; she is the only not watching. Most look impatiently blank.

From here he can't hear the waves crash against the cliffs. Foam sprays and splashes around the jagged edges, the white standing out against the gray, but neither the crashing whoosh nor the subtle ebb and flow echo up this high. He can still smell the water, though: briny, ancient, mucky. It smells like distant memories--some his but most not--and a promise. Maybe he can't hear the waves because the wind is so loud. It howls monstrously in his ears, along with the thumping. Stronger gusts sway the bridge, and he squeezes harder to maintain his grip on the oxidized rail, which is damp from dew or bird shit, or maybe his own sweat. He doesn't know why he grips tighter when the gusts roll in. Doing so seems counterintuitive. Something instinctual, imbedded deep inside him, reacts before he can stop it, he guesses.

Why don't you come down so we can talk?

His arches ache. He left his shoes at home, not seeing the point in bringing them, and now his bare feet curl around a black pole about as wide as an average man's arm, rust patches like scabs. With every gust the railing groans.

He's walked along the bridge countless times before, coming home, leaving home, going nowhere in particular. He always walked along its side-set path, fenced in from the road and the edge. It never looked *this* high from the path. He could see out from there, but never down. This is real height, out here on the rail, past the fence. This is a cosmic height. Maybe even a divine height, if one believes in that, he ventures, and he feels the yearning to believe now. Aching arches and sweaty palms are worth such a feeling.

You don't want to do this, son. Come down so we can talk.

It took a while for anyone to notice him out here on the rail, and then a while longer before they cleared a perimeter around him and phones came out and the woman started sobbing. His arches ached by then.

He stands stock still, as motionless as the cliffs below, meditatively focused, his senses hyperaware. Dr. Lorsan tried to teach him mindfulness. They spent a few sessions on it, breathing a lot, thinking about breathing even more. He never managed it, that acceptance and progression through the world, that wholly, bodily *there*. Out on the rail, now, he has finally achieved it. He is wholly and bodily *here*, now, progressing on the rail. But there's so much--more too--so

much Dr. Lorsan didn't explain, maybe didn't know about being *here* or *there*, that it really meant also not being *here* or *there*. Next Tuesday will mark a year since Dr. Lorsan and the Tuesday after that two years since the house.

Whatever it is, I'm sure we can fix it.

Can they? He has asked this question dozens of times with dozens of variations, but he hasn't found the answer. Below knows, though. It must.

Long before he ever stood on this rail, long before this rail existed, that space below him was there. That space below him stretched and wound and slithered back through time, a time so distant he can't imagine it. Once, long ago, it was all water, before land rose from the depths, a beast emerging from below, and brought with it a whole new world, whole new life. Cliffs now towered and lorded over the water. But one day, after all the eons of splashes and crashes that he can now see but cannot hear way down below in the froth, the cliffs will erode, swallowed back again by the parent who birthed them, who gave life to the new life. Long gone would be the rail, even longer gone him, when the cliffs disappear, submerged beneath the pools. Going down into that water is not a fall but a return. Water is in him now. He can feel it squelching. Water is him. He is water, and one day all will be water again. What lives beyond water, after all?

Please, son. Children are watching.

The sun hangs on the edge of the horizon, partially concealed by the cliffs, casting forth a polychromatic screen of darkly warm hues, reds and purples and pinks. Orange is the sun itself, enlarged by its proximity to the cliffs. How large it would loom once all was water, once the horizon curves and falls away, unbroken by anything but fluffs of cloud, which are really just water waiting to return, like him. He can't imagine an orange not exactly the orange of the sun right now. He knows there are other oranges--he has seen other oranges--but here and now is only this orange. Orange of fire once flickered in his irises; he stood outside and watched as it licked away his world. But that orange has evaporated out on this rail, and this orange alone remains. Only that purple and red and pink, too, once he thinks about it, remain. Only that gray-blue swashing below. Sunlight iridescently bounces off the water. Movements along the surface make the reflections quiver and dance. He is aware of his body like never before, aware of all of it, the whole thing, here. Not just the aching arches or the sweaty hands or the knees growing a little shaky. He feels the breeze on his skin, on every inch of it exposed, in his hair. He feels the smallest flutter of the air around him. He feels his lungs expand and contract, every increment of their ballooning. He feels the trace of his thoughts, the way they surface, grow, and then disappear, and he feels the ripples they send forth. He feels his blood in his body, moving like those waves, red like the red halo around the cold orange disc. He feels all this as if for the first time. Every pore is individual, distinct, atomized, and he can feel them, each one. And he can extend this awareness out, beyond him, past him, but still with him. What he can't see or smell or hear or taste he can still feel. Crashes and splashes down below, not even seen now because he can't focus on both the sun and the water, resonate up to him in lulling undulations. Not on his fingers or his palm or anywhere on his skin: inside is where he feels it, because it is him, and he is it, connected by his water to the water. They are bound by their long history, both experienced and

awaited. They will reunite soon, he knows, because he feels that inside of him too. He feels the lowering of the sun. Not just its last vestiges of warmth or the only-orange glare in his eyes, but the movement of it. He can feel the sinking, the sliding, and he knows it is neither sinking nor sliding, not really, not for him. Like the return to the water, it is not a descent. Sometimes, language fails a sensation. Language, after all, is not water, perhaps the only thing that is not water, and language is all he'd known before that rail.

Are you listening, son? Can you hear me?

The sun now barely peaks out from over the edge, all orange disappearing. It has dipped below the horizon, a horizon now inside him. All of it rumbles together inside, mixing, swishing like the water, his water, *the* water. There is no he, no rail, and, now, no sun, no orange, not the shade of the sun nor the shade of his banished memory. They are not so discrete as that, so divided. They are one now, and he feels them, deep in here, resting like a weight that pulls him downward and will burst out of him and birth it all anew. He feels only now.

Son...

Texas (with an Accent)

Slow dance polka in your mother's kitchen,
"How we did it in Texas" you said
and for once I didn't have a witty quip
about hunting or Republicans or guns
because you were swinging me
through windows full of drying herbs
and your sisters had grabbed each other
and followed our lead—
your mother, oh your mother,
clapping her hands to the beat and laughing
and somewhere I thought
"This is love. Love is THIS."
And maybe it is and maybe it wasn't
but I teach my fiancé (who isn't you)
to polka "the Texas way"
even though I hate Texas
and still, sometimes,
you.

Pressing Play

There's a split second where I'm unsure if this is really happening. Maybe I imagined a car backfiring, or maybe the local kids have started throwing bigger rocks, but when I hear the screams, I know it's for real. Everyone starts running away, but I know I have to move in the opposite direction. I need to run headfirst into the fight.

My heart is beating so quickly it feels like it could explode. The palpitations are so powerful I can hear the rhythm they keep deep within the canal of my ear. Each new breath I take is being squeezed out of me. Until I learn how to breathe normally under pressure, every breath is a battle in itself.

Sweat is running down my face in sticky beads. It pools at my eyebrows, my upper lip, my chest, and the lowest part of my back. I'm producing so much heat that my special ballistic eye protection fogs up, and I have to rip them off my face just to see.

Kabul, Afghanistan fucking sucks. The sun is always radiating pure hellfire heat. If the humidity didn't make it hard enough to breathe, the pollutants in the air certainly don't help. The air is so full of contaminants that a constant cloud of toxins always hangs, hazy, overhead. The water is polluted, running thick and brown from the faucets. The traffic is the worst I've ever seen. Worst of all, no one wants us here and, at times, neither do I.

I know I checked this morning to make sure I didn't forget anything from my uniform but, just in case, I run through the list in my head. I know I have my duty uniform on because the fire-retardant clothes are camouflage and everything else I'm wearing is placed on top of it. I shift the weight of my I.O.T.V.--for plebeians that's an improved outer technical vest--and I feel both it and my soft armour pull away from my now adhesive skin. I wear four ceramic plates around my front, back, and sides, and they are hefty, but I'm grateful for them because they are ready to stop 7.62 x 31s, rounds fired by AK-47s, the most favoured gun by many of the world's shitbags.

I tighten my gloved grip on my M4A1 Carbine, a rifle that I've had since basic training. Below the M4A1 is my M320 that can fire 40mm fragmentation grenades, smoke bombs, and pyrotechnics. As I run my hand down my gun, I am reminded of the three-hundred-and-forty rounds I'm carrying. I'm carrying one-hundred and thirty rounds more than what is required, but the extra weight means increased safety, and I am comforted.

I squeeze the pocket on my upper thigh to make sure I'm also carrying the tools I need to fix my weapon if it goes down. I am. In the same pocket is a knife, a pen, and a pad of paper. The pocket on the opposite leg would contain my land navigation supplies, things like maps, compasses, protractors, and string, but I think that's bullshit.

For starters, most of our missions occur in the city doing COIN-op, or counter-insurgency. Then consider that the trucks we ride around in have two different forms of navigational devices, and we always roll out in convoys of three trucks. That means six separate navigational devices would have to go down in order for me to ever use my land navigation skills. As I said, bullshit

My footsteps are light despite the weight of my combat boots, something I've been practicing for close to two years now. As I step, I hear the sloshing of water in my Camelback, the bottom of which is secured by my admin pouch. My admin pouch is brimming with cigarettes, lighters, and chew. It also houses my C.A.C. card and my R.S. Badge, two forms of identification that are used to recognise me by the U.S. military and any N.A.T.O. forces.

I hear a bullet whiz past my ear, immediately followed by shouting.

"GET IN LINE!"

"RETURN FIRE!"

"BATTLE DULL ONE ALPHA CALI!"

After each line is shouted, the entire platoon repeats it in unison.

I can feel everything. A calmness washes over my body, and I am so focused that it's as if I'm a part of everything surrounding me because of how aware I've become. As if I'm one with the battlefield. Yet, at the same time, I'm not here at all. I feel as though I'm observing all this through someone else's senses. My breathing slows, my eyes widen. Someone better and more experienced, who has been in thousands of firefights, is stepping into my shoes. A real fucking killer.

Then I see 'em, the enemy. I see him, but he doesn't see me. His cover is shit. I pull my rifle to my face and align the sight with my right eye. I press my finger against the trigger, so charged and ready to expel a shot into this motherfucker. I line up my shot and blow him away. Easy as that. I shoot him again, and again, and again until I'm sure he's dead. The craziest part is, after all this time, I've actually gotten used to this part of my day.

Bullets sail through the air, but they're so small and sporadic that I can't even worry about them. I just progress towards cover and worry about the guy to my right and my left, knowing that he'll worry for me. These guys are in my platoon. I've trained with them for months, lived with them for months. These are not just my co-workers, these are my buddies, my video-game-playing, deep-conversation-having, witnessed-some-crazy-shit-with friends.

And within moments, one of them goes down.

Sometimes, you've just gotta let 'em lie because it could be a trap. The enemy will purposely wound someone, and when you go to save them, they shoot you in the face. Then, the person who comes to save you gets shot in the face. Then, the person who comes to save them gets shot in the face, and so on. This is not one of those times.

Every soldier is combat-lifesaver trained; it's a school you have to go to before you can be deployed. Because of this, my training kicks in and takes over. I cannot tend to the soldier until the enemy has been killed or properly suppressed. So, I suppress the fuck out of the enemy and put as many rounds in their direction as I can. I shoot until I know they are sorry that they shot at all.

I am the member of my team chosen to run out and get the grounded soldier. I recall my AVPU and ABCs, checking to make sure he is alert, verbal, receiving pain, or unconscious. Kneeling beside him and seeing that he is mumbling incoherently and his eyes are fluttering, I look for an entrance and exit wound. Dark blood stains his right knee, and I know I must act immediately.

I render him trauma naked by using my knife to cut off his pant leg. Blood is spilling out of his former kneecap, which is now demolished. I run my hand

over his skin to locate the bullet wound, and finding it, I pull out his I.F.A.K., an improved first-aid kit, and rummage for a tourniquet. I slip the tourniquet under his thigh and tie it high and tight, about two inches above the wound. As I knot it for the last time, I begin to stand.

I apply a buddy carry, hoisting his torso onto the backs of my broad shoulders and lacing my arm between his legs. My right arm wraps around his right leg and grasps his right arm, pulling them together. In my left hand, I hold his weapon. His body is heavy, but I've been thoroughly trained for this moment. He smells like blood from his wound and smoke from his weapon.

"Hang in there, buddy...You got this, man...Don't you die on me, you fucker..."

As I enter the concealment of a ramshackle house, I am greeted by another member of my platoon.

"Fucking hell, dude, he looks like shit," he says, helping me lower the wounded soldier to the floor.

Now, the wounded soldier is completely unconscious, and I go through my AVPU and ABCs again. He isn't breathing, and I see a newly formed puddle of crimson by his left pectoral region.

"MEDIC!" I scream.

The other soldier is off to my left, watching. I look over at him and notice that he has a radio.

"Get on your radio now and give him the nine lines!" I shout.

I watch as he scrambles for his radio, squeezes the receiver, and recites the five lines necessary to obtain a Medevac. He communicates our location, call sign, the patients by urgency, special equipment, and discloses that our patient cannot walk. After successfully requesting and getting the Medevac helicopter airborne, he can now recite the remaining four lines.

I hear this in the background as I'm ripping off the wounded soldier's shirt. I've gone through his I.F.A.K. to find an absorbent pad to seal the entrance wound on his chest. I hoist him upright to locate the exit wound, which is near his goddamn kidney. This means that the bullet travelled inside his body, bounced around, and, more than likely, his organs are all torn up. I slap another pad on this exit wound.

I lay him down and find that he is still not breathing. I swab the inside of his lips and his throat for any dip that may be lodged inside. Finding none, I locate his NPA, or his nasopharyngeal airway device, and lube it up with the blood, still shiny, surrounding his chest wound. With the bevel in the direction of his septum, I feed the tube through his nose. I open his mouth and push until I see the N.P.A.'s colourful bottom poking out in the back of his throat. When I feel a warm breath escape his mouth and notice his chest has resumed its normal inflations and deflations, I let out a sigh of relief. But the danger is far from over.

"Luke," my mother's sing-song voice carries up the stairs, "It's time for dinner!"

I smell the spaghetti and meatballs from my room. I can already taste the slippery noodles covered in a deep red, chunky marinara sauce. My mouth salivates.

I stand up, pause Call of Duty, and head downstairs, letting my PlayStation 4 controller fall to the floor, and hope to continue my player's mission after one, maybe two, helpings of my favourite meal.

Two Rooms

I twisted my hands around the straps of my overnight bag as, panel by panel, the industrial-size sliding door closed behind us. Forty-eight hours left in this new place, and I was already anxious to leave. The slamming of the car doors echoed throughout the parking garage as we made our way toward the elevator, my brother and I silently gawking at the unfamiliarity of our surroundings.

As soon as the elevator doors reopened, we stepped into the fluorescently-lit hallway. The smell of spaghetti mixed with stale cigarette smoke hit me like a brick wall. Bag still in hand, I watched my dad locate the apartment key among various others. As I stood there wondering if he still had the one that would bring him home, he swung the heavy door inward, allowing my brother and I to pass through the threshold.

The walls were all white. There was no trace of the warm tan color from the living room in our family home, reflecting the crackling embers in the fireplace. No yellow tint of the dining space that held memories of Christmas cookie decorating, pumpkin carving, and countless after-school snacks. Instead, the sides of the kitchen, leading up the narrow staircase into the open bedroom were all freshly coated in a color that expressed no emotion: a color unable to hold memories.

Other than my dad's inquisitive "What do you think?" no one had anything to say. To be honest, my dad hadn't had much to say for the past seven years, so I wasn't surprised by our lack of conversation. It was almost like he was a stranger to me, an ominous figure that had provided for the rest of my four-person family while only actively participating in larger family functions when work refused any more overtime.

Now, it was this moment that defined how I would view my father for the rest of my adolescent life. Our wandering eyes quickly settled on the television screen set as a main focal point of the living space. As we sat eating our greasy, sad supper in front the flickering screen, I allowed myself to harbor further resentment towards my apathetic father. Not only did I believe that choosing pizza for dinner reflected his carelessness towards us, but I had convinced myself that he was more interested in some History Channel special than his own children.

I knew my definition of "family" had changed significantly since the divorce, but I knew my definition of family would never be this. "Family" meant mom's home cooked meals and cuddles with our puppy. "Family" was Sunday afternoon cookouts and the tire-swing hanging from the oak in the backyard. It was not awkward silences and stumbling into uncharted territory. It was most certainly not this two-room apartment.

I considered the choirs of "How was your weekend?" that would ensue once I returned to school the following Monday and couldn't help but cringe. I bargained with myself that I'd either lie, or, if I couldn't mask my disdain, simply evade the question entirely if it was ever directed my way.

So, as we extended the futon and inflated an air mattress, transforming the living space into a bedroom for my 5-year-old brother and me, I began contem-

plating future excuses to escape a weekend at my dad's. With exactly forty-two hours left in those uncomfortable rooms, I became unbearably angry. I had no desire to return to this place: empty, forbidding, embarrassing. Hot tears started streaming down my cheeks as I laid in the dark, allowing them to slowly lure me to sleep.

Still-Life (Portrait of a Lover)

i. hands

yours take mine,
take my whole life too
because i fall in love with you
every time you pull me closer
and my skin brushes yours,

heat from your body
like rope winding me,
desire binding the strings
of my heart

to your fingers.
play me like a marionette.
knit me into the fabric
of your heart,
rip out the embroidery of
your last relationship:
a girl that looks just like me,
someone you now consider a psychopath,
a stranger.

i become new when you touch me,
made again from the electricity
sparking from your fingertips;
i am a hotwired car,
i fall into the leather of your
convertible mustang when your
hands and want restrain me.

keep me tethered to earth;
with all of the confusion floating
in the genetic dark of my brain,
this is the only way i feel real.
hands in mine as we dance,
endless movement and time

erases everyone else from the room
until the universe consists
of your palm on my palm.
my heart in your hand,
blood buried beneath nails;
you look at me wondering

why i gave you this damaged thing
to carry.

pull me closer and tie
the knots of me to your wrists.
nervous sweat slicking your fingers
when you first told me
you loved me.
a strong grip when my tears fall
and melt into your skin,
my salt mixing into your bloodstream;

i cannot tell you from me,
i cannot distinguish what hand is mine;
my grip becomes tighter
because even when sense
slips through my fingers,
i cannot let you get away.

ii. neck

press your hands on me,
press them up against my neck
and wrap your long fingers
around my throat

watch as i gasp for air,
the purple bruises left behind
a request to feel something
to feel real
and what it's like to comprehend
the feeling of drowning
without water.

am i still alive?
does it count as living
if you press your palms
to detect a heartbeat and i
pronounce myself dead on arrival
from the pills i've been taking
to make myself feel whole again,
to feel like my old self again.
depression makes every word i speak
feel like a pretender in your eyes.
my senses burned out
by one too many matches swallowed
and the brandy bottle that lit
my sentences on fire.

place your hands on me.
give me cpr,
teach me how to turn my shaking breath
into something more convincing;

teach me how to pump
my lungs again to
make the heart beat fast
against my neck
in the palm of your hand.

i rest my head
next to yours,
our pulses touching and fighting
but the only war
is to make it to another morning.

iii. legs

we run through meadows of gold,
dandelion puffs and wheatgrass
licking the skin at our ankles.
i want to dance with you
beneath the endless
east coast july sky;

your legs stretch on for miles
a stride to match a smile
to match your skin
as radiant as the sun:
you are summer,
you are the birds soaring overhead

and you never know that i am winter,
i am the cold
that creeps into your jacket
even after it's zipped up all the way.
i try to pretend like one smile can thaw me.

keep pace with me
even though it's a hindrance;
your laughter moves faster than your muscles
even though your legs could
cross an ocean,
but mine could only pass a stream
and crumble beneath my foundation.

i remember the sea:
indigo swirling waves
knocked out my knees
and made you stand your ground.
i remember the patio:
dulled neon lights barely
glowing glinting off your teeth
as you rest your hand
on my thigh and it is

so unlike the previous residents
that rented my body as their home,
their summertime cottage
with the heating bill
they always left unpaid.
oh how they ran
away from my heart;
maybe they were waiting
for you to stay.

you have walked beside me
at every step of the way,
every milestone and path
every hike around my heart
around my love.
starting to build a home
in the deep dark wood
along my dirt road
that leads back to where i belong.

you run ahead,
still laughing and smiling
still an aspect of summer
in a changing climate;

still part of the race,
you never lose that golden glow.
i watch your form retreat on the horizon,
a figure running into the sunset.
you are unaware
that i have stopped running.

Southern Dust

I-85 runs from somewhere up by Richmond, through most of the southeast, and ends out in Montgomery. It's one of those highways that's somehow always crowded but seems to grow more desolate after you leave each successive city; the population follows canyon curves, with stretches that feel like you're somewhere out in Who-Knows rather than being, as you are, never more than 100 miles from a city. In spite of being a major thoroughfare for these southeastern cities, it still finds a way to be dangerously sharp in some of its curves, especially when it rains, and raining it definitely was when I drove home. Forrest Gump wouldn't have had the words to describe this kind of storm, I don't think. Still, it seemed as though we'd all collectively decided that stopping was for chumps.

I noticed her sometime around the I-81 and Rt. 77 interchange, following right on my ass. I brake checked her a couple of times before seeing that it was just some girl who was clearly a little too nervous in the coming rain. Her rationale, I assume, was to stick onto the back of a truck much bigger than her little coupe in the hope that it'd guide her through the traffic (and with the way I drive, I most certainly did). Maybe she saw the college stickers on the back of the truck, along with the license plate (complete with county, as most southern plates are), and decided it would just be easier to make her only focus the back of a truck going to the same place, rather than worrying about the signs, the GPS, or the shoddy directions her father probably sent her. I don't know, though. I never really got a word in with her.

It was somewhere south of Greenville, just across the Georgia-South Carolina border, that she lost control of the car. I'd been checking the rear-view every once in a while to see if she was still there, and a few times between North and South Carolina I saw her check her phone and drift towards the median, only to jerk back into the lane a second later. This time, though, she didn't jerk it back. It almost looked as though she was just letting it drift into the grass in the center of the highway. She finally ripped the wheel back and sent her car rolling, its white paint now slinging mud and oil. I slammed on the brakes, skidded into the grass, and ran back to help her, pulling her limp body out of the car and filling my palms with broken glass and a stranger's blood in the process.

The last thing I remember about her was the way the mud and blood matted her hair. Georgia clay is glue when it's wet, and it, along with the blood creeping from the point of her gentle widow's peak, laid her hair flat in my hands and along the grass of the median. Raindrops kept the blood from her eyes and hid the tears I'm sure she was crying, but it made the black, curled mass of her hair like a woolen surplus blanket against my forearm. I wanted to lay her somewhere better, anywhere, but there was nowhere to place her that would keep her hair out of the glass and the clay, so I knelt there, waiting for an ambulance. I held her as gently as I could, this nameless girl, and watched her slip in and out. She breathed in quick gasps at first, shaking, visibly wondering where she was and jerking away from my bloody hands and then back into them when the pain, she realized, was just too much. She looked up at me after each spasm, her eyes wide and her lip, split from the crash, quivering; each time, her

eyes would slip closed slowly and roll backwards. If not for the gasping breaths of broken ribs I would've been sure she'd died twelve times before the ambulance finally rolled to a stop, but that was still so far away, and she was running out of time, so I stayed.

There was a rose tattoo on the left side of her neck, right below her ear-American traditional. It was only two colors, red and black. Three, only if you count the ever lightening porcelain color of her skin. The porcelain that was, of course, cracked in a thousand places. The color of her blood matched the rose petals perfectly, if only in the glow of shattered headlights and partial moonlight. I pressed my thumb over the center of the rose, trying to hold the two halves of her skin together like an accidental suture; I was not even the temporary solution, and I was going to lose her. She was begging me in silent gasps and fleeting whispers to keep her there, hold her grounded in southern dust. The rain, though, turned her into copper mud, and she was slipping backwards into the void. I didn't know what to do but hold her the way I had been for the count of three slips in and out of consciousness and forty-five speeding cars without so much as a brake light or a rubberneck.

She was still fighting four slips and sixty-two cars later, still jerking out of sleep and sliding back into my hand. I held it up against the top of her spine, like I was taught, though she moved enough for me to know that I was simply holding her spine still in her body and keeping the clamp shut so that her ribs didn't burst into wings and send her out of herself. She gasped twice when she looked behind me, her eyes growing wide and bright, and then shutting slowly, as though closing the blinds at the end of a day. The lights of the ambulance stretched out from behind my back like rays of tinted sunlight across the highway. The red of the siren turned her blood into tar, dripping even from the corners of her eyes. It seeped from the center of her rose and dripped from the de facto ring the crash had created on her lower lip. Nevertheless, they were here. Angels screaming into siren trumpets on their way to do as they do best.

They came in too fast. The tires screamed for mercy as they hydroplaned and slid into the back of the overturned car she was pulled from. I slumped over her to cover her from the glass. The sound of a second crash triggered something inside of her that brought her right back to the surface; her eyes shot open and the creeping blue light behind me lit her eyes up brighter than I'd imagined. The skidding of steel on asphalt and glass on skin, though not hers, made her shake like a bareboned wind chime; the glass both peppered off my soaking back and ripped its claws into me, touching me with leper-spots of blood through my shirt. Though I couldn't see it, the overturned hood of her car slid towards us like a guillotine. I stayed slumped over her and watched her eyes watch it slip closer and closer among the rock and water of the road. She had the same look in her eyes as it blotted out the warning lights that ancient people did when they saw their first eclipse. It was doomsday, and they were sure of it, though they had no shield over their sky. Still, as if halted by God himself, the white civic stopped before it flattened us, though putting corkscrews and debris into my back, further punishing me for keeling over her and trying to keep her alive. We slipped further into the mud and clay as we waited, though I was still stuck on this nailboard of a hood and she was still the same cracked porcelain doll she was when I'd found her. We waited.

The ambulance sat for what felt like hours before two angels came bursting out of the back and sprinted towards us, kits and tools in hand like flaming swords. One pulled me off of her with a gloved hand and leaned me, weaker than I'd thought, against the guardrail. The glass still lodged in my arm from the driver's side window from which I'd pulled her slid down and sliced me further than any of us had known. The twisted bits of hood and bumper pressed further into my shoulders as the guardrail and my fatigue laid them in like a vice that only they, the preoccupied angels, could loosen.

I, as she had, started to slip. I dug my nails into Georgia clay to keep myself grounded, but I could feel my hands sink deeper and deeper while my head rolled back and my eyes rolled skyward. I'm sure I was cracked porcelain to the God that was holding me. I'd wondered if it was the bleeding of the cross tattoo on my back that finally brought him down here, finally let him answer to the two reincarnations of Job he'd left on highway 85. I wasn't sure if the blue lights were making my eyes light up the way hers had, but I knew when each red light flashed that I was covered in blood, or tar, or clay.

Another set of sirens came, and with it, another set of lights, and then another, and then another. God had split open the sky for me and lit the world with headlights and flashing blues and then their flashing reds. Back and forth they went while they tended to her and then, almost by accident, found their way over to me, leaning on the guardrail, eyes pointed skyward. They slid me down, and my head cracked against the mud and stayed there, not bouncing, but stopping dead against the ground. I turned to see her just as they'd elevated the stretcher and brought her towards the dented angel's chariot. Her eyes were surely pointed skyward, with her temples sandwiched between plates meant to stabilize a neck injury she likely didn't have.

The last I saw of her as they rounded behind the car and further back into the ambulance was her hair, sticking out from the neckboard and still matted with blood and clay. It lay like an obsidian shield tied to her head, blocking out anyone who held it, passively rejecting the touch of skin from anyone trusted enough to touch her. I was given such trust only because she needed it, I guess. In another life, another world, this is exactly where we'd be. I'd likely never see her in a bar somewhere in Atlanta, buy her a drink, make small talk about the rose tattoo on her neck, or tell her, with my hand wrapped around the nape of her neck and the curled blanket of black hair, how blue her eyes were. I'd only see her again if they placed us next to each other in the hospital, or if I stumbled upon her stone growing out of the ground, but I didn't know where she was from or even her name. I wouldn't have known her in another life. I wouldn't have seen her the way I saw her then.

I Came, I Saw, I Fled: Romantic Cowardice in High School

Back in my junior year of high school, I was fumbling, insecure, and awkward, with dark curly hair, crooked glasses, and a bit of body flab. I was (and still am) an undeniable nerd. I loved Pokémon, video games, and books and hated socializing, group activities, and athletics. A person such as me might as well have had a giant “Don’t Date Me” sign on his head, and at this point, I was an outcast from the various cliques at St. Timothy’s Catholic High School—Nicholas Koloian was a nobody.

The conflict during autumn of my junior year, and the apogee of my high school awkwardness, all came down to girls. Everything started with Michael, who almost acted like a friend when he wasn’t making fun of me. A pudgy African American of Nigerian descent who usually wore rimmed glasses, Michael made it his sacred duty to torment me at almost every opportunity. When he asked who my first crush was, I told him because he had told me who his crush was, and I lacked the common sense to not respond in kind. That’s a story on its own, but for now I’ll just say that she didn’t return the feelings, and that my friend Madison helped prevent her from finding out. It did, however, give Michael a precedent to ask me who my second crush was. I refused to tell him, but she was a sophomore named Natasha. Natasha was a petite girl with straight blonde hair, braces, and glasses. I related to her, in a sense, when I overheard people talking about how shy she was. I coveted her because I imagined her as being like me, even though I never spoke with her. She was the only girl I could picture myself with, and I barely knew her.

In a bold betrayal only matched by the likes of Judas handing over Christ to the Sanhedrin, a friend who knew I liked Natasha sold out my secret to Michael for five dollars, which the friend used to buy lunch. Michael informed me that the friend sold me out after school one day and then told a sophomore named Alexis right in front of me. Alexis told another sophomore named Gus, who is the primary agitator of this particular tale.

It happened when Alexis mentioned that I liked Natasha to Gus one day at lunch.

“You mean that really quiet girl?” he asked.

“Yeah, what are you thinking?” Alexis said.

“I’m thinking we should get her over here so Nick can ask her to homecoming.”

The fast-approaching homecoming dance, which I wasn’t planning on attending in the first place, became a source of existential dread after Gus’s statement. He came up with some truly awful suggestions for getting me to ask her out, like serenading her, or asking her out in front of the entire school at home-room so she couldn’t say no. Then Gus physically held me down at the lunch table so Alexis could find Natasha and bring her over to me. I managed to break free, run out of the lunchroom, and hang out in the hallways for a while. I came back to the lunchroom later for some reason (even now I’m not quite sure why),

and Gus told me I needed to “face my fears.” I turned at the door and saw Alexis and Natasha walk in, triggering a fight-or-flight response that sent me running from the lunchroom again.

But the big awkward moment happened on October 4th, 2013 – my seventeenth birthday. On that day, the hallways, with their bland white walls lined with dull green lockers, were empty at St. Timothy’s, save for Gus and me. Bright ceiling lights gleamed down on the white floor tiles, while Gus sipped from a nearby drinking fountain. I knew Gus was going to agitate me more, which gave me a nervous feeling in the pit of my stomach. Black bangs hung down over Gus’s forehead, overtop pale pimply skin and glasses—his body type was also distinctly doughboy-ish. “Face your fears,” he told me, after he finished his drink. We proceeded to walk down the hallways to geometry, a class we had together, which was also full of sophomores.

The arguing began in the hallway and continued into the geometry classroom, where Gus said he was going to tell her. He then told Pam, Lisa, and Kathy.

“Stop telling people!” I said.

“Practically the whole school knows,” he said.

Great, my secret was spreading like an STD.

The bell for the end of the school day rang, and I walked out of the classroom, down the brightly lit hallways, and eventually into the school’s library. It wasn’t so much a library as a room with shelves stacked with books, full of students goofing off, skipping class, or eating candy instead of reading. From the ratty, light brown carpet to the dilapidated bookshelves with a collection ranging from *The Hunger Games* to *Mein Kampf*, the place had no sense of comfort. This was the place I usually waited for my dad to pick me up after school ended.

Michael and another student named Lewis were hanging out inside the library when I entered.

“Gus is talking to Natasha,” Lewis said. Then I saw Gus and Natasha enter the library.

“Coward: One who, in a perilous emergency, thinks with his legs,” wrote Ambrose Bierce. Even if I had known this quote at the time, the wisdom of it would have been lost on me. I ran out of the library and down the entryway. The scene—a large foyer with a triangular roof, light shining down on the floors from the windows at the ceiling arch—was a blur to me as I sped out of St. Timothy’s. I went out of the building and down the long sidewalk, winding around the school. I ran past the white siding and brick foundation of the school, past the green lawn and the dark green shrubs that flanked the building. The sidewalk, right next to the road on which parents drove to pick up their kids, led me to a place right at the corner of the school, right where the road forked off into a T shape. I could wait for my dad to take me home here, and I stared at the trees across from the school, catching my breath and taking a moment to collect myself.

I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket, unlocked it, and noticed a notification onscreen. It was a text from my good friend Madison. She had always been nice to me, the kind of outstanding person you rarely see in a lifetime, let alone in high school. Before this, she had helped me with the first girl Michael tormented me over, finding out that she didn’t want to be in a relationship be-

fore I asked her out and saving me from awkwardness.

Regarding Natasha, Madison didn't have the full story, but had texted me saying, "Sorry everyone was being a bit of a dick."

I received no presents from friends on my birthday. Instead I went running from the school like a coward because someone was trying to force me to ask my crush out.

I saw a car drive up to my hiding spot at the corner. It was Michael getting a ride from his carpool. Michael just laughed. The student he carpooled with, Angelica, said "I've never seen you run so fast."

Eventually, they drove off, and my dad came back to drive me home. I didn't tell him what happened. Upon returning home, we proceeded with a meager birthday celebration, a chocolate cake from Wegman's. The cake was large, double chocolate, with thick layers of icing and "Happy Birthday Nicholas" written on top of it in blue. My dad went upstairs to take a nap, while I began eating my cake. I was eating a little too quickly. Bite after bite, I was feeling fuller and fuller. Upon finishing, I decided that I'd had enough of that day's bullshit and wanted to de-stress, to take a walk and listen to some music. I went out the garage door, Bluetooth headphones on, with some nondescript song from a Nintendo video game playing. I barely made it a few houses down from mine when I felt a sinking feeling in my stomach, as if I had just swallowed a load of wet cement, and then the sensation that I was going to be sick. I returned home, entered through the garage again, and ran to the bathroom, where I heaved my birthday cake into the toilet, the ultimate *coup de grâce* to my self-esteem after my flight from school.

It's worth saying, to his credit, that Gus never pushed further to try to get me to ask the girl out. Based on what his friends told me afterward, he felt incredibly guilty after seeing me run from the school. High school is a time of great immaturity, and they don't call sophomores "wise fools" for nothing.

What wasn't so admirable was that Michael ended up trying to force me to ask Natasha out after Gus relented. At first, I was almost comically unwilling, but the choice was between sucking it up and asking her out myself or having Michael ask her out on my behalf, as he was threatening to do. One day, I was with Alexis when I saw Natasha waiting to be picked up from school. Natasha stood by the school's front door in the entrance hall, looking out the window to watch for her ride. "She's right over there," Alexis told me. "Why don't you ask her out?"

"Fuck it!" I said. I walked over to her, gathered my strength, and then...

"Hey Natasha," I said. "I have a question. Would you like to go to homecoming with me?"

She smiled and said something I couldn't quite make out. Then she repeated herself: "I don't know."

"You don't have to give me an answer if you don't want to," I said. She assented and I walked off.

My friends, when they saw what I had done, immediately told me how brave I was. They also pointed out that I was shaking. If Ambrose Bierce's cowardice quote seemed too harsh on me, Mark Twain once wrote: "Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear, not absence of fear." In that sense, and in that moment, perhaps I had overcome my cowardice.

A few days later, I asked Natasha over Facebook messenger if she had given my question more thought. She thanked me for asking her, but told me she was going with someone who she hadn't seen since middle school. At least she was polite when rejecting me; the first girl Michael asked out laughed in his face and said no.

I later learned from Alexis that Natasha was going to the dance with another girl. I still clung to the hope that there was some way I could change her mind, some convoluted plan that would get us together. Eventually, I texted Madison from earlier, who by this point knew the full story of the great debacle of October 4th and referred to the aggressors as “huge, colossal assholes” rather than “a bit of a dick.” By then, I had lost all aspirations of changing Natasha's mind. I told Madison there was no hope of me ever being in a relationship, and that I'd never let myself be burned again. I regret that I don't remember exactly what she said, but I do remember the general tone—taking a break was fine, but I didn't need to give it up forever. I would find someone someday. When replying to Madison's texts, I agreed that taking a break was good. It was only after a few months of waiting in high school that I got over it. From there, it was only a few years later that I realized Madison was totally right, when my romantic situation reversed.

In 2016, at the beginning of sophomore year at Gettysburg College, my flight on the 4th from St. Timothy's was out of my mind. Instead, a good friend who I had met on my first day of college was on it, and I had hopes of something more with her. I'd been playing it safe with the friend since earlier that year in the spring, spending lots of time with her, but never explicitly saying I liked her. One day that fall, I finally texted her and said, “I don't know if this is a good way of saying I like you as more than a friend?”

She asked if I meant as a crush or “bffls.”

“Crush,” I said.

Her reply: “Ur cute. :D.”

We then agreed to spend more time together and see where things went.

Almost one year later, now officially dating my college crush, the memory of Natasha doesn't pain me anymore.

A Letter to My Daughter

Sweetheart,
I'll never be the father you want me to be, but I'll try.

I'll ask God to put lightning in my bones, and have the voltage run through
my body
And contract the strings in my fingers
So that I'll never drop you.
Soft skin has better grip than the glass of a bottle,
Or the wrapping of a cigarette.

I'd rearrange the planet for you if I could. I'd bend weapons into instruments,
Turn water into wine when you're old enough
And break the good boys' hands into holding yours,
Though the curve of your smile would hook them just fine.

I'd sew your clothes out of the sunlight in my hair, and when I ran out,
I would unstitch myself and graft the best pieces of me onto you
In hopes you might wear a thicker skin than I ever had. The world can be so
cold and so dark,
But you will be warm, and bright.

When the flushing of your cheeks is taken from you
I will replace it with the redness of my blood,
Tearing myself open so that you could stay the same. I'd be your angel
Only in that I'd have torn my ribs open into wings
To open myself up to be who I should.

All of this because, darling,
You are still a dream,
And that's all you may ever be.
Promises are so easily made to girls whose names are still blank.

You are only half a whisper,
A breeze that blows in only when I leave the windows open
So that the night air will ease me of my worries.

It is not you that scares me, darling, because I know how far I'd walk for you,
But I don't know where to step,
Nor how far to go.

The world can be so cold and dark,
But you will be warm, and bright
When I finally find you.

The Invention

The first time I saw the shadow girl was my fifth birthday.

That day, at my request, my parents and I went to the park. It didn't have any playhouses or swing sets, just a yellowing strip of grass and a murky pond. Even so, it was my favorite place in the universe. There, not a single tree or rooftop obscured the horizon, so when the sun rose or set, it was framed by nothing but ivory earth.

We brought a whole loaf of bread with us, as we always did. The loaf had been sitting on the counter, growing stiffer by the day for an entire week, so by the time my birthday arrived, it was ready. I crumbled slice after slice of age-stiff bread in my tiny palms and lobbed the crumbs into the pond. We spent the day watching clusters of fat, glossy ducks gobbling up whatever we threw, paddling with thick yellow feet and squawking. As the evening approached, a chill swept the muggy California air, and my parents and I huddled together in a huge, grass-stained picnic blanket. It smelled like wet earth and summer. The sun was sliding beneath the trees, smearing the darkening water with gleaming bars of orange and gold silk.

I remember the laughter, just snippets of it. My mother's laugh, like a sweet bell, her hair a dark tangle beneath the picnic blanket. My father, his deep, gravelly chortles thrumming against my back as I laid against him. The air had a crisp, honeyed scent. I don't remember what we were laughing about, but I will always remember the laughter.

That's when I saw her. My smile faded like an old photograph. I only just glimpsed her--a flash of dark hair, the length of her fingers--before she vanished into the twilight shadows. But the memory followed me home as if it had folded itself up inside that picnic blanket and nestled in the checked folds.

I knew she wasn't just a random bystander or someone who passed us by chance. She was watching, hiding. I felt her eyes on me like silent brands. Thinking about her was wrong; seeing her felt...unnatural. It was as if I had seen something that I shouldn't have, like a kiss on the lips that I should have hidden my eyes from. But time spiraled away, and I almost forgot.

The second time I saw her I was eight. It was the middle of the night, and a gentle hand on my shoulder woke me. My dad was nudging me awake, a finger pressed to his lips.

"Come on, Claire. I have to show you something," he whispered. Anticipation instantly flooded me. For two months now, he had sequestered himself in our basement, working. When I pressed my ear against the door, I could hear the soft scratching of graphite, the whisper of papers rustling, but I couldn't fathom what he was making. It wasn't exactly new to me, though.

My dad called himself an inventor, though he had yet to invent something. He lived off my mom's sparse paycheck and tried desperately to think of something no one had thought of before.

"A useless endeavor," my grandma used to quip. "There's nothing new under the sun."

"But what about beyond the sun?" he would grin. I suppose that's why I

adored him so much. There was no such thing as impossible to him, and I was boundless, a child.

But even at the age of eight, I knew there was something desperate about him, something frantic. I'd never been allowed in his basement before, but his half of my parents' bedroom was enough to hint at what it was like. Papers, crumpled and tossed, smears of ink on the sheets, dirty dishes on the nightstand. To me, those drawings, all hectic scribbles and excited scrawlings, were the most mysterious and beautiful things I'd ever seen. I would smooth them carefully with my palms, drinking in his imagination until I heard his boots on the basement stairs. Then I would rush to my bedroom, head spinning, cheeks flushed with the impossible.

In hindsight, I don't know why my mom put up with his work. He lived because of her teaching job, and she supported us alone. But I guess she thought she saw something special in him, in the agitated way he tried to create, the bizarre intelligence behind his eyes. She was right. He was special. Or maybe it was just the way he laughed, stale bread in one hand and a picnic blanket in the other. Either way, she let him sketch and continued budgeting her spare dollars in mason jars.

I'd seen him inspired by an invention before, but that night was different somehow. He had barely left the basement for weeks, and when I did see him, he looked strange. His cheekbones protruded, skin sporting a waxy sheen, and his face was sallow. His eye sockets were sunken and dark, as if bruised, but his eyes...they were thrilling. They were electric in a way that I'd never seen before: raw, unbridled.

That night my heart fluttered in my throat. Was he going to show me his invention? Would I be allowed, finally, into the wonderland of his basement? What would it look like? I imagined beakers filled with sparkling, vibrant liquids, rabbits hopping in hanging enclosures. But we didn't turn towards the basement. Instead, we crept towards the guest bedroom. I held my breath as we ascended the stairs noiselessly. He grinned, opening the door with exaggerated caution, and I watched with wide eyes as he pried open the window. Awkwardly, he swung his lanky legs out and over the sill. Perched on the roof and grinning mischievously, like a child, he turned to me.

"Don't tell your mom," he whispered, holding his arms out to me.

He lifted me out onto the roof and into the humid night air. Then he lay down right there, sprawled out under the immeasurable expanse of the night sky. I scrambled down next to him. The gritty asphalt shingles pricked my elbows.

"This is what I wanted to show you, Claire. Look up," he said. The moon was huge and pearlescent, hanging dangerously close to earth. The stars were close enough to taste. I sighed.

"Isn't it amazing?" he breathed.

"Yeah. I wish every night could be like this," I murmured.

"But they won't be," he said softly. I turned to look at him, taken aback. He shifted to peer at me, and there was that glint in his eyes, that dark, obsessive excitement that was beginning to frighten me a little.

"But if you could go back in time," he continued, "you could revisit this moment, again and again, as many times as you want."

I sat up.

"You would never have to wish for nights like these again, Claire."

"What are you talking about?" I asked, but I already knew.

"It's my invention! The Time Machine!" he exclaimed, folding his arms under his head in self-satisfied way, beaming up at me. I rolled my eyes, propping my elbows beneath me. I only realized he was serious when he remained silent, his eyes shadowed and searching beneath his brows.

"Mhm..." I began.

"No, really! I'm not joking, Claire! So many people have tried before, and I've been looking at their attempts, and I think they've been going about it the wrong way entirely! I think I know what to do now--how to make it work!" he burst, sitting bolt upright, "I have what they were missing! That old basement is going to be an edifice of science! My Time Machine is going to change...*everything*," he declared, his voice low and strained. His hands were calloused but still delicate, like an artist's, when they clasped mine.

"It is going to change the world, Claire. We are going to change the world."

He radiated excitement. I knew he needed me to believe in him. He needed me. He'd never needed me before. I allowed a small smile, and his eyes were suddenly ablaze with pride.

It was infectious. I giggled, the exhilaration slowly gripping me, stealing my breath.

"I can't believe it! You're serious?!" I gasped, and he bobbed his head.

"Why would I lie?"

"You...you can really do it? Do you really think you *can*?"

He put his finger to his lips in caution and nodded vigorously. Then we were laughing, delirious with exaltation.

For a while, we just flopped onto our backs on the roof, beaming up at the stars, and in that moment I could have sworn I was one of them. We both were; so bright and impossibly untouchable. It was as if the future was spilled out before us in the patterns of the Milky Way, and I knew that nobody could look at my face without being blinded. Nobody could touch me without feeling that bursting light just beneath my skin, white-hot embers of hope. We were unstoppable.

Suddenly I felt the sensation of eyes on my skin. Of watching. I turned.

The shadow girl was there, standing stock-still on the roof. She was just a dark frame, perched lightly on the shingles, as if she were a ray of light on the verge of vanishing. I couldn't see her face, but the moonlight illuminated the crescent of a smile. And then she was gone.

It wasn't exactly threatening, but I immediately felt protective of my father. Was this girl trying to steal his ideas? But no, she couldn't be. I'd seen her before, a long time ago, in the midst of some sun-sweet memory...

Soon after that, the sounds in the basement changed from the whispering of a pencil to the grinding and shrieking of metal on metal. It drowned out my voice. I tried to keep my excitement fresh--tried to help. On the roof that night, he'd needed me. But as his work drew him closer to a breakthrough, it pulled him further from me.

Years passed. I saw the shadow girl five more times, seven in all. I never knew how to feel about her presence. She just watched. She appeared mostly on

the happiest of occasions, like my high school graduation, and though I never saw her face, she seemed glad for me. At first, I thought she was a ghost. Some sort of lost spirit following me in secret. After a while, I began to think of her as a sort of guardian angel. Even when I couldn't see her, I felt her like a hand on my shoulder. But as my dad became more and more obsessed with his work, her presence became less and less frequent. Though the shadow girl unnerved me, I felt unexpectedly abandoned.

I grew up. Once he began his work on the Machine, he spent more time surrounded by cords and wires and plates of metal than he did with any human being. Eventually, mom and I moved into a different house with a roof much too slanted to sit on and stargaze. It was a tiny house. Mom planted vibrant flowers and crawling ivy everywhere, and the effect was that of an old-fashioned cabin in the woods. It was as if she were trying to ward off technology completely. The new house had no basement.

For a while, it seemed as if my father hardly existed. Mom and I would sit on the threadbare couch in the new house, sipping tea and pushing pawns across a stained chess board. But my father's personality was so sharp, his presence so acute and lively, that his absence was just as palpable. We tried to laugh it off, but without his energy, that frantic scrambling for answers surrounding us, it seemed like we had no direction.

Between the bell-notes of my mother's laughter, I could hear him. In the moments when her eyes weren't fixed on me, I could see him. In the space between her words, in the silence between her heartbeats, in the early mornings when she pushed her coffee cup away from her and cast her eyes towards the lake, I could feel him. She could, too, and I guess that's why she died. When she stopped eating, I knew that she was already gone. My father wasn't at her funeral. I faced it, robbed by time and dreams and a basement.

But I wasn't completely alone. The shadow girl was there beside the coffin, just before the friends and distant cousins spilled in with flowers and perfumed sympathy cards. I barely caught a glimpse of her as I turned into the reception room. One long-fingered hand was cupping a rose bud, but she disappeared too quickly for me to see much else. She'd pulled one of the petals free when she fled, though, and I clutched that petal in my fist throughout the entire funeral. It was damp and creased, but it was my companion.

As time passed, I barely saw my father. I knew his health was slowly worsening as his obsession grew, but even so, I rarely visited. He never called. I occasionally called him, but when we were on the phone he always sounded distant and distracted. I didn't really mind. I called him because he was my only relative left, not because I knew him. Ignoring me was the least painful thing he'd done.

Sometimes, I stared at the peeling plaster ceiling at my mom's house, the house that I now owned, and thought about the days when the plaster was the night sky and my father's eyes weren't hooded and dark. The days when he was just an unsuccessful nobody, with a useless job and a mischievous grin, a knack for stargazing and a fistful of stale bread. But those days were gone.

When I was 20, the time finally came. My dad called me. I answered on the first ring, sure there was an emergency.

"Dad?" I asked, my blood rushing audibly.

"It's finished," he whispered. His voice was thin from disuse.

"What?" I asked blankly. I could hear his breath through the speaker, shallow and tense.

"The Machine. Come over now."

I sped through every red light on the way to my parents' old house, weaving between cars. When I got there, he was sitting in the front lawn, looking comically out of place. His skin was practically transparent, and he had lost an enormous amount of weight, his bones jutting like knives. He was skeletal, but the gleam in his eyes was stronger than I had ever seen. A feeling of unease beleaguered me. The grass, unkempt and shaggy, had grown long and yellow.

Inside, the house was almost exactly as mom and I had left it. Except, of course, for the dust. An old telescope sat by the window, and a few of my stuffed animals lay discarded on the carpet. It was like an abandoned building--a ghost town. Our lives, frozen in place and left to wither. I wondered for a moment if dad had even noticed when mom and I left.

My heart hammered in my chest as I walked down the basement steps for the first time. I'd always thought my first time in his secret study would be an exciting, enchanting moment. Standing in the simple cement room, I felt numb.

My father's creation was in the center of the space. The Time Machine was oddly small and simple. Just a box, a metal cube really, veined with a labyrinth of gleaming wires and glowing buttons. It was barely big enough to hold a person. I knelt in front of it, staring at the countless years of tireless work, the memories of my dad I would never have because of this box. It had stolen them from me.

"How would you like to be the very first time traveler?" I heard him ask, his voice distant. There was a clicking noise as the door swung open on well-oiled hinges, and the hum of electricity washed over me. I folded myself into the tiny box, knees to my chest, the coolness of the metal seeping through my shirt.

"When do you want to go?" he asked. I already knew the answer. This box had taken my mom, crushed the breath from her lungs. It had robbed me of all those memories I should have had with my dad. Now, it was going to give them back to me.

"April 10th, 2020," I said hollowly. "My fifth birthday."

The machine clicked and thrummed as my dad pushed the buttons and shut the door, locking me into the darkness.

When I got out, it was all exactly as I remembered it. The quiet ripples on the pond. The ducks gliding across the water. The picnic blanket and the little girl, and that laughter. I could hardly make them out beneath their shelter, that mud-smeared blanket. I still didn't catch what we were laughing about, but we were together.

Five-year-old me did something unexpected then. She peeked over the blanket. I saw her eyes find me.

Right then I knew that I would never stop visiting myself. I would appear on the roof of my house, at my high school graduation, and every moment in between. I would never go back to the bleak present. What was left for me there? I knew then that when the Machine was finally destroyed, I would remain.

She didn't see much. A flash of dark hair, the length of my fingers. But I knew what I had become from that moment on. A shadow.

Holding Me

Cradling myself, feeling the support of the kitchen floor beneath me. The grey and brown swirls of the tile are cold and tough. I surrender all my weight into the light brown, wooden cupboards beside me. I don't care that my tears are distorting my thick, black eyeliner. The heat they bring is welcomed because I find my skin to be freezing. I try to curb my inner monologue because my thoughts are elusive and sometimes too fast for me to catch. I try to control my thoughts because thoughts turn into triggers. Triggers are dangerous because they stop my breathing, they quicken my heartbeats, and they transport me to a scene of their choosing. But it's too late to avoid that now.

He was my best friend. Sometimes I think about how happy we might have been if the bad, the horrors, had never existed.

But they did.

We met in the summertime, when the sky was blue and the shade of a tree provided shelter. Six years ago, at the age of fourteen, he was just over six feet tall. His eyes were wide and light blue with a little hazel circling his pupils. His hair was outrageous, untamed, and black. I remember running my fingers through his thick curls, lightly grabbing hold, and leaning in for a soft kiss where his lips embraced mine.

We were so in love. Maybe in the you're-too-young-to-know-what-love-is kind of way, but it was wonderful. We spent every weekend together, always doing something outdoors. Maybe it was a sailing trip with my parents or a wine festival with his. Whatever it was, we were together, and I was incandescently happy. We were the type of couple that everyone was jealous of. If he could, he would never let go of my hand. If he could, he would make sure I was always smiling. If he could, he would never let a moment pass by without letting me know that he loved me.

We attended two different high schools, he and I. He went to Gettysburg, smack-dab in the middle of Adams County, Pennsylvania, and I went to Fairfield, just fifteen minutes southwest. Fairfield is a rural town where the cows outnumber the people, everyone knows everyone else, and drama spreads like wildfire. To me, Gettysburg was the town where all the essentials were: Walmart, Giant, restaurants, outlets, etc.

Because we lived in two different towns, we could only see each other on the weekends, but we made the most of it. Once, I attended his soccer game and cheered his name so loudly and so often that I lost my voice. I sat in the grass with his father, stepmother, and two stepbrothers. The grass was itchy, but I didn't mind because I was watching my superstar take the field and totally annihilate the other team. He scored goal after goal and, as he ran past me, he would wink and say, "How's my girl doing?"

I loved being called "my girl." I loved being possessed, knowing I was his and he loved me. The way he acknowledged my presence gave me a high. My body erupted with pleasure that started in my chest and spread to my fingertips. No matter how embarrassed I felt, no matter how much my modesty

felt betrayed, I would smile. A big, goofy, unashamed-to-be-loved-by-the-best-boyfriend-in-the-world smile.

But that smile would vanish after a year of bliss. The smile he fought so hard to keep on my face would falter and disappear.

July 31, 2012. One year, one month, and twenty days after we met.

It was premeditated. The expansive forest behind my house, the comforter taken from my bed, the condom stolen from his parents. I had changed my outfit at least seven times but settled on a short, tight dress with a floral pattern. A little too girly for my taste, but what other costume could've been more perfect for my deflowering?

We were both acknowledged virgins and owned the innocent awkwardness of that fact as we hiked about a mile into the woods. Nervous laughter and multiple whispers of "Are you ready for this?" interrupted the forest's quiet demeanour. As we stepped foot onto the sacred ground chosen for this occasion, I felt the nervousness ease in my stomach. We helped each other unfold the comforter and place it on the forest floor. Smoothing out the wrinkles, we ended up on opposite sides of the blanket. We made eye contact, and he spoke first.

"Are you nervous?" he asked.

"No, I know you'll be gentle," I said.

And with that, I crawled towards him and let my fingertips pull upward at the seams of his grey t-shirt. Taking his turn, he tugged at the hem of my skirt before realising that it needed to be taken off in the other direction. In one, fluid motion, he pulled the dress up and over my head. I wriggled my arms free from their sleeves and stood before him in only my bra and panties. He decided to take off his shorts himself because the button had always caused me trouble.

Simultaneously, we undressed down to our bare skin. I allowed myself a moment to acknowledge everything my senses were experiencing. Before this moment, I had only seen his bare chest in the context of a pool. Now, he was in front of me with nothing to hide behind. The various shades of green enveloped us. The dark green grasses curled over the edge of the blanket. The lighter green leaves canopied the tops of trees, contrasting the sunlight sneaking through the gaps between branches. Even the browns from the trunks of trees were encircled by lush green vines.

He reached up, brushing the loose strands of hair from my face, and kissed me. It was different from other kisses he'd given me. This one was hard and, acting like a leading question, begged for a response.

Close by, a branch fell.

Its crackling noise stole my attention. My awareness expanded from his immediate touch to the surrounding forest. My Cherokee-oriented grandfather taught me that nature is sentient and autonomous. In the moment, the trees became perceptive and the soil in which they grew was responsive. The forest's presence overwhelmed me. It provided active company. The green engulfing my vision was dynamically occupying this moment. The vegetation remained unbiased, but I could not help but find comfort in its existence. But this ease would be short-lived.

As I emerged from our thick haze of intimacy, I noticed that his expression was one of annoyance. He was clearly flustered that I had broken his concentration and, therefore, killed the mood.

"May we resume?" he pressed.

"Can I just have a minute?" I pleaded, "I'm sorry, I just got caught up in the moment, and that clamour made me jump." Suddenly, the thought of unwelcome hikers crossed my mind, and the fear of being happened upon made me uneasy.

"Are you serious? Do you even want to do this? Are you just making up excuses because you can't just tell me that you don't want to be with me?" he probed.

"Of course not! I was so excited for this moment! It was going to be so special..." I felt my voice begin to trail off.

"Was? So it's over? Just like that you decide that we're through here? That this isn't going to happen?" he assumed.

"No, that's not what I meant—"

"Because you don't get to decide that, you know. You built this up, you got me all hard, and now you have to honour your word," he stated firmly.

"But I'm just not in the right mindset now, you know? I'm sorry," I said.

"You will be."

In a flash, he placed his right hand on the curve of my shoulder and his left around my neck. He had never touched me this way, and it rendered me speechless. His grip was so tight that I could follow his veins from the back of his hands, up his arm, to his biceps. His eyes were darker now, his dilated pupils taking up most of the space, and his jaw was clenched, as if he was putting every ounce of energy into this action. I was eighty-five pounds, and I knew he could overpower me, but I still didn't understand what was happening.

My body became tingly and numb as I felt him push me onto my back. I even remember blinking at him a few times, wide-eyed, as I stared into his familiar blue eyes, as he lowered himself to reflect my horizontal state. I allowed him to position my body, like a puppeteer manipulating his doll.

Heaving, he separated my legs. He tugged my underwear down over my knees, then over my ankles, and eventually onto the pile of clothes I had willingly removed. He situated himself between my thighs, creating a space wide enough for his hips.

I remember how dizzy I felt as I refocused my eyes on the leaf-speckled ceiling. All of my blood drained from my face and rushed to my heart, which was now beating so loudly that even he couldn't help but notice its rhythm. He gathered my limp wrists into one of his giant palms and held them above my head. With his other hand, he adjusted himself and pushed into me.

The pain startled me, and I yelped. In that moment, everything was too much. My senses were overwhelmed. I could taste the blood in my mouth, as I had unknowingly been biting my tongue. I could hear the breeze move nearly-weightless objects across the ground beside my head. I could smell the perfume I had borrowed from my mother in honour of this occasion. I could see how his body contorted mine. As I exhaled, his weight crushed my ribs, not allowing my lungs the courtesy of another breath.

I raised my head to see if the fear on my face could be registered and processed as an apologetic surrender. I repeated my repertoire of apologies and pleas but he took my words and twisted them into consent. This was before I learned that silence makes him softer.

"It hurts!" I cried.

He ignored me, and another sharp pain was followed by a shift of weight. I felt him thrust his full body weight into me.

I started screaming and thrashing within the confines of his grip, "Please, I'll do anything! Please stop! Stop!" He tightened his grip and choked my sobs away until I was left, whispering, "Please... Please... Please..."

After what seemed like hours, his grip loosened, and he pulled away. When I inched away from him, I clasped my hand over my mouth. About three feet below the indent that my head left behind was a pool of blood, now staining the middle of my childhood comforter. I pulled my knees upward to rest my chin on their boniness.

He edged slowly towards me, offering my clothes in lieu of a white flag.

"I'm sorry," he said, his eyes, now soft, pleading with mine, "You're just so beautiful that I couldn't help myself, and I had built up this moment in my head, and the thought of not going through with it today nearly broke my heart. Don't you understand?"

I couldn't find the words. I couldn't even look at him. I grabbed my clothes from his hand and slowly began to dress.

"Are you really going to be a baby about this whole thing? I mean, come on, wasn't that everything you ever wanted it to be? Wasn't it special?" He reached his hand out to touch mine, and I flinched, the first of many to come.

"Oh, Love, you know I would never do anything to hurt you. Please? You're making me feel bad," he beseeched.

That broke me and he knew it. A guilt swelled up inside of me that was so great and so overwhelming, that I smiled. I turned to face him, lifted his hand to my lips, and kissed his clasped hand. As my dimples gave way, he enveloped me in an embrace that reeked of a false sense of safety. But while I was shrouded in his arms, I buried my face in his chest and allowed silent tears to fall.

My eyes burn, my head is pounding, and my lungs feel like they are thawing. All at once, very real arms surround me. I'm lifted off the kitchen floor, and my feet are grounded. My mind still feels clouded, and my body is weak from reminiscing, but he knows this. He scoops me off my wobbly feet and carries me to my bed.

Trying to calm my dread, my beloved sings to me, "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine..." I almost urge him to stop because this nightmare will not be soothed with a nursery rhyme, but think better of it because his voice settles my breathing, dries my eyes, composes me.

"Which time was it?" he inquires, his low whisper not intruding on my privacy but genuinely wanting to understand, to help.

"The first," I manage, but my voice breaks.

"It's ok. You're ok. You're safe now," he repeats. With each phrase, he strokes my hair in rhythm. "He'll never touch you again," he says, sternly. And although an embrace from my protector may send me back into the arms of my demon, all I want, more than anything in the world, is to be held.

Spring Wakas

Beckoning colors,
Draw up my eyes, stretch minutes,
Grooming longer days.
Fanatic, eating the sun,
Now is no time for sleeping

My forbidden love,
If I wait to watch you wake,
You'll sleep forever.
Rapidly springing to green,
I roll your new leaves and feast

Chapels are structured
From canopies, as nothing
Godly could be this divine.
Devotion reemerges,
Not remembering time *sans* shade

Saturated with jade,
I lie organic, apart
From my maker, lone, rootless
Like cream in unstirred coffee,
Like harmony with no song

Branches like harp strings,
Vibrate tonally, birth leaves;
All that moves makes sound.
I grow now, but one day die,
Singing, and one day, muted

Are You Ready?

A space emerges before you. First, a crack, a sliver, and then it swells. Light pours through the opening. The light hurts. You squint your eyes against it and hope it will dissipate.

You wish to remain where you are, but a hand is on you, and it ushers you toward the light.

Droplets that kaleidoscopically interact with the light plaster your skin. Your palms especially, curled into little balls, are moist.

"Come on," a voice says. "A little more."

The light has swallowed everything. You can see nothing in it. All noises, including the voice, sound thunderous and hollow, as if echoed down a well. A strange pounding reverberates all around you, thumping intensely and rhythmically.

Shadowed outlines surface from the light and slowly materialize into shiny blurs. An arm extends outward from you, pale and bristled with thin, flat hairs. It turns blue above the elbow, rippling like the ocean at twilight. More pale appears past the blue. An edge, like a cliff face, juts out with sprinkles of dirt irregularly patterned across it. Two thin, pink lines protrude above that, a brown bush above those.

"Come on," the voice repeats. The pink lines tectonically divide and recollide.

You move into the lighted space.

"Not much further now." This is a man. His voice doesn't rumble anymore, no longer sounds like it roars from the clouds. It comes out throaty.

"Right in here." This time it's a new voice, adenoidal and slightly screechy, and it comes from behind and to your left. You see eyelids painted a bruised color. This is a woman. Her arm, thinner and with less coating than the man's, touches your other shoulder. Her fingers form more of a caress than the grip of the man's. Both, in their own ways, feel reassuring.

Glasses slip down the man's nose and he takes his arm off you to push them back up. Images move in the lenses. As you blink, a figure blinks back. You realize that is you staring back.

The woman also removes her hand, and your legs feel like they can't possibly hold you. You teeter in place. Knowing you must move, you drive your knee upward and push your foot out. You sway dextrally. Without thinking, your arms extend laterally. You bring your left leg forward and discover balance anew.

There is a straight-backed chair in the middle of the square room. A fluorescent rectangle blazes directly above the chair, and a few specks of dust play in the air beneath it. All the walls are sterily white and have a vaguely reflective quality that makes them seem like they move. On the wall to your left, facing the back of the chair, a clock hangs. The wall across from that, the one the chair faces, has a single, long mirror running across it, several feet high. Over in the corner across from you and to the left is a panel with a series of switches and dials.

Your feet no longer feel unsteady. Your body groans.

A man in a white smock stands a few feet behind the chair and watches you closely. His coal eyes move up and down your body and penetrate it, seeing the muscles and tendons and bones underneath. Another man in a navy button-up lingers near the back of the room, shifting his weight and causing the light to bounce off his smooth head at different angles. He stares straight ahead in a way that says he isn't looking at anything in particular, one hand on a black belt, displaying no sign he has noticed you. A five-pointed star glints from the left side of his chest, and to the right of it is a tag that reads Juris. A woman in a teal blouse lingers between the man behind the chair and Juris at the back of the room. Her hair perches in a tight bun, and her eyelids are a droopy, fleshy pink. Her eyes also penetrate you, but this penetration feels different, as if she sees things inside you that you don't want to see. She smiles at you with tight lips.

Your body has stopped groaning, and the smooth, glossy slate floor looks lower than before.

"Are we almost ready?" the white-smocked man asks.

The bruise-eyed woman and the man with the glasses leave. With the finality of a tomb slab slid into place, the door closes behind them. You glance at it, also white and with a worn-bronze knob on its left side, and you know there is no returning, no heading back through that door, and you can already feel the memory of the space beyond it seeping away. The light buzzes.

You stand alone and hesitate.

Juris turns and now all eyes in the room look at you.

The woman with the tight lips walks over towards where you stand. Her heels clack like heartbeats. She still smiles at you as she reaches your side. "My name is Dr. Potestas, and I'll be supervising today." She puts her matchingly-teal-nailed fingers gently around your arm. "Come on," she says as she takes a step forward. "I'll go with you." You mimic her step beside her.

She keeps going and leads you towards the chair. With each step your soles clap against the floor. As they bounce around the room, they combine into an applause that you find both exhilarating and menacing.

Juris checks his watch.

You reach the edge of the chair and something in your stomach distends. Dr. Potestas takes her hand off your arm. The air against the skin where her fingers lingered feels cold.

Your knees have begun to throb dully. Hand shakily extended, you feel the arm of the chair. Cold, slick wood greets your skin.

"Okay, sit down, and we'll secure you." The white-smocked man, who has not moved, pats the back of the chair. He has a gold cap on his first right bicuspid.

You stare at him, and he stares back. You try to swallow away the thing that feels lodged in your throat, but your mouth has dried and your neck contracts uselessly. "I don't want to sit," you say. His face doesn't change.

Juris moves toward you with both hands on his belt. "Just do as he tells you."

Dr. Potestas now stands with her back facing you. You yearn for her warm hand again, but know you cannot have it.

You look down at the chair, your hand still pressed against its hard arm, and then back up at the man. "But why should I sit? Why should I sit and you

shouldn't?"

"That's why you're here. That's why I'm here, why they're here" the white-smocked man gestures around the room. "For you to sit." He peers straight at you as he says this, and his voice carries something final.

By now, the aching in your knees has spread and reached your hips and the lower region of your back.

"They were wrong about me, you know," you say. "They were wrong."

"Everyone says that." Juris takes another step towards you, puts his hand on your shoulder, and gives you a slight push. "Now do as he tells you and sit." Your hold on the chair keeps you from stumbling.

With another attempt at a swallow, you acquiesce and move around to the front of the chair. As you lower yourself as slowly as you can, the exertion burning in your thighs, something inside tells you that it's not time yet. You are unsure what it's not time for. A moaning issues from the chair as more weight than you expected presses down into it. The chair feels rigid and, somehow, relaxing.

"Okay," the white-smocked man says. He steps from behind the chair and moves to your right arm. He grabs the black strands dangling from the chair and straps you in so tightly you can feel your heart beat in the crease of your elbow. After your arm, he moves to the front of the chair and straps in one leg and then the other, attaching something you can't see that feels cool to your left leg, and then he stands and reaches over to your left arm. One final strap stretches across your torso and squeezes in your diaphragm so that it becomes difficult to breathe. As he loops this last strap, you can smell something chemical about him. He looks at you studiously again before he steps away.

The man no longer in front of you, you now look back at yourself in the mirror. The clock on the opposite side of the room indicates it is three minutes from twelve. Its red hand ticks in a blur. Juris has reassumed his stoic-sentry position below the clock, staring at nothing with an air of dignified purpose. Dr. Potestas still hasn't faced back around, and her head hangs towards the floor.

You hope and fear that people are on the other side of the mirror and see the clock racing, too. Mostly, you fear that they look at you.

"Are you ready?" asks the white-smocked man.

"The clock," you say. "Why is it moving so fast?"

"Are you ready?" he asks again. The way he peers at you tells you that it doesn't matter whether you are ready or not, and you don't know anyway, so you don't answer.

A thin, black cloth slides down your face. It slips over your nose and settles around your jaw. Each breath pulls the material toward your mouth and your exhalations feel warm against the cloth. It smells like salt. If you squint, you can see vague outlines through the black layer. The silhouette of what you presume is still the white-smocked man walks over to the dials in the corner of the room and grabs something circular from atop the machinery that has a tail slithering from its back which connects to the panel. He returns to the chair and slides this thing onto your head like a crown, pushing and pulling on the shroud. You had no idea a crown could be so uncomfortable. Wrapped from temple to temple, it squeezes your head in places hair once sprouted. A single bar rests across the top of your skull.

The silhouette behind you moves away. "Okay. I think it's time." The voice

sounds quietly indistinct, as if not meant to be heard, and the acoustics of the room mask its tonal source, so you don't know who speaks. From behind the shroud you can't see the clock hands and don't know what time it is. You imagine the hands spinning so quickly that they hypnotize those who look upon them.

The figure behind you moves back over to the corner and raises an appendage to the panel.

The light above you flickers, goes out, and then brightens into a shimmering halo. The air smells hot. Someone screams from a distance, and the voice sounds familiar, but you cannot place it. Your body irregularly and painfully tenses and jolts but you don't tell it to. Pinpricks have begun in the tips of your fingers. The halo has swelled into a sun, and you see other stars appearing around its edges. These stars are not like the one on the man's chest. A song you have never heard before but which originates from inside you sizzles through your head and reminds you of the quiet hum of dusk. The sun has gotten closer and closer, and you can feel its heat tingle your nose while the other stars swirl around you in a dance perfectly attuned to the throbbing cadence of your song. Something inside your chest desperately wants out, and you want to ask it why, why does it want out of you, but you no longer have a voice. Is it time and are you ready? Do the people on the other side of the mirror see the clock now, or can they only look at you? All shapes have disintegrated, even the layer of the veil. You can no longer feel the straps pinching your forearms or the pressure of your lungs or the stiff set of the chair. Are you really innocent? You aren't in any one position, like liquid released from its container. The tingling of your nose spreads and immerses every particle of you in celestial droplets, and you feel them slowly moving inside of you and making you glow, but you feel this from afar. Lights have become light as the dancing stars and sun conjoin into a descending, encompassing wave that pumps bursts of heat you swear you can see and taste and hear. The prickly sensation has now spread to more regions than you knew you had. The song reaches a pitch and blares like a musical siren. It no longer matters if you're ready or guilty. The light quivers, collapses, explodes, and then recedes into a crack, a sliver across the black space that emerges before you.

Seeking Totality or: Risking Blindness Nearly Naked in My Front Lawn

I stand in my front yard. Half of the grass I can see is mowed in wobbly, vertical lines, trails of yellowing clumps running parallel to the cut lanes; the other half, which is to my left and across the driveway from the cut side, is high enough to tickle the bottom of my shin and subtly glistens with left-over dew. I wear only gray briefs and a pair of cheap, plastic sunglasses I found in the junk drawer. Its hinges and temples are a shamrock green. Something crawls over my feet. I ignore it, and it scurries on. A car drives down my lane, and the racket of the flung pebbles rebounds off the trees.

Against every recommendation coming from the TV inside, I'm staring straight at the sun without protective glasses.

When I was between six and eight I experienced a meteor shower.

My best friend, a shy boy with an inherited overbite named Nathan, lived in a house similar to mine: two stories, remote, atop a hill with a sizable lawn flanking all sides of the house, and surrounded by woods. It was an ideal locale for meteor-watching. My presence at his house late at night meant it was either a Friday or a Saturday—no sleepovers on school nights.

I had a ghost runner on third—the supportive pole near the washer and dryer—and led by two runs when Nathan's mom came down the basement stairs. "Come on," Mrs. Zetterstand said. "Come out and watch the meteors." I dropped the meter stick we used as a bat atop home plate—a pillow—and Nathan set the beanbag ball on the stairs as we hurried after his mom. I made sure to remember the details of our game.

Mr. Zetterstand and Nathan's older brother, Shane, met us at the top of the stairs. "The shower should be starting soon," Mr. Zetterstrand noted, steering us outside by the shoulders.

The sky outside was twilight and cloudless. The tree line was marked by edges of a deeper darkness.

As soon as we stepped outside, Nathan and I began playing, chasing each other around, looking for quartz in the dark. Mr. and Mrs. Zetterstrand and Shane, too old to care about quartz, stood in a loose triangle and peered upward, Mr. Zetterstrand occasionally checking his watch.

After a few minutes, Mrs. Zetterstrand gasped and quietly said, "Look."

I don't know whether I listened to her, whether I stopped and regarded the distantly burning sky. I have a vague memory of standing next to Mrs. Zetterstrand, her hair silver and her arms wrapped around herself. She gazed upward. In this memory, the streaks are an acidic green, a shade associated with cartoon aliens, ones with teardrop heads and obsidian eyes. Meteor showers are, of course, not an acidic green.

The source of this misremembrance remains unknown, and it makes me doubt I ever looked up.

If I squint and peer through the cloud cover with the sunglasses, I can discern the dark, distant outline of the moon pushing against the white of the sun, the image like a cookie with a cleanly round bite out of it. I can't actually see the moon. I see only where the sun isn't.

It is now 2:27. My phone, to my surprise, has managed to capture exactly what I see in the sky. Later, I'll delete these photos to save space; they are for my parents who, on their drive home from Minnesota, say they can't stop and look. "That is beautiful!!" my mom replies. I suppose she's right. It looks like every other gibbous to me, except I know it's the sun.

Beyond the meteor shower, I have lived through a series of partial eclipses and appearances of Venus. Like the meteor shower, I never saw any of them. Afterward, I looked at the photos that appeared online or flickered on the news and wondered if they really looked like that, looked so vivid, so sublime, every picture inspiring awe.

This new event has stirred something inside me none of the others had. Maybe taking an astronomy course titillated my inner Galileo. Maybe I want an excuse to stop vacuuming around the house for my parents to return. Maybe the promise of totality tinges it with a consequentiality I subconsciously find lacking in the other cosmic events; a partial eclipse sounds so dull. The buzz surrounding the event is probably what did it, though, is probably what drew me outside and has kept me there, incapable of focusing on anything else for the duration of my wait. The voices telling me how spectacular, how unique this event will be, and the smaller voice inside telling me not to be left out, not again, like the meteor shower: these are what have planted my toes on my stone front walk. Not that those other reasons aren't good enough, or true.

From what I can find (which means quickly Google) total eclipse should occur around 2:50 and last anywhere between thirty seconds and two minutes. I hope for the latter.

There is too much uncertainty in the predictions for me to feel comfortable about the timeframe: nobody, neither the local news nor any website, gives a precise time for Palmerton, Pennsylvania, instead grouping the town, which I'm already at best on the fringe of, into the greater region of the Lehigh Valley. Uncertain and unwilling to risk missing the main event, I went outside at 1:23, and I don't plan on returning inside until I watch the sun get swallowed.

I haven't spent the full hour standing there and staring at the sky. My patience is not that monk-like. Right now, I'm sitting on my front porch, which could really use a new coat of paint, the white chipping to reveal a darker wood beneath. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* sits open on my lap, unlooked at. I haven't turned more than 2 pages since I came outside. I maintain a careful watch on the lighting in my yard, ready to jump up and down my porch steps should the light suddenly dim. Who could miss the descent of abrupt diurnal darkness? Every few minutes or so, even if the light remains the same, I step to the edge of my porch, put on the sunglasses, and check the regression of the sun.

The progress is slow and steady. Time trickles in the way it does when you want something. It's now 2:29 and the sun is somewhere between half and two-thirds gone. With the eclipse still far from its seminal moment, I return to my

chair.

The last visible total solar eclipse across the contiguous United States fell on February 26, 1979. Jimmy Carter was president, gas cost an average of \$.65 a gallon, Rod Stewart crooned “Do Ya think I’m Sexy?” across America’s radios, and *The Empire Strikes Back* was a week from starting production. Along the geologic timeline, hardly a whisper had passed. On my timeline, the last eclipse may as well have ended the dinosaurs.

The next total solar eclipse for the continental US will take place in April 2024. Much can happen in 2,416 days. I could go blind—possibly from staring at the sun without eclipse glasses. In enough ways to provoke agoraphobia, I could die. In enough ways to provoke nihilism and alcohol-dependency, we could all die. Or it could be cloudy.

These possibilities have coalesced into a feeling of necessitated immediacy: if I would ever see a total eclipse, it would have to be here and now. Hence, my anticipation has swelled well beyond levels I’ve felt for anything for too long. Something within me depended on those thirty seconds to two minutes; this feels like my last chance at carefree, inexplicable, unreasonable excitement, a final vestige of the childhood aura we forever crave once it vanishes unannounced and unnoticed until, suddenly, we look back and realize it has left us, never to return.

A glow announces the appearance of the sun from behind the thin, light gray clouds. I put on the sunglasses to see what has emerged.

There is a problem—not a crisis yet, but certainly a problem.

Until now, cloud cover had dulled the rays, and through it I could discern the shape of the sun as the moon crossed before it. Without cloud cover, the light is overwhelming. Instead of a slowly shrinking ball perched in the sky, the sun has transformed into its usual self: indistinct, shimmering, and visually merciless. Nowhere is the moon. Everywhere is the sun.

I try to adjust the sunglasses, push them tighter to my face, but this does nothing. Neither does holding my hand over my eyes and the glasses. After a quarter of a minute of trying to find the outline of the moon, my eyes have begun to hurt; they squint so tightly I see only a bright, hazy slit through the curtain of my eyelashes.

The door grunts closed behind me. Inside is twilight. Violet blotches block my vision like cartoon squids inking on a TV screen. Hands held out to avoid bumping into corners, I make my way through my dining room, around my kitchen counter, and to the junk drawer. My fingers fumble around inside and close on a gallimaufry of goods ranging from fish oil pills to an old disposable camera to a pile of old mail, which, I know, is mostly from casinos. No sunglasses meet my fingers.

I venture back outside and look up at the sky again, scanning for clouds. The only ones in sight are already east of the sun and creeping towards the horizon. This may, I admit to myself, now be a crisis.

Throughout history, we have chased the sun. We have chased its light on the equinox and the solstice and its edges during an eclipse. We chased it west-

ward as it sank, across open waters, across continents. When we couldn't reach the sun, we landed on its sister and claimed it as our own. Now we seek its children as surrogates, sending rovers to explore Mars and probes to document Pluto.

Icarus, given his chance, chased the sun until his wings melted. I don't know when I first heard of Icarus. I do know when I first understood. Had I wax nearby, I would have formed wings, too.

2:42.

Back inside, I grab a black cloth headband from the cabinet with our winter apparel. My other options are ski goggles, full beanies, and scarfs. My options aren't good, but this headband is my last hope.

I half-jog down the stairs and back onto my front walkway. With naked eyes, I can still only see a normal sky. I sweep my hair back to keep it out of my eyes and slide the headband down my head and over my face. The absurdity of my image—still only gray briefs on my body and now with a black headband over my eyes—is not at all lost on me.

I can barely open my eyes. Through the crisscrossed holes of the stretched fabric, instead of the position of the moon across the sun becoming distinct, everything has become indistinct.

2:47.

I'm pacing. My soles slap on the rocks. I'm wringing my brain, but the only option that comes to me is to wait, to have faith that the moon would consume the sun and its blinding lights along with it, giving me the chance to peer above uninhibited. I'm not good at faith and never have been.

Maybe I had it right as a boy: I should run around in the grass, ignoring the space above me, and let my imagination lie to me afterward, let it fill me with the splendor I never saw.

Maybe I should've ordered protective glasses.

2:50

It is, according to the website, the moment of truth. I can't feel any truth pouring upon me. The space around me still blazes with a summer glow. I don't know whether the wind blows or something inside me has chilled. The sky remains typically blue. Hairs stand on my arms.

The predictions could be off, right? I should stay outside and continue to wait.

Hope, always so flimsy and fickle, has started its slow, seeping drain from my veins, and my heart slows because of it, easing back to normalcy.

3:05.

Nothing has happened. I've stayed outside and held faith as tightly as I can. Fifteen minutes is too great a difference to account for calculative error. My chance at totality has evaporated with the pounding rays of the sun. Numbness creeps from my naval. Seven years are a long way away, and I have already spent this much time seeking a light that has never stopped.

I raise my arm into the air. My hand turns red in the sun, and I feel warmth on my palm, but it stops at my skin. I close my hand, and my fingers grasp around nothing.

At the Feet of David

I press as close as the glass barrier allows
and let the yellow light
from the windowed dome above wash
over me, neck dropping back, mouth
falling open, like a baby bird
just minutes old, calling to be fed.
I wait for him to bestow upon me
the knowledge, the perspective
he has, the understanding I crave.

He is everything they said he would be.
Massive but delicate, more beautiful,
more human than stone should ever be allowed
to be. I see what every art professor
has always raved about: the defined
musculature, the contrapposto
stance, the smoothness of the marble,
the steady gaze into the distance,
the legend reborn, and me, standing
here so small in his presence.

But there is more than that. The look
in his eyes and the gears turning behind them,
the rock that hasn't been thrown
yet resting gently on his thigh. I can
see him deliberating, planning the battle
to come: how his agile feet will
spring through the grass, how his shoulder
will drop back, how the muscles in his arm
will tense and release, the air
in his lungs forced out with a grunt as he
does so. He calculates the trajectory
of the airborne stone before he lets it fly.
He knows where it will strike.
He knows how his opponent will fall.

How is he so confident in the face of a Goliath?
How is he so assured of his victory when so much stands in his way?
How do you beat a giant when you're just a woman,
little more than five feet tall, twenty-one years old,
disgusted with the world you live in
and desperate to fix it?

Throngs of tourists with their cameras and guidebooks

and *Top Ten Things to do in Florence* checklists
wade around me, like swells of the ocean
trying to loosen my grip on the pier.
I do not let go. I cling to
the David because he has the answers I need,
I'm sure of it.
He knows how to beat every Goliath plaguing
this fucked up world.
He must know. He's survived
every other Goliath he's faced, looked Hitler
and Mussolini in the eyes and watched
them fall. He can tell me how to
defeat the Goliaths we face today, as long
as I wait here long enough to hear him speak.

Blood above Our Doorway

Sitting in an auditorium surrounded by students three years younger than me, I am scared for them. It's the third day of orientation, and the class of 2021 is learning about Gettysburg College's commitment to ending sexual assault and power-based interpersonal and domestic violence through education and awareness. The first-years are tense, self-conscious, and unmoving. We, the orientation staff, have worn them out with hours of icebreaker activities in the unforgiving August sun. So while they're grateful for the air conditioning of the auditorium now, I know by the end of their third information session warning them against all the things that can go wrong in college, they'll be begging for more get-to-know-you games and blazing heat. There's always a content warning at the beginning of this particular presentation: "We'll be talking about sensitive topics, so if you need to step out of the room at any time, please do so." Everyone looks around to see who will be the first to leave.

The presentation begins with a slide of statistics: 1 in 5 women will be the victim of attempted or completed sexual assault during her time in college; female college students aged 18-24 are 3 times more likely than women in general to experience sexual violence; sexual assault takes place at the highest rates in the first three months of the fall semester, with the majority of victims being female first-year students. This information is meant to emphasize how prevalent the issues of sexual assault and domestic violence are on college campuses—yes, even small, liberal arts colleges like this one—but it casts a noticeable pall over the room, as if it's all just another way of saying, "good luck avoiding *those* stats." For the past three years, my room has been marked by the words "Resident Assistant," naming me as a resource for confused new students. In other words, I'm supposed to be an answer to the question, "who can I talk to if I've been sexually assaulted?" I've yet to have a resident come to me saying it happened to them. I'm not so naïve as to think this means my residents have just been the lucky ones, and it's a fact that makes it hard to fall asleep some nights given the statistics projected at the front of the auditorium. But perhaps my final year will prove the toughest, and someone will knock on my door in a state of shock or with tears running down their face. I look down my row to where five new female residents are sitting, and before I can stop myself I wonder, *Which one of you will it happen to?*

Attempting to sound optimistic, our moderator informs us we can end power-based violence, not only by being decent people who respect others, but also by intervening in situations we think may foretell violence. Like both the perpetrators and the victims of sexual assault and domestic violence, warning signs come in all shapes and sizes: bruises on a classmate's arm, an excessive number of phone calls or text messages, humiliation and degradation thinly veiled as jokes, isolation, fear, mood changes. When we notice these things, we're supposed to offer help or look for someone older and wiser than ourselves and ask them to step in. In my transition from college first-year to senior, I've had to *become* that wiser person, although I don't feel it; I am no less frightened by the prospect of an unwanted kiss on the middle of a dance floor or of being

followed home at night than I was in 2014.

Having heard this exact presentation a number of times, I usually take this time to observe the room: some of these people will commit acts of violence or sexual assault, probably with malicious intent, but maybe because they just “zoned out” during the part of the presentation that provides a detailed definition of “consent;” some will be the victims; and some of these people have already experienced interpersonal violence. They know what happens when nobody notices warning signs. One of my residents asked me this morning if she could skip this orientation session. Of course she can, I told her, she should take care of herself first and foremost. I’d find her later, pass on the pertinent information, name various campus resources, cite myself as someone she could talk to at any time, hope she wouldn’t take me up on it.

After the initial overview of the problem and the staggering statistics meant to inspire caution, we’re asked to close our eyes.

“Picture someone you care about,” says the moderator. During this exercise, I’ve always conjured up an image of my best friend: a college-aged woman like myself, we both fit into the category of “most likely to be victimized.” And although she’s my first thought this year as well, her image in my mind is quickly replaced by another.

When my mom was nineteen, she had long, skinny limbs and frizzy hair. Her front teeth were prominent but had been straightened by braces, just like mine. Her green eyes crinkled when she smiled. Over the past year, my aunt has dug up a cache of pictures of the three sisters when they were young. I am a shade of all of them, but the one in the middle is undeniably my mother. She is gawky and awkward and wearing an oversized button-down shirt, pink leggings, scrunched white tube socks, and Keds. The bangs exploding off her forehead in a poof confirm the year: 1984. But as I sit in the auditorium and picture my mother at age nineteen, it’s not the version I’m used to seeing in old Polaroids.

“Picture them in a room with someone, someone who is hurting the person you care about.”

And he is, he’s *hurting* her, and her skinny limbs are bent at awkward angles, she’s crumpled in a corner, like my Raggedy Ann Doll when I was done playing with her. My mom’s green eyes aren’t crinkled, they’re swollen shut, and she’s not smiling because her front teeth are on the floor and her mouth is a gaping hole. She is bloody and her clothes are torn, and in my mind, she suddenly opens her eyes, and it’s so hard to tell through the bruises if her face is still her own or if the broken figure lying there is me.

It was August of 2013, and we had just arrived in Harrisonburg, Virginia, to move my older sister in for her second year of college. Every family in the town seemed to agree: Panera Bread was the perfect place for lunch that day. The three of us found a small table in the corner of the restaurant, tucking ourselves out of the way.

“We’ve sat at this exact spot before, Mom,” my sister noted, surveying the crowd of people. “Last year, when you told me what happened to your teeth.”

“It was something I thought you should know before starting college,” my mom said. A glance in my direction and the thin line of her mouth told me she wished my sister hadn’t mentioned it.

I'd always known my mom's teeth were false—a bridge of three squares at the front of her mouth, each the ideal shape, different now than in pictures of her as a kid. I admired their smoothness, running my tongue over my own smile, recently freed from three-and-a-half years of braces but still not quite perfect. Why my mother even had a bridge put in had never been a question I felt the need to ask. But then, I was seventeen and entitled to everything. “What happened to them?”

“I had an abusive boyfriend,” my mom answered, softly but definitively, making herself heard despite the chaotic hum of Panera. “He knocked my teeth out.” There were tears in her eyes, the feeling of a hand clenched around my windpipe, the muted sounds of the surrounding people. My mom hesitated, debating whether she'd said enough or should add one more thing. Her voice dropped even lower, but I heard each word perfectly. “I was raped.”

I stared for a moment, trying to remold this strange new person into the shape of my same mother. But she was suddenly much smaller, and she held so many secrets. We still looked alike, but I was seized by the realization she had once been someone other than a mother, a person entirely separate from me.

I closed my mouth and scrambled for something to say. My gaze landed on my sister, who was watching me carefully to see how I'd react. I looked back to my mom. I desperately grabbed onto a difference between her and me, like a vine floating out in the middle of the rolling river I felt I'd just been sent down. I chose to cite my all-girls' private school's favorite words: “You should've been an empowered young woman.” It was a motto that came at a high cost to my family, but she wouldn't have sent me there if she didn't think I deserved this emphasis on empowerment in addition to the prep school education.

She didn't laugh, although I don't know if I really expected her to; sarcasm is my family's native tongue, the one we revert to when we can think of nothing else to say. Maybe I thought that if I used our first language, she'd understand my true meaning: *I can think of nothing else to say*. But she just looked even more sad. “Yeah, I should've.”

We haven't talked about it since that day, leaving questions unanswered for the primary reason that I have not asked them: How long did she date him? Did her family know him? Were there warning signs leading up to it? What was his name? It makes me feel like there are gaps in my memory, and then I remind myself that I can't remember something that never happened to me.

Four years later, I was behind the wheel of my sister's car, driving the two of us home from vacation. The rest of the family would stay in the Adirondacks for another day, but she and I had a concert to attend. Within the last year, we'd begun excavating the skeletons in the maternal half of the family closet: Our grandparents got divorced when Mom was seven, but apparently it was much more than a mere “failure to make it work.” Our grandmother's affair was rumored but never confirmed. Our grandpa remarried soon after, moved an hour away with his new wife and seven step-kids. Grandma and the three daughters, Mom in the middle, went to live with my verbally abusive, alcoholic great-grandfather and certifiably crazy great-grandmother. It was easy to criticize all of them when we'd heard bits of the story from our dad, who entered the scene when Mom was twenty. He wanted us to know how much she held

things together in that household, sticking around to take care of her grandparents, living at home and putting herself through college, when everyone else came and went as they pleased. I never asked clarifying questions of my dad; I'd already learned that family history rarely results in better understandings of one another so much as further confusion and the cognitive dissonance between the people I knew and who they'd been before.

"Mom was kidnapped that night," my sister told me without preamble, fitting her words into the silence between songs on the radio. We hadn't even been talking about Mom; I'd made a concerted effort to steer clear of this exact topic.

"She was kidnapped. Her sisters called the police to go get her. They found her with her clothes torn, and she'd been...violated. And her teeth had been knocked out." *Crumpled in a corner, like my Raggedy Ann Doll.*

Nothing about the situation became any clearer to me: I still didn't know his name or how long they had dated or how long she was gone before someone picked up a phone, but I didn't want to hear anything else. My grip threatened to tear the steering wheel in two, the beam of the headlights flattened into a thin and watery line. Breathing deeply, I surreptitiously wiped at my eyes. I let my sister talk herself out, grateful when she quickly moved on to stories about our aunts and great-grandparents before falling asleep in the passenger seat.

I thought about the word "violated." It was different than the word my mother had used—"raped"—which I think my sister and I shied away from, scared. My mother wasn't raped or assaulted; she was violated. He'd been someone she was dating, and he had taken advantage of just how much power he held over her, and he had *violated* her trust, her body, her being. He left her broken and bloodied. He wrecked her confidence and self-image, like taking a hammer to the mirror she looked into, forcing her to try to fit the pieces back together, to reconstruct herself in a way that looked whole, false teeth the finishing touch.

Summer ended too quickly, and October was underway when I found myself alone with my mother in our kitchen, a rare opportunity to talk without someone else vying for her attention. She was washing the pile of dirty dishes in the sink, and we were talking about my younger brother having to find a new therapist. I'd just told her, as casually as possible, I had spent autumn of the previous year seeing a counselor at college. She was taken aback and asked why I hadn't told her sooner. I picked my words carefully, kept my tone even.

"Because it wasn't that bad, I just went to talk through some of my anxieties." I was annoyed, hoping she'd leave it at that. She, after all, should understand better than anyone. She, too, spent most nights awake at 3:30AM with her thoughts threatening to overwhelm her and her heart pounding in her chest. "It isn't a big deal."

"I *know* it isn't a big deal, so I don't know why you didn't just tell me." Obviously, she thought it was a very big deal.

I bit my tongue, letting a snarky "well, I just told you" sit behind my teeth. My mother was only ever allowed to hear about things in my life *after* they occurred. As a kid, I'd tell her I got an A on my test, and she'd say she didn't know I had a test. College applications, school events, breakups, all had a waiting period before they reached my mom, giving me time to process things on my own. I needed to make sure all damage was done, there weren't any aftershocks. I needed to know my voice wouldn't hitch on the phone. Mom would get the

story after all bombs have been successfully disarmed because I wouldn't want a sliver of stray shrapnel to leap up and puncture the bubble of *today*—bills that were always overdue, four kids, two jobs, the daily minutiae that took up her attention and was more important than the things I blathered about to my counselor. My mom never made me feel like one, but it was my goal to never be a burden to her, to never tell her anything that could cause concern.

She paused, soapy hands poised above the sink full of dirty dishes. Her eyes welled, sage green and rimmed with brown mascara, just like my own. "I think therapy can be a very good thing. I went when I was nineteen, and it really helped me regain some of my confidence."

It was so simple, but her words betrayed the complexity of how we speak to one another, never directly, something always remaining unsaid. What happened when she was nineteen opened like a chasm between us, and in the space laid all the details I'd never asked about, but I could still see her across the distance. I could have reached out, offered words meant to act as a bridge — *Mom, I'm sorry that happened to you. I wouldn't mind hearing the story if you ever want to tell it to me, but I mostly want to know if you've found peace. If you're happy with the way things are now. I want you to know it won't happen to me.* Instead, I let the air lay dead between us, making a note to enter this conversation into my journal.

The Thanksgiving leftovers were barely in the refrigerator when I went off on a rant about sexual assault on college campuses, all the factors that create and maintain the climate of abuse known as "rape culture."

And my mom had said, "Young women need to start protecting themselves! If they're not going to respect themselves, how can they expect other people to?" She said something about tight clothing, something about drinking too much. I looked at her and saw someone who was a teenager thirty years ago, before people began spreading the radical notion that sexual assault is *never* the victim's fault.

In all my training sessions on what to do in the event a sexual assault is reported to me—from Residence Life to orientation to the online tutorial we watch before the start of every school year—one thing consistently emphasized was the importance of *believing the victim's story*. Acknowledge how difficult it must have been for them to even get the words out. Tell them it wasn't their fault. What they were wearing, how much they had to drink, whether they'd had sex with their assailant before were all pieces of information that didn't matter when someone has been violated. So just *believe* them.

I wanted to shake my mom and scream, *what are you saying?* I didn't know how to tell her that I can't hear the word "rape" without thinking of her expression that day in Panera. When I think of anyone getting assaulted or taken advantage of or abused or violated or any of the myriad other words we use for the terrible things people do to one another, I see her, alone and scared and missing her teeth. Was all of that, then, a result of her lack of self-respect? Her words stung me because I wanted her to know when I talk about sexual assault prevention, I'm advocating for *her*, the nineteen-year-old version of her who I can't erase from my mind, especially not when she looks so damn much like the person in my mirror. I was working toward a world in which moth-

ers wouldn't have to tell their daughters they were raped (with the unspoken warning that it might happen to them too).

My dad suddenly entered the conversation. "The burden of proof rests on the shoulders of the accuser," he reminded me gently. "A rape case, like any other criminal investigation in this country, still relies on the notion of 'innocent until proven guilty.' Once physical evidence is lost, adjudication proceeds with the accounts of the people involved. And it's almost never enough." I knew he was right.

While half the battle is getting a victim to report sexual assault to the police—a mere 31% of rapes are reported, as opposed to 62% of robberies and a similar statistic for assault and battery—only 6 out of 1,000 perpetrators will ever see jail time. So, despite outcries of support through movements like #MeToo and the urging of my college administrators to *just believe them*, the overwhelming statistics present a different narrative. How can anyone honestly think we believe them if we're simultaneously holding the door open for their attacker to walk free?

I don't know anything about the abusive boyfriend who hurt my mom. Maybe he saw the inside of a jail, or maybe he joined the 82% of suspected rapists who are never even arrested. And maybe he, like my mom, came from a place of turmoil, a fractured home. Maybe alcohol was a fixture in the hands of the people who raised him, loosening tongues so they only spat words of hate. Or maybe "love" in his household was spelled with clenched fists and split lips; one third of abusers are the children of abusers. But I can allow him no excuses. In my head, he has hateful eyes and a smile made of razor blades. I hope he never saw my mother again. I hope he is haunted.

My interest lies in the children of the abused; am I statistically less at risk because I'm the daughter of a survivor? If one in three American women is likely to be the victim of attempted or completed rape in her lifetime, maybe my mom was the unlucky "chosen one" from our household. And now she has painted her blood above our doorway, warding off the Angel of Rape, hiding my sister and me: *There's no one else for you here. We've made our sacrifice.*

The moderator of the sexual assault presentation speaks once more, her voice breaking through the image of my mom at age nineteen.

"Now picture a third person in the room, someone who knows the person you care about is getting hurt. They can do something to stop it. Wouldn't you want them to? Or, better yet, wouldn't you want them to say something before it ever got to that point? Wouldn't you want them to notice the warning signs?"

But there wasn't a third person in the room when she was beaten and raped, when he tore her clothes and knocked her front teeth out. Nobody saw the warning signs. Nobody did anything to stop him before he had the chance to take her from her home and inflict that pain. They didn't know he was hurting her until they saw the blood.

I squeeze my eyes tightly, praying my new residents won't see me cry, hoping I won't be the person who quickly walks out of the room, drawing the attention of everybody and making them think I've been assaulted—I *haven't* been assaulted. My mom was the one who took the abuse, and despite how much we look alike, maybe now I won't have to. We've complied with the statistics; her

daughters have been spared. My cheeks burn redder than usual, and my breath catches in my throat. The exercise suddenly ends, and we're all told to open our eyes.

Why We're Here

we tiptoed into an ocean
like liquid nitrogen swirling around our legs
so cold my breath came faster
pressing my chest against the neoprene
bandage of my wetsuit

I turned to my sister and said
before you die from hypothermia
your entire body fills with the most
soft, golden warmth

and she said shut up
and I sent a bank of blue her way
and then we were giggling
and I felt that golden warmth
but in a way that reminded me
I was alive

connected to her
not by the salt in our blood
but by the salt of the ocean
and we were speckled with sunspots
blinking water from our blue eyes
shielding our fairness from the
blistered sky

I pulled her to me and,
half drowning her,
told her of other wonders

we are built from splintered stars
penguins propose with pebbles
the structure of our DNA came to a scientist in a dream
and sea otters hold hands

and as we tumbled through the ocean
I clutched her to me
both afraid we would drag each other under
and afraid we would drift apart.