The middle place

by

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This is to certify that the master's thesis of

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has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

_________________________
Major Professor

_________________________
For the Major Program
Oh, I'm scared of the middle place between light and nowhere. I don't want to be the one left in there.

- Antony and the Johnsons
Part One:
Inheritance
Speak

One day we will speak
in syllables we did not know
we knew, the mother tongue
erupting from our lips
like a long dormant volcano

we'll walk along a line of petroglyphs,
carefully carved into stone
and I'll take your hand and point
saying, *See the woman warrior?*
*there, with her shield?*

Daughter, the books will tell you
otherwise, but truth is in the blood
*This is where we met,* I'll say,
*where I promised you we'd find*
*each other across the war-torn fields*

over the crackle of the monitor
strange sounds erupt from your throat
and I repeat them back, regurgitate
that strangled struggle toward language
until I feel the distance between us
beginning to shrink with every sound
Crush

It’s avocado green, made of textured plastic, with a handle so it can be carried like a briefcase. A black cord trails out from its base. My mother shakes her head as she sets it down.

“I never thought these things would come back,” she says, wiping her palms on her jeans.

But my back is already to her. I kneel down on the worn carpet, pry open the lid, inspect every inch of my new record player. I check the needle, feel its tip, like the single leg of a centipede poking into my flesh. I blow dust off the turntable. I check that it can play 7-inch records, and 45s.

“What?”

“Never mind,” she laughs. “I’m glad you like it.”

I pull the White Album, Side Two, from its sleeve and place it on the spindle. I snap it into place with the plastic arm; turn the setting to auto on my new Truetone with mono speaker capabilities. The machine starts with a whir. “Martha” erupts from the tinny, built-in speaker. I skip the needle to “Blackbird,” the third set of grooves.

*Take these broken wings and learn to fly. All your life, you were only waiting for this moment to arrive.*
The first crush I can remember was a boy named Josh. In tenth grade. He was a year younger, wore a vintage brown leather jacket even in the dead of summer. He had gone to Christian school, and only just arrived at our public high school of about a thousand students. He brooded, smoked cigarettes, snuck off to the gas station during lunchtime to roll a joint. He belonged to a different era. I wanted to belong to a different anything.

I wrote poems for him. Stuck them in his jacket pockets. We didn’t speak, much. I was convinced my love was radiating at such a rate that he would absorb it merely by inhabiting the same room, the same row of desks in Drama Class. But his eyes remained downcast. He wandered the halls aloof, seeming to exist in a world in which he felt loved by no one. The only acknowledgement of my declarations came in the form of a simple “Thanks.” And a crooked smile.

Eventually, though, Josh and I became friends. He grew into himself and out of the shyness, but not out of the tortured self-isolation. We smoked pot at our friend’s house, the one whose parents were too cool to be parents, and he’d stand in the driveway mesmerized by the headlights on her car. Like a conductor, he’d lift and lower his arms as the lights rose and then retreated into their metal casing.

I learned he collected Star Wars figurines. Once, in passing, he mentioned how he’d been looking for years for the Luke Skywalker with the gold medallion he’s presented with at the end of *Return of the Jedi*. I searched the area shops until I found it, this perfect gift. As he drove me home from our friend’s house in the middle of a
blizzard, I presented him with it, for his birthday. He looked out the window, on the verge of tears. He set the small paper sack gently on the dashboard. The porch light was on. My parents were waiting. I fidgeted in the seat, shifting my weight back and forth between my hipbones. He was supposed to kiss me now. It was all supposed to fall into place. Instead, he continued to look away, Adam's apple bobbing slightly in his throat. I thought of how his face would look from the other side of the glass: frozen like Luke’s behind the plastic casing. I got out of the car with a falsely bright farewell.

My cousin had cancer at eight years old. She was two years younger than I, and we had always been close. We wore matching pajamas. We slid down my mother’s stairs in a giant denim beanbag, my arms around her thin shoulders, giggling all the way. At lunchtime, mom would ask what we wanted for lunch, and her reply was always, “I’ll have what Amy’s having.”

After the diagnosis, the tables turned. I wanted what she had, but even at ten, I knew it was wrong. That it was a bad wish to make. Still, I clasped my hands together, squeezed my eyes shut every night praying for an invasion. My morning ritual evolved to include feeling my lymph nodes and bending my joints, searching for swelling or stiffness. In the mirror, I pulled at my eyelids, checking the whites of my eyes for signs of jaundice. In the sickly yellow glow of the single bulb in the bathroom, I could almost believe it was there.
Her cheeks became bloated; her hair fell out, even her eyebrows. She looked like an alien, dressed in too-big t-shirts, and bright neon hats that contrasted sharply with the urine-tone of her skin. But she beat it. You’d only know it now if you noticed her jaw, too small for her face because it never grew again. The haughty look of defiance in her eyes. She didn’t want what was mine, anymore. Even my friendship. The cancer had changed her. And even though I know better now, I thought the radiation had given her x-ray vision so she could see that I had nothing. That my bones, unlike hers, did not contain any secrets. That they were merely hollowed out spaces.

The next crush was a jazz saxophone player. He stood before the bleachers in his black leather trench coat, blowing out every note of “My Funny Valentine” in my direction. It took two years of him sneaking into the library during my history class’s research sessions, pestering me, stalking me through the aisles of books, for me to finally agree to go on a date with him. But eventually I relented, I began to unfurl. He was my first kiss, my first notion of something resembling love.

So I wrote poems for him, too. In mottled black composition notebooks, with purple ink. I’d sneak them into his palm as he came through my checkout line at the local drugstore. His five-foot-five frame, his flat feet shuffling over the tiled floor. Everything he did was languorous, leisurely. His fingers were squared and stubby. His body was like that of an adolescent boy, even at seventeen.
And then he went to college. Another one lost, to games where he role-played vampires. To friends who would end up in prison. To a dead-end job fixing instruments in Kansas, getting gigs wherever he could find them. I hear he’s married now, and maybe he still plays. For his wife, for his friends. But when I imagine the scene, his playing lacks the intensity, the passion he displayed when he played for me.

A little girl called Alex died of cystic fibrosis. I remember wishing I could catch it, or some illness like it. I wanted something grave and dark to fill the vast empty spaces of my chest. After my parents divorced, I watched the movie of her life over and over. Rewound the part where she lay in her room in those last moments, sipping root beer from a straw, Elton John spinning on the turntable behind her. “Which way do I go?” she asked. And I’d cry, but only when mom wasn’t home.

Alex used to call her father “my little daddy.” He was Frank DeFord, the famed sports writer. Idolized by many men across the country, my father being one of them. And my father, after the divorce, he asked me to call him that, too. Only once he’d lost it did he want back what he never had. He wrote me a poem, in saccharine rhymes. I laminated it with strapping tape. I learned to amplify his absence, and I’ve been doing it ever since. Gone, he could be anything I wanted him to be. He couldn’t do anything wrong because he wasn’t there to do it. Summers, we’d stand in the yard at night, ice clinking on the sides of glasses of root beer, and he’d point at the stars. He’d show me
which star was Alex's. And which one belonged to Jennifer, the stillborn daughter that I replaced. "My little daddy," I'd say, taking his hand, taking deep breaths, sure I could feel fluid in my lungs, my chest cavity slowly shrinking.

The needle revolves in slow circles. The diamond tip feels its way along the track laid out for it. How simple it would be if I were the needle. If I were always spiraling towards a center instead of outward, out of control.

A silence in the air, a breath. Mom is down the hall, clucking her tongue at the dirt gathered in the corners of my bathroom, the hair coiled near the drain in the sink.

Side two, track four.

And Rocky said, Doc it's only a scratch, and I'll be better, I'll be better Doc as soon as I'm able...

I choose to forget the name of the third crush. His dorm room walls of avocado green. His long blond ponytail. His father, who threw him down the stairs, beat his back with a belt. His plaid sheets, stained with my blood.

I choose to forget the way he looked at me with such disdain, such disappointment that the love he'd always needed wasn't there. A worthless piece of shit, he said. And the rough way he handled my small frame. Perhaps because of that love he needed; because I wasn't big enough to hold it.
A few weeks later, after walking out of his room for the last time, I found out I had contracted mononucleosis. A common virus that affects nearly everyone. Nearly an adolescent rite of passage.

“It’s possible,” the doctor said, “that your spleen could rupture. You need to rest for at least six weeks.”

Instead of being frightened, I clutched at that knowledge. Something in me had been welling up, and I held onto that word, rupture. I had hours available in which to write, but I’d put the pen away. The notebooks were shoved to the back of my desk drawer. Words weren’t helping anymore. With waning energy I pushed my short legs up and down the four flights of stairs, hoping for a miracle. Excused from classes, I walked the long eleven blocks to the movie theater every day - sure that at any moment, that elusive organ would split at the seams, fluids rushing out to fill up my empty spaces.

When I was very young, I exerted a tremendous amount of will power over my tiny body. At two, I scraped my knee while running down the driveway. Bits of skin and blood were embedded in the concrete. My mom called out to me. Arms outstretched, she ran toward me to scoop me in her arms and quiet my tears. But there were no tears.

“I’m fine,” I yelled. My precious, precocious knees pumping my two-foot frame farther and farther away from her.
At seven, in second grade, I sat at my desk, forehead beaded with a cold sweat, my stomach flipping its contents over and over as I completed a worksheet on subtraction. Eventually, I stood on shaky legs and wandered up to the line in front of the teacher's desk, for those who had formulated questions. When my turn came, I managed to get out her name, before my hand flew up to my mouth, thick orange mucus the color of her hair flooding out through the spaces between my fingers.

And there are a million other stories like these, where if only I would have spoken sooner... if only I'd have asked for help, I would have been embraced instead of pushed away.

In the living room, Mom has settled herself on the couch. “When did you start liking the Beatles anyway?” she asks. I tell her it was inherent. Seems like I've always liked them, somehow or another. Snatches of songs have been weaving their way into my memories for as long as I can remember.

“It's nothing specific,” I tell her. “I didn't dance on Daddy's toes or anything. Remember? He wasn't there.”

She looks out the window, absently, while I get up to put the casserole in the oven. She didn't teach me how to cook, either. She is wondering where the evidence of her influence is, if not in music or food. But I refuse to relinquish this hard kernel of
resentment. This stone lodged in my throat that I’m not quite ready to swallow. The
speakers sing out slivers of sound:

I hear the clock a’tickin on the mantle shelf. See the hands a’moving but I’m by
myself....

My strongest memory of my first real boyfriend is of him carrying me in his arms into my
mother’s living room, my right knee shot through with pain. My breath came in sharp
gasps, the pain rolling in waves that eroded away at my sinews with such speed and
precision it left chasms in its wake. Between breaths I pleaded with the pain to envelop
me, to pull me into a void so complete it would absorb all emptiness and I’d come out
complete and unscathed. But the pain passed with the night. No cause was ever found.
Psychosomatic, they said. And I realized then that it was my own fault, all of it. That
each breath was a choice. That if I tried, I could accomplish much more than brief bursts
of fury. I knew then, what Anne Sexton meant in her poem, “Wanting to Die.” That
suicides have a special language. That: To thrust all that life under your tongue! --/that,
all by itself, becomes a passion.

In high school, I spent summer nights locked in the bathroom with a book, a tub full of
lukewarm water, and the blade from my dissection kit for biology class. My mom and
stepfather would be out for the night drinking margaritas or playing nickel slots.
Tentative at first, I'd gently drag the sharp edge over my skin, the same line over and over until a few drops of blood found their way to the surface.

That was my first habit. My mother and sister shredded their fingernails, I shredded my skin. And over the years I found myself moving on from razor blades, from small superficial wounds. Nights I'd curl into a ball, insides twisted and wrought with worry. In moments of lucidity between drug-induced states, I'd formulate my escape.

And I'll never really be sure how the decision was made, but I found myself sitting in the back room of some café downing sixteen blue pills with a large glass of coffee. Stumbling into the pastel painted bricks of the doorway on my way out to the street. A dead crow on the sidewalk, one glazed black eye meeting mine. The hushed phone call from another room. The bright lights of the ER, frowning faces swimming in and out of focus.

In the morning, two fingers rested gently on the thin skin of my wrist. My pulse was present, thready and weak. My eyes slid open, peered through the fog into the face of my poetry professor's husband. And it came flooding back: the shift I'd missed at work as a waitress where their band was scheduled to play. The worried eyes darting around the large, dusty bar. I'd never missed a shift.

I retreated into darkness, pretended not to recognize him. And when I saw him around, later, he never brought it up. He was skilled at hiding the questions in his eyes. But his voice was softer, his tone more imploring. "How are you?" he'd say, and my cheeks would flame with shame. I had been telling myself it didn't happen. But the
slight tilt of his head told me it did. All that life under my tongue. Or rather, on top of it. And my own slender fingers had placed it there.

_mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa. Father forgive me, Mother...

"This guilt you carry, this grief - it’s like a broken leg," my psychiatrist explained. “One that’s healed crookedly. We’ll have to go back and rebreak it in order to put it together correctly."

But I couldn’t afford his treatments. Or so I told myself. Rocking back and forth in the big leather chair, staring out the window at the highway. His forefinger in a perfect curl above his upper lip. This was his thinking pose. He was willing to wait it out, to wait for me to tell my story. He was the first to offer up flat open palms on which I could place my burdens. But I was paying him for this, I reminded myself. And that broken leg, crooked or not, it had healed. Wasn’t that what he had said?

These cycles that won’t stop, this spinning. I remember going to Adventureland, some humid summer in college. This rinky-dink theme park full of cheap imitations, placeholders for the real thing. There was a big barn, with pigs painted on it, or so I seem to recall. It was the Fourth of July, maybe, and I was with some nameless ‘guy with dark skin from a country far away. He was so excited. And he paid for my ticket, which was all I cared about. That and the drugs.
Inside the ride, the cool, sudden darkness. Then the suction, sticky palms flat against the metal grill, knees bent into Vs. Lights flashing all around. The wind of a makeshift tornado. He inched his hand along to touch his fingertips to mine, fighting against the pressure.

Who was this guy? I thought. Bile rising, an excess of everything flooding my system until I shouted at the guy in overalls to stop the ride, stop everything, just stop.

"Why you do that?" my date asked. The wrist of a small stuffed bear dangling between two of his long fingers.

And I wanted to shout at him that the ride was out of control, couldn’t he see that man with his finger on the lever ready to fling us into oblivion? Couldn’t he feel the air escaping his lungs in brief ragged breaths, never to return again?

I shrugged my shoulders. I stumbled out of the sweltering still air into the air conditioned bathroom, rested my forehead against the cool, cracked porcelain of the toilet seat and retched for all I was worth. Relieved, I stared at my gaunt, white face in the streaked mirror, flecks the color of an avocado sticking to the corners of my mouth like the morning’s toothpaste.

The timer on the oven beeps insistently. The smell of mushroom soup, the sweet salt scent of the baked potato chips fills my nostrils. I am thinking of Ireland, of the sea, when she interrupts me.
"That record’s over, why don’t you change it? I’ll get the tuna casserole."

I’m too old for the gesture, but I roll my eyes anyway. “It has four sides to it, Mom. You grew up with the Beatles. It’s not over.”

Nothing between us is over. The tension is taut as the umbilical cord that once connected us. That once carried nourishment into the vast emptiness underneath my ribs. But I don’t voice this part.

I pull aside the plastic arm and remove the record. It’s flimsier than I expect, wavering gently in my hand. I replace it into its sleeve, and take out the second one. Blowing the dust off first, I put side three on the deck and lock it into place. Skip the needle to the second groove.

*Yes I’m lonely, wanna die... Yes I’m lonely wanna die... If I ain’t dead already ooh girl you know the reason why...*

But the truth is I don’t know the reason. I feel the solidness of my flesh, how its sleight weight forms small depressions in the foam of the couch cushions. Feel the fluids in my stomach swirling at the smell of the food. How I have survived to arrive at this moment seems like an incredible feat.

I don’t believe in miracles. My one-month old niece was murdered. Her nine-pound body left in a shopping bag by the Missouri River on a frozen morning in February. Two
weeks later when they found her father and he told them the truth, nothing was left for us to bury. A tiny triangle of bone.

Struck suddenly with this, I could have gone either way. The habits I’d left behind were right there waiting. But something in me shifted when I heard that sound erupting from my sister’s throat: a wall that traveled at a frequency lower than human range. The coyotes in Colorado that used to haunt our backyard heard her and responded. You see, there’s something inherent in all of us, instinctive.

*Jesus wept.* I’m not a Christian, but I relate to that passage. Grief is a universal language. The whole world weeps. Even the water. And it was time for me to do it too. To stop attacking whatever was vulnerable inside me and let it loose. When I took my sister’s hand in mine that morning she squeezed and squeezed until our sweat coexisted, our fingers fused together and all of our burdens flowed freely back and forth through our veins.

After Mom leaves, I jog down the gravel road near my house. I feel the warm burn in my sides. The gentle loosening of tendons that are stiff from a long day of standing still. My lungs stretch to reach their small capacity – but no fluid resides there. This is pain I can control.
I lift my left hand to wipe a sheen of sweat off of my forehead. A stray lock of hair curls around my cheekbone, dries in the wind. Sweat from my efforts streams out of from the hollow places underneath my arms. I lick my lip and the sweat is salty as tears.

The ribbon of road is like a river underneath my feet. The rubber soles of my shoes catch and release like palms carefully threading out a fly line into the turbulent waters. And like in fishing, I try to set goals. A perch today, a trout tomorrow. Out to the stop sign and back today, but eventually, maybe, the horizon.

When I reach the house again, I put my hands on my knees, bending at the waist to let my head hang lower than my lungs. My mind no longer separate from my muscles. I try to capture this moment: the breath coming so easily. The body I had tried so long to destroy rewarding me with a strong heartbeat, a thrilling tingle in my fingertips.

The sun has just set, and the stars are starting to come out. Alone in my yard, I sit with a sigh on the front stoop and stare up at them as my metabolism slows. Without my father as a guide, I have a hard time discerning which is Jennifer's, Alex's. Which one he promised would be mine. But the world doesn't revolve around exact values, I've discovered. It doesn't really matter if I get it right.

Just before slipping inside I throw my arm in the air and point to one at random. And then I make a wish, sure that it's a foolish one, before letting the screen door bang shut behind me.
Sitting in the Chinese Garden I Contemplate

Well, everything, because that is what is expected of one, like wiping the crumbs off of the counter after making toast and putting the lid of the toilet seat down. The tables are very low

and I'm lucky I only weigh a hundred pounds because the stools are so small and squat that even my cat's head would rise above them.

But because of all this, the light angles in through the vaulted windows in such a way that it lands directly on the pages of my open book

and I can't help but think that something out there, perhaps something Divine, wants me to pay attention to at least one sentence in a long day full of them, (and fragments of them). Wants me to pause, with a greasy but good bite of *dim sum* halfway to my lips and ponder just this one moment illuminated

on the clean white page.
A Path to the Lighthouse

*Build your castle, stop collecting stones, and the riverbed will not be your home.*
- *Patrick Wolf, “To the Lighthouse”*

I offer to take my mother to London, but she doesn’t want to go.

“Oh, that sounds nice.” Her hand dipping absently into the bowl of popcorn.

“You’d like it, Mom. They drink lots of tea. And it’s not Lipton. But you’ve got to get your passport, and it takes at least six weeks. That’s why I’m telling you now. I’ve got to get the tickets while they’re on sale, so make up your mind.”

“Oh, honey, it’s so great that you got to go to Ireland. None of the women in my family will ever get to do anything like that.” Tears welling up in her eyes.

I don’t know if she’s crying at the screen, or if some part of her hears me. Maybe it’s a combination of both. I want to buy the tickets, forge her signature, sneak her photo while she sleeps and pack her suitcase in the middle of the night. She’s fifty-four, not too old for adventure. But I don’t know how to get through.

My mother and stepfather have been together for fifteen years. They’ve taken one vacation: to the Black Hills, in South Dakota. One state away. Brought me back a shot glass, as if drinking is the only habit they know I have. I can only imagine how the trip really went. My stepdad wanting to try out some local biker bar, reminisce on his days of riding the Honda that sits at the side of our house. My mother pursing her lips and setting her jaw. Her eyes only daring to light up for a flicker of an instant as they
stand in front of Mt. Rushmore. When I ask her about it, later, "It was so neat," is all she will say.

"You know," she says, the husk of a kernel stuck to one of her teeth. "When do I get to see something you're writing? You were always such a good writer."

I dug out the notebooks from high school over Christmas. The poems about suicide, about different ways to die. The marginal scribbles about how much I hated her. The typical, teenage, apocalyptic bull. If she'd read them, I would've known. Would've seen it in the set of her jaw.

So I don't know what her statement speaks of. I've come to believe everything she says lately is arbitrary. A repetition of something she heard someone say, once.

"Yeah? Which poem did you like best, Mom?"

She swallows. Looks away from the screen. Takes a drink of her black tea, with a teaspoon of honey.

"Oh, Amy, I like them all. I couldn't choose." Her cheeks flushing a slightly darker shade of pink. Suddenly she turns toward me. "Did I tell you where Mary is going?"

Mary is our next-door neighbor. A widow who raised five children, one of them schizophrenic. Her daughter used to bring me clothes ten sizes too big, not able to fathom that they wouldn't fit me, not realizing she was twenty years older, a hundred
pounds heavier. But Mary took care of her, up until last year, when her crazy but usually well-behaved daughter hit her over the head with the base of the telephone.

“No, mom. Where’s she going?”

“Macchu Picchu. It’s in Brazil, I think. With that group of lady friends. You know, they always travel together.”

But I don’t know. It’s the first I’ve heard of such things. I knew her daughter worked for the airlines. Knew that we picked up her mail while she visited her grandkids in Texas. I know that Mary is at least ten years older than my mother. But I don’t really keep in touch.

“Peru, mom. It’s in Peru. I dated a guy from there once, remember?”

“Oh. Well, you know. Somewhere down there.”

As if “down there” were only as far away as my private parts. As if it were just as exotic as that. I stuff some popcorn in my mouth to keep from shaking her. Glue my eyes to the pixels on her TV screen. The small squares of black that add up to make a pupil, the blue iris around it, the seemingly unending white.

I know the whites of my mother’s eyes very well. From looking at her while she looks away at something else. On the TV, a man slaps a woman across the face. She falls to the floor, into that perfect pose: one elbow bent to hold herself up, hair across half of her face, her dress riding up, the top leg bent at the knee. A few drops of blood are oozing out of the corner of her lip.
"Not in front of the children," the woman says. Isn't everything in front of "the children"? I want to think no one is this ignorant. I want to think my mother is not.

I fight the urge to grab the remote and shut the damn thing off. Or better yet, to throw it out on the front lawn next to the waiting garbage. I want to know what image my mother's eyes will scan without the presence of a screen. I don't remember the last time I saw her engaged, animated, in love with a moment. I don't know if I've ever seen her that way.

My father, Wayne, was in love with the West. He was born in Iowa, the same state his hero, John Wayne. The youngest of three boys, he was practical by nature but always with that dreamy spark of idealism shining in the corner of his eye. He married young, a handsome man in an Air Force uniform, and fathered five children. The youngest of these, his only son, you guessed it: John Wayne Clark. My uncle's name is John, so under duress, he'd claim to have named his son after family, of course. The practical thing to do. But in reality, poor young Johnny was named for a dream that his mother wouldn't follow, that would fail his father in the end.

This was before I came into the picture. My father left his first wife, found my mother working at his bank. Thirteen years younger than he was, pretty and petite, he saw a glint of mischief in her eyes as she passed around a tray of chocolate-covered ants and bees, a practical joke from the women to the men. This bit of mischief he knew, he
recognized. So they married, he in a baby blue leisure suit, she in a purple flowered
dress, beehive halfway to the ceiling. He adopted her two-year old daughter.

Between them, they now had six children, but she wanted another. For five
years she wore him down, while they both lost their fathers to cancer and heart disease.
And then Jennifer was born, not breathing. My father took it as a sign to quit, but my
mother was lost in grief. And so six years after their marriage and many arguments later,
I finally came along into the mugginess of a Midwestern fall, six weeks ahead of schedule.
And as I started to crawl across the green shag carpet (which I swear is my first memory),
it was decided that I would not grow up in this place. That my father would follow the
old creed, "Go west, young man," his new family in tow. It was decided that all their
dreams would be pinned on me.

So they packed the tan Buick. Baby on mama's lap. Little girl with her palms
pressed to the glass in the back. Rocky, the Golden Retriever pacing the seat beside her.
Father at the helm, steering the ship towards the New World, where all of the answers
were waiting.

I dream of deserts. Of Tibetan mountaintops. Of the interiors of rainforests, the air as
thick as blood. I dream of lying on a beach in Greece, the white sand slowly settling in
my skin, the rhythm of the waves causing my scattered thoughts to still. Of life on a
boat, unmoored. In his memoir, Another Bullshit Night in Suck City, Nick Flynn writes:
"When everything has proven tenuous one can either move toward permanence or move toward impermanence." He was living on a boat in Boston Harbor at the time. And it's easy for me to imagine myself next to him, grabbing the rough rope in my small, tough hands and casting it off into the water. Placing my palms on the stern and breathing in the salty air. Each breath measured, calm, settling me further into the notion of floating with no goal in sight.

Three-thirty in the morning is a time when I find myself at the computer, fingers poised over the keys, sometimes finding meaning, other times simply stalled. A time when I find myself staring at a screen, like my mother, searching. But I remember a time, before the divorce, when three-thirty was the magic hour at which Dad would wake my sister and me. Suitcases packed from the night before, we crawled bleary-eyed from our beds and stumbled to the Buick—already running and waiting in the two-car garage. He placated us with chocolate milk and donuts. I don't know how he managed to appease Mom.

A few hours later, as the sun woke us, I'd hear him humming "Moon River" in the front seat. Next to him, Mother's head lolled sideways on her foam neck rest, softly snoring. I was curled in the corner, while my sister hogged most of the back seat. She was eight years older, so she had privileges. And she was cranky as hell in the mornings.
Seeing me, bored and lonely in the rearview mirror, Dad would stop humming and start singing me songs. *Amy says find a little lake, find a little lake, find a little lake.* And I’d look out the window, trying my best. “There’s one, daddy!” But it was just standing water. No fish resided there, only mosquitoes, breeding in the stagnant green-brown water, preparing to swarm.

The origins of the word “stagnate” come from the Latin “stagnatum” which means, “standing water.” Like the lakes I thought I saw through the car window as the highway rolled on underneath us. Phil Collins, in his old band Genesis, wrote a song about stagnation: *And I will wait forever, beside the silent mirror, and fish for better minnows amongst the weeds and slimy water.* And I want to think that this is part of the reason my mother left my father: to fish for better minnows. Or perhaps she was just plain tired of fishing.

But I wasn’t ready yet. My young life had not yet reached a point of stagnation. I want to understand her reasons, but I can’t escape my own perceptions. I had bigger fish to catch. I had hours left to spend at my father’s side, legs swinging over the edge of the boat. And she took me away, to the cornfields of her youth. To a place where the only water was the rushing, muddy Missouri River. Its stench and strong undertow. And the stagnant pools that formed in the fields after each hard rain. The breeding grounds for
mosquitoes, who waited for me to come out at night, so they could suck out any hope that was left in my tender flesh.

I have decorated my desk area with pages ripped out of travel magazines. Coral reefs with bright orange sea horses, schools of silver fish, beautiful blue skies. Baobab trees in Africa, women with black clay pots balanced on their heads. A bamboo hut where a man hangs in a hammock, a lemur perched on a mangrove tree.

Mingled in with the exotic are the familiar: the clay outcroppings of the Colorado National Monument, where I hiked last December. The alluvial fan in Rocky Mountain National Park, where Lawn Lake Dam broke and killed two rangers the year we moved to the mountains from Iowa. A river running through Montana, where rainbow trout wait for me to learn a new trade, to cast my fly into the water, and take up the traditions that were passed down to me.

When we'd go fishing, on family vacations, my mother looked so lost sitting in the middle of the rented motorboats, the bright orange jacket belted tight around her waist. She was never relaxed like Dad was, his ankles propped on the lip of the boat. Her nervous eyes darted around at the fluid water as it lapped the aluminum sides. The changing, mercurial nature of it that she couldn't bring herself to trust.
But everything changes, I learned this early. She's the one who taught it to me, while remaining rigid herself. In fluidity, I find solace. In stagnation, suffocation. After too long in one place, I feel the invisible tugging in my center, the twitching in my hands and feet. It's time to go. And I picture my father looking at his watch.

No matter where we were: the library or Disneyland, Dad never allowed us to lose track of time. To linger in any one moment too long. And maybe my mother, maybe that's why she left him. Perhaps she found a moment all to herself, and it was a good one, so she allowed herself to stay. To capture all of its details, its every particle of promise. As I look at the whites of her eyes, all that I can see with her pupils glued to the screen, I think that maybe she's still there now. Maybe she's afraid if she leaves that moment, she'll never find another one that's quite as good again.

"Mom!" I'm plucking at the fabric on the couch. Annoyed that her eyes have barely scanned my face this whole conversation. "Seriously, we could go. We'll get a hotel a block from Big Ben. You don't have to speak another language. It's not that different. And it could change your life."

"What?" The woman on the screen is now meeting with her lawyer. He looks like an underwear model, of course. His hand rests on her knee as he talks, and I'm disgusted. But at least he's listening.
I can feel my jaw settling into place, the bone becoming denser, heavier, welding itself together. Inheritance is a tricky thing. I rarely look at my mother and recognize parts of myself, but as I sit here, fuming, I realize this habit is inherited from her.

While studying Anthropology, I've learned that primates have a highly evolved sense of mimicry. In facilities around the country, chimps are being taught sign language. They share ninety-eight percent of our DNA. They wear diapers, are raised on bottles by researchers. Watching a video on this, once, I was haunted by their all too human eyes staring out at me from the screen. By their familiar looking thumbs tracing their jaw line in the symbol that means "mother."

Biological or not, it seems, we can't help but want to be like them somehow. The mother figures. The matriarchs. Lipstick smeared on my cheek at three. Marching around the house in heels. The way I hold my hands laced behind my neck during tense moments at the movies. I can't escape it. I know parts of me are bound to reflect my mother's image. But no one can blame me for trying to make parts of her a little more like me.

I take the now empty popcorn bowl from her hands and go rinse it out in the sink. As the water runs, overflowing the rim, I breathe deeply, palms placed flat on the countertop. Impatience will get me nowhere. Turning the faucet off, I paste a smile back on my face and walk back into my mother's living room to see how the on-screen court case is coming.
When we weren’t fishing, we were haunting the hotel swimming pools. My mother sat at the edge, dangling her legs into the cool, unnaturally blue water. I recall the overpowering scent of chlorine. Sometimes, she’d wade in up to her waist, but never farther. I remember hating my swim lessons at age nine, glowering as the instructor held his firm arm underneath me, kicking my little legs for all I was worth, her image in my head the whole time.

She never learned to swim. Tells it as if she’s not embarrassed, hides all traces of wistfulness in her voice. But I can still hear them, an undercurrent. Laughing around the dinner table, she tells us how that boy threw her into Lake Manawa on Senior Skip Day. How she screamed and flailed her fists at the too-yielding surface of the water, tears streaming down her pale cheeks until someone yelled at her to *put your feet down*, and she did. I can see her, standing, blushing, vigorously crossing her arms over her chest, shooting daggers at the young man. *I can’t swim*, she’d point out, instantly turning all blame, all fault in the situation, outwards away from herself. Something she still does to this day. Even now, as we laugh about it, I can see in her eyes that she didn’t think it was funny at all, that she still doesn’t think so now.

I’ve decided the only way to show my mother my world is to fully inhabit it myself. To move as far away as possible until she comes to me. My stepsister got married a few
months ago in Las Vegas, and my mother and step dad went. Their first trip since South Dakota. *It was so neat*, she said. Though I haven’t seen any pictures of anything but the inside of the chapel. The details escape her, vagueness envelops her. But I keep thinking if I try hard enough I can pull her out of the fog. Into a vivid world, alive and thriving. That I can give her an image of something she can cling to as she ages, her memory fails, and it seems there’s nothing left.

My grandmother, my father’s mother, started losing her memory at age eighty. Or at least, that’s when they told me about it. A few weeks before they took her to the home. Never once did she know who I was, her blue eyes cloudy and vacant. Once in awhile she’d remember that my father was her son, but out of three, she always chose wrong. *No Mom, it’s Wayne.* I know it must have killed him. His whole life trying to please her, to be good, all of it leading to this moment in a white-walled room, her limp hand in his, calling him by his older brother’s name.

I always paint my father in this light. The fallen hero. The dreamer who dreamed too big. But the truth is we see things how we want to see them. My father has only occupied three weeks a year of my life since I was eight years old. But in absence, I found room for unlimited use of the imagination. Of course the actuality of summers with Dad was never the perfect vacation of my dreams. But each year I had ample time to forget, to fill my heart once more with excitement and anticipation. And each
summer, as I stepped off the plane, he'd always be standing there, at the end of the ramp, waiting for me, winking at me. Mischief in his eyes.

When I was thirteen, my father and stepmother took me to Camden, Maine. A quaint little seaside town that survived on the lobster business. I remember the bike trail outside of our motel, figures pedaling through the fog each morning before the sun gained enough strength to burn it away. I remember eating squid, my stomach revolting against the strange food. Walking along the shore, fifty degrees even in July, collecting shells, most of them broken, wind whipping my hair into tangles.

My father is strangely absent from this trip. I remember him being upset when I complained about the seafood. Him standing on the pier, pacing, while my stepmother and I browsed the shops. And a trip on a lobster boat, my small hands clinging to the wet metal rail, out on the gray Atlantic, the boat endlessly bobbing, the fog so thick there was no land in sight. My father stood at the stern the whole time, alone, seeming to search for something in the churning grey water.

If I think hard, I can remember this. But the image that comes most readily is one of a young man, a crew member. He had tanned olive skin, green eyes, and curly blond hair that my stepmother and I bonded over. I recall his hand enveloping mine to help me back to shore. Our “Greek Adonis,” we called him. My stepmother claims not to remember him now, having had so many other memories with her aunt in that place.
But when I think of Maine I can still see him, waving from the side of the red and white boat, a lighthouse in the distance, a wide white grin, a dimple in his left cheek.

But I don't wear the little plastic pin with wings on it anymore. No one directs me through the corridors teeming with families that I must walk through alone. Although when I visit, my father is still there waiting at the exit, grumbling about how long the baggage is taking to arrive at the carousel, the unsatisfactory coffee. He looks me up and down as if I never quite fit the image in his head. Why do you have so many holes in your ears? Your hair is so dark.

I don't have the strength anymore to convince myself he's a hero. Once the truth has been faced, imagination won't conceal it any longer. When I see my father, now, he's just an old man, clinging to what's left of his life. And every time I tell him something I've accomplished, he suggests something I might do instead. He'll find a million ways to ask the same question: How are you going to succeed? And I can't think of an answer that will please him.

Just yesterday, my father and I visited the Space Needle in Seattle. We took a boat tour around Elliot Bay. He stood next to me with his digital camera ready to point and shoot at the skyline and I tried to ignore how his hands shook with palsy as I squinted into the sun. And how his blue eyes were turning slightly milky at the edges, his white hair
thinning. When we walk up the stairs to Pikes Market after the tour, we have to stop every ten stone steps for his heart to take a rest. Some sort of valve problem that he's never properly explained. And I have to remind myself that he's nearly seventy years old, that he was well into middle age when I was born. I take his arm, but he pulls it away, hanging on to his self-sufficiency as tightly as he does to the cigarette wedged between his two trembling fingers.

But what if this degeneration spreads? It's only natural, after all. First his hands, then his arms. Perhaps a wheel chair to roll alongside me as when I walk down the aisle. If he even makes it that long. I don't even have a boyfriend at present. Can't even get a date. If he doesn't see his youngest daughter married, I'll feel that I have failed him, that I've failed myself.

But there's nothing for it. The ground will level out. His heart will slow. I'll see the sweat rolling down the back of his neck, from the top of his head, which is balding. I'll offer him a drink of lemonade, but he'll refuse. He'll plunder forth on his unsteady legs, ready for the next sight, the next sound, the next taste. For whatever it is that he's sure is just around the corner, which will make him satisfied at last.

Mom has finally turned off the TV. She glances occasionally over my shoulder as I leaf through old family albums. Every time I come home I drag them out from under the
coffeetable, stare at the images as if willing the force of my gaze to create a portal, to pull us back into those days.

"Mom," I say, and point at a picture of us at Mesa Verde – a Pueblo Indian village in Western Colorado we visited when I was four. In the photo I wear a beaded headband bought from the souvenir shop. My mother is walking ahead of me and I am trying to catch up. And I realize that now I am the one who has gotten ahead, who has kept moving. That even though I often look backward I have not stalled my forward momentum.

From where I sit, next to my mother on the couch, I feel myself insistently, invisibly tugging at her hand. And I can't help but want to bring her with me into that dream, then, of sharing, completing, finding in solitude on the beach an answer... that Virginia Woolf so clearly depicted in her novel, *To the Lighthouse*. I am James, was born with his essence, forever looking back and seeing my mother still framed in the window we once sat in together. And if I ever get her out of the frame, she may very well say, *So that was the lighthouse was it?* “How neat.” And turn her head back to the TV screen without recording a single detail. And I’ll take her hand in silence and remind myself, *No, the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing.*
Inheritance

Is this how our ancestors lay bodies with backs to each other, bones bent into questions 
In Southern Nigeria they bury their dead like this: the wives entombed alive next to their dead husbands

Did just one manage to claw her way out, struggle to the surface and leave tracks for some future archaeologist to find? Or are women innately satisfied with suffocation (fingers entwined in their husbands' long cold hands)

Five generations of my family's women were born and have died in the same place, borders being something they lack knowledge of — still, I'd like to believe our Ancestral Eve was the first cartographer that she put miniscule maps in our cells so we could find our way back someday

Sometimes, I can sense it, when I map constellations in the freckles on your back, but I cannot trace the path of this silence — or the molecules of matter that shift aside for us each time we turn away
The van arrives in the middle of the night and we tumble out – disoriented fugitives running from what promised to be a sticky and boring Midwestern summer. Blue beams from hastily grabbed headlamps shoot out into the air at myriad angles, illuminating the rotting wood of the longhouse we are to stay in, a screen door that has long given up attempts to be flush with its frame, a patch of sodden grass. A young man whose name I didn't catch, who we've awoken from slumber, starts grabbing items at random out of our trailer. The sleeping bags tucked under each of his arm could belong to the men, but he isn't asking for confirmation. He marches into the empty cabin ahead of us, tossing our things on the dusty wood floor. Seven small single beds on aluminum frames, a couple of cheap dressers, a yellow swath of carpet meant to serve as a rug. He neglects to tell us other women are asleep just beyond one of the three doors in the room.

"All set?" he asks, without waiting for an answer.

A few of the women look around the room and their faces change with dawning familiarity. It seems the time for summer camp has arrived, though they thought they'd outgrown it years ago. I, on the other hand, was never sent to camp. There were three worlds I resided in: Mom's house, Dad's house, and the alternate reality in my head.

The other women giggle and unroll their sleeping bags. There is some bickering over who gets what bed, and which drawers in the two cheap chests we are to share. We
left a group of writers, leaving for a month-long retreat. We have arrived in a fit of regression, tumbling backwards over the miles through time. To travel West, for me, has always been moving back, not forward, in time. I fall asleep dreaming of the mountains of my youth.

At seven years old, I was uprooted from the Rockies – the only home I’d ever known. We lived on an acre of land with a fruit orchard, a vegetable garden, and Columbine bushes out front. Large lilac bushes grew next to the patio, filling the air with their scent. Hummingbird feeders hung in at least three windows. Apple Drive. Basalt, Colorado. We were a small community nestled at the banks of the Roaring Fork River, ten miles from Aspen. Our road was long and made from gravel. A mile down, across from the bus stop, someone had horses, and my sister and I would climb the split-rail fence to feed them apples. Coyotes often howled at our back fence. I heard them in my dreams.

A drainage ditch from a neighboring farm ran through our backyard. At its banks I collected earthworms with a boy whose name I’ve forgotten. He ate one once to try to impress me, and he must’ve, in his way. Another boy, or maybe the same one, the son of my parents’ friends, showed me his penis while we were playing with matchbox cars. I don’t remember why. I don’t remember if I told. I do remember thinking it looked like an earthworm.
The worms were for Dad's fishing trips. Twice a year he'd let me tag along, towing my Snoopy-embossed tackle box. I'd dangle over the lip of the boat in a web of skinny arms and legs. If I felt a tug, he'd convince me it was just a weed, even if I knew different. Once, he let me reel it in: a small perch. But it wasn't big enough for us to keep. Translation: good enough. Nothing was ever good enough, he taught me.

Everything can be improved.

This first early morning in Wyoming I crouch next to what is a river in this season—a stream in dry times, rocking on my haunches as if I had four of them. The ground beneath the rubber soles of my sandals is muddy, the area patched with tall grasses and reeds. Even though I have spent the last few weeks anticipating being able to try my hand at fly-fishing, the current of Shell Creek is swift and brown and uninviting.

It is the stark gray driftwood that catches my attention, the only thing not perceptively moving. I have always been fascinated by the color gray: its many hues, its many liminal states. And the notion of something that has been petrified and left behind. Petrified, but not afraid.

The pile of driftwood sits scattered, yet solid as I try to place it within the rest of the landscape. The red clay outcroppings towering above me, across the creek. The damp soil my soles are sinking into. Like me, it does not fit. It is merely an observer, rocked back on its haunches, looking as if it might burst into flames at any second.
On our first free day we travel to Cody, Wyoming. I stand outside of a coffee shop, owned by a rock climber and his wife. I don't tell him that I belong to his tribe: that I'm a fellow climber. I don't tell him how I revel in the sense of accomplishment that comes with each hold I stick, knuckles locking in place, one step closer to finding the correct sequence to the top.

I decide to phone an old friend who has just moved to Seattle. Both of us wanderers in strange cities. He tells me I would love it there. How the people there are faceted like jewels. How he wants to design a building for me. Each corner a quirk, each staircase an achievement.

Down the street, a German Shepherd barks before diving under a bench. A woman rides her bike, head thrown back into the wind. Dolly Parton's song “Jolene,” blares from outdoor speakers. I lean back in my metal chair, take a long sip of espresso and tell him the coffee here is as good as any in the Northwest.

"I could stay here," I say. "Just leave everything behind..." A pause. "I'd send for the cats, of course.”

I can hear him smiling on the other end; feel the tires of his old black Honda rolling down the cramped Seattle streets. In our separate states, all senses are engaged. Neurons, aided by coffee, fire more than they have in months. The invisible line crackles with possibilities.
I am told that when I was two years old I toddled into the living room of our Colorado home and climbed into my Grandmother’s lap. My mass of dark brown hair was wild and tangled from a nap. Playing with her blouse buttons, I innocently asked her age.

“Sixty-one,” she replied.

I looked at her in all earnestness and said, “When people get old, they die.”

My grandmother lived with us, then. In an apartment attached to our big, brick house. I was too young to remember, really, but I imagine her holding my hand, walking me to the bus for preschool. Handing me a plastic trowel to help her dig in the garden. Pulling up squash and leaf lettuce. Snapping green beans into a colander at the picnic table. Baking zucchini bread, monkey bread, banana nut bread.

Now she’s eighty-two, and she loves to retell this story. *When people get old, they die.* To remind me that I am the “weird” grandchild. The only one to graduate from college, the only one to move away. Yet she also likes to remind me how I have inherited her hands. And when I sit with her, she strokes my long, slender fingers with her own.

Back from Cody, we sit around the cabin while a thunderstorm rages outside. Tornadoes touch down ten miles away. Outside, the sheep from the neighboring ranch bleat like they are dying. I put on a CD to drown out the sound, but the first measure of music
sends me spiraling back to that Saturday morning six weeks ago. Cross-legged on the
black futon, in the living room of my friend Matt’s minimalist Portland apartment. I am
reading the poetry books his brother has checked out from the library, waiting for his
presence in the white-walled room. When it comes, he is barefoot in sweatpants with a
lazy half-smile. His eyes alert and engaged as he stretches his arms above his head and
bends his yoga-toned body at the waist to place his palms flat on the floor. He tells me he
hasn’t slept so well in days.

We got in well after four a.m. the night before, but I’ve been beyond boundaries
of time since I arrived. Not since I visited Ireland has a place seemed so ethereal. Every
front-yard is landscaped. Foliage hangs over the streets and sidewalks, green and alive.
Even the air, cleansed daily with rainwater, is full of magic and possibility.

He strides over to the record player, eager to share his recent finds. A male voice
fills the room, tremulous and haunting. *Losing, it comes in a cold wave of guilt and
shame all over me/ Child has arrived in the darkness, the hollow triumph of a tree.* I am
close to tears. I gaze at his face and for the first time he doesn’t look nervously away. But
his arms are folded tightly across his chest and he is rocking slightly on his heels.

“Let me show you the garden,” he says and laughs. His mouth working a wad of
gum. That distinctive quirk I remember.

We step out onto a single square of sidewalk at the edge of a small area of mud
and grass. No plots of squash grow here. No green beans, no lettuce, no fruit trees. Not
even a picnic table adorns his tiny yard. But I slip my sandals off anyway and make
tracks around the perimeter with the soles of my feet.

"It's wonderful," I say.

He stands in the doorway watching me, working his wad of gum.

The mountains faded from my background when my mom packed the Plymouth Voyager
and took her girls down from the mountain. We came to inhabit a state that looks like
graph paper from an airplane. Each agricultural plot nearly identical. The only thing
that jutted out into the horizon was the Woodmen Building in the Omaha skyline, across
the Missouri River.

We had crickets in the basement, water beetles in the bathroom. Every time it
rained, it flooded, ruining items from my past one by one. Grandmother's rocking chair,
the couch I had lain sick on, board games, Christmas decorations, a framed family photo.
I learned what a sump pump was, learned to pile beloved items on the curb and call them
"trash." A tornado hit in 1988, three months after we moved. The top of the neighbor's
sycamore tree was inches from our front door. The Venetian blinds flapped on the
windows as my sister and I ran downstairs, even though the windows were barely
cracked. A house three blocks away was ripped from its foundation as the family of four
huddled in the basement beneath it.
I told myself it was temporary. It was just a house. I didn’t belong to it. I hid on the stairwell or in the bathroom, immersing myself in books. Anything I could get my hands on. I checked out the maximum six at the library at every visit. When Mom was too busy to take me back, I resorted to reading the Medical Dictionary, or our set of Funk and Wagnall’s encyclopedia. At eight, I was already a mental escape artist.

The song slowly fades, and I grow to inhabit my senses again. The sheep from the neighboring ranch are still crying. Maybe they feel displaced, too. Maybe they miss their mothers, their fathers, the pastures of their birth. They are recently shorn and red paint adorns their sides. Numbered just like the cliché. But I don’t plan on counting them. I’ll allow them that much dignity.

I walk down the road to Dirty Annie’s, the local hangout that serves as café, grocery, souvenir shop and bar. All the local gossip transpires on the porch. The men wear Stetsons and chaps, Carhart jeans and spurs. Some sport handlebar mustaches. Art is made from pieces of old tack. Bits of dialog float through my ears. “Chasin’ girls and drinkin’ whiskey.” “Purty good.” “Dark-thirty.” A man says he got his degree from HKU. “Hard Knocks University,” he explains.

A black horse is tied to the post out front. Rain clouds threaten, but don’t deliver. The old board creaks, the dust rises and settles like the tide. The bottomless cup of coffee
is good and will sustain me through this lazy Sunday that drags on in the way of the West. I am content to fade into the background of this quiet afternoon.

Quiet, that is, until the busload of tourists comes for food, buggy rides, homemade ice cream. They line up to have their pictures taken with a "real cowboy." From my perch on the porch, I try to suppress a bemused smile. Knowing all too well that I am just as much an outsider as they are.

In her essay "Writing in Wyoming," Annie Proulx says: "I have always been in an outsider's position — perhaps the natural stance of a writer, though the outsider's eye is common to all humans." In this instant, on the aging porch, it is easy for me to smile up at the proprietor and his wife. To nod my head knowingly at how the tourists have turned them into caricatures, how they have gotten a cheap show. But haven't I gotten it too? The day is slipping away. And even though I inhabit the moment, nothing lasting will come of any of this.

Summers were spent at Dad's house in California. He lived in the retirement community of Ventura. I spent the afternoons rollerblading to the Shell station. The library was too far away. I had to wait until weekends and beg to go to Barnes and Noble. Dad eventually gave up and let me read his books. Among them were Louis L'Amour's westerns, Dean Koontz's suspense stories, Robert Ludlum's political thrillers.
Within a ten-block radius, there was one girl near my age. As a last resort, I would play with her. She had a sno-cone machine, and a pair of roller blades. We'd skate around the block, talk about celebrity heartthrobs. I'd watch her practice gymnastics. She was half-Jewish, with olive skin, and curly hair that was almost black. She reminded me of the best friend I'd left behind in Colorado. I avoided her as much as possible. I stayed indoors, huddled in Dad's easy chair reading or watching movies.

Except for the skating, I wanted little to do with the California sun. My landscape was contained in memory. In inner oceans, valleys, and peaks. In my head, I went to the gray shores of the Atlantic. I was older. I had a dog, a Siberian Husky. I wore long skirts, wool sweaters, and knee-high boots. I read books on the beach. I watched the fog roll in and out. The waves crashing against the breakers. The lobster boats bobbing where grey sea meets grey sky. I inhabited my imagination. No one could touch me there.

After a brief return to camp, I find myself back at Dirty Annie's for the Friday night bonfire. We sit on stumps culled from what was once a very large limb of a Cottonwood tree. The fire blazes inside a ring of stones. I think of how old this technique is, how we intuited or inherited it. The dry grass poking through the cracks catches fire, but burns out quickly. I could sit and watch it until morning. But the whiskey makes me antsy. Bushmills, in a makeshift flask. I drink it straight, true to my Irish roots.
Around me, the buzz of conversation is a comforting white noise. Everyone glows, from the fire, from the fresh air. A cowboy sings Townes Van Zandt, while a young man with a guitar stumbles through the cords. *Maybe she just wants to sing for the sake of the song.* Even when he pauses in his playing for long lengths of time, the old cowboy keeps on singing.

There are seven verses to "Home on the Range," he tells us. Bet you didn't know that. And it's true, I didn't. It's also true that at this moment, I do feel home. I've forgotten, for the moment, the harsh winds. How they strip my skin cells away, make me feel exposed, naked. How they make the dust settle in every crevice.

Headlights shine in the small gravel parking lot. A small hatchback pulls up, its cargo: what I've been waiting for. Secretly, I wish for those strong arms, carrying a case of Coors Light, to come encircle me by the fire. To hold the warmth in, while it lasts. To keep the last layer of skin from blowing away. To offer some protection. But I'll settle for conversation—flowing like water through this dry land. And a hand, to help me over the makeshift bench, steadying me, if only for a moment.

I read somewhere once that the French have no word for "home". Using the internet instant translation, I tried to translate the word from English to French and got *maison* as a result. Typing in "house," I received the same word. To the French then, I deduce, home is stone and mortar, brick and glass. A solid foundation built with strong arms, and
two able hands. And maybe it's because they don't have our penchant for housing tracts of identical A-frames with cheap aluminum siding, that they needn't distinguish the residence from the home. Or maybe it's because the house was once so central to being that the language never evolved to include shifting attitudes toward temporality.

I live in a *maison*, but it is not home. I transpose the words as readily as anyone else, but I don't mean it. Home is a sensation, a slow swelling of something old in the blood. It's walking down the beach on the Atlantic shore, feeling the chaos of my thoughts suddenly settle. Staring at spirals on a green hill in Ireland, feeling my fingers remember tracing the shape. It's my lips lingering too long on a new lover's back, sure I have tasted this skin before. The tears in my eyes as the train pulls away from a place I have only just begun to inhabit, a city where I never looked over my shoulder, but forged ahead into every moment with the sure certainty of someone who belongs just where they are in that instant.

The California summers and the Iowa winters grew longer. I never grew out of learning to retreat. From the sun, from the cold, from myself. I had few friends, fewer boyfriends. By high school, I still read voraciously. But I had found other means of escape as well: I wrote poetry, smoked pot, watched movies. I went for long walks in the middle of the night. I sat in the back corners of coffee houses in Omaha, while Mom sat up and worried.
I was too far inside of myself to cause anyone else any trouble. Late at night, when my parents were out, I sliced lines into my skin with razor blades. Watched the blood drip into the warm water of the tub. The Bell jar lay open, face down on the lid of the toilet. Flickers of longing for deeper wounds passed through my thoughts. But I wasn’t quite ready for that. These scars, they wouldn’t stay. I wore long sleeves to hide the damage.

The Smithsonian Institute's Natural History Museum dedicates a rather large wing to housing its gemstone collection. The Hope Diamond being, of course, the museum's prize asset. It spends all day inside its bullet-proof display case, twirling slowly before the crowd of onlookers like a ballerina in those music boxes mothers like to give to daughters. The hallways containing the rest of these precious stones, polished to perfection, are always thronging with visitors. Diamonds can be red, black, pink, blue, yellow, or white. Sapphires, my birthstone, which I had previously thought only had one hue, can actually be blue, pink, purple, yellow or green. They can also be deep red, in which case they are called a Ruby.

The most talented lapidaries in the world encase the gems in precious metal in every shade of platinum, silver, and gold. They have been cut to give off such sheen that any self-respecting girl would buckle at the knees upon viewing them.
When I visited the Smithsonian, I may have felt a twinge of jealousy or two, but for the most part, I wasn’t interested. Instead, I lingered in the back hallways, where they keep the asteroids and moon rocks. The ones that brought back memories of primary school field trips to the planetarium. You’re allowed to touch these. And I thought how if life ever existed on these neighboring celestial bodies, it flashed so briefly even the rock didn’t have time to record it. At least, not the rocks that fell burning through our atmosphere. When I want to record a moment according to my sense of time, I write a poem. When the Earth wants to write a poem, it hardens into rock.

Out here in Wyoming, we kneel down in front of dinosaur tracks bigger than my father’s palm. Evidence of tail drag runs between the three-toed impressions in the sandstone. A geologist, head of the camp we are staying at, shows us bulges on boulders that are bigger than my head. These, he says, are where the flat feet of the herbivores sank into the sodden soil. Where the earth decided to remember them, to allow them to say: we were here.

In *Rising from the Plains*, part of a quartet of nonfiction works exploring North American geology, John McPhee explores how each layer of rock tells a story. He follows geologists around, listens to their stories, then translates them into the written word.

I cannot look at a landscape, like a geologist, and see its history. In the
Museum, I am most attracted to the uncut stones, the rough and random shapes of them. I am taken by the fact that no matter how intuitive I pretend I might be, I would never guess what dazzling possibilities lie inside them.

At seventeen, I drove down to Missouri, toward my future, in the middle of a heat wave. Ninety-five degrees in the shade, a hundred percent humidity. No elevators or air-conditioning to aid us in moving to the fourth floor of the dormitory. Sweat pooled in the small of my back. Andy, a friend, carried boxes up the stairs behind me. I smiled at him over my shoulder as I set down an armful of bedding on my new mattress. A metal frame attached to the wall. It was a tense smile, a forced smile. I had never seen such close quarters.

Andy had offered his services for the move. He drove me down in the car he'd once tried to teach me to drive in: a stick shift I never mastered. Mom and Grandma came separately and got a flat on the way down. They had to use the donut and drive 55 all the way home. They left me alone with him, with that town, at a slow crawl.

Maryville, Missouri has seven bars and a Wal-mart. A Hardees that never closes. No bookstore. No library to speak of. I was glad Andy was staying for a couple of days. I had a few friends there, but I welcomed the company, to ease me into my new state. The August days grew longer. I avoided my roommate, my room. Andy left for home, but called a couple of days later. We'd known each other two weeks, not much more. He
was coming back. To go to school with me. I wanted a clean break, but I didn't have the heart to say so. I can't remember what I did say, but I hoped the unease in my voice was apparent.

It wasn't. His room was across campus, which was not far enough. His roommate had a Confederate flag hung on the wall along with a cowboy hat, and a gun rack. But the roommate was barely around. I'd turn the corner for class, and Andy would be there. He'd need to talk. We'd have the room to ourselves. He'd lock the door.

"It's important. I don't want him to interrupt," he'd say.

Important: "Carrying or possessing weight or consequence." Important: "bearing on; forcible; driving." His lean frame pressing me to the bed. His thumb and forefinger encircling my left wrist, pinning it to the mattress. Blue plaid sheets with my blood on them.

It had been ten years since I was led from my home in the mountains. Led by my mother's hand to the car. Led by Andy's hand to his room. At that moment, drowning in fluids, his and mine, I was further from home than I had ever been. I had moved to Missouri to find a new place to belong. But it used me and spit me out. The heat continued to rise. I was sweat and skin. Nothing more.

I harbor this secret fantasy that my father never sold our house in Colorado. That somewhere, hidden in his will, he's left it to me, explained how he rented it out these
past twenty years. How he cultivated my dreams for me, with the secret knowledge that
only parents have of what their children truly want.

The property value is nearing, if not over, half a million dollars by now. But it
means much more than that to me. It means my legs pumping the cool mountain air.
For the first time learning to propel my body higher, as high as the chains on the swing
would let me reach. The toes of my sneakers pulling me toward boundaries that seemed
limitless.

It means a mountain for a backyard, coyotes singing me lullabies, reminding me
how human I am; how alive. Reminding me of the true primal home we all hail from. It
means my fingers fumbling through the soil of the garden, planting zucchini, leaf lettuce,
green beans, tomato vines. Food I could follow from start to finish. Dreams I could see
to their end.

But I’ve read his will, found it in a file cabinet, snooping once while he was at
work. The house isn’t there. *Invisible ink*, I try to tell myself. And perhaps this last
burst of hope stems from the fact that anything lasting is invisible. The knowledge that
what matters lies in memory or in dreams, in fragile hopes placed delicately on another’s
palm as you say goodbye in a dry Wyoming morning.

The morning after the bonfire, I say goodbye to the few friends I have made here. Take
one last look around at the close quarters we have kept. Close quarters where instead of
feeling suffocated, I felt safe. In Missouri, all I'd wanted was to be alone. And then, suddenly, stripped inside out, I never wanted to be alone again.

It's true that I've grown a little weary of the women's chatter before bedtime. And of the rudimentary amenities of the camp. Of not even having a bathroom to lock myself in for a peaceful bath. Of showering three feet away from another naked form. But I'll miss the bond that forms when everyone is out of his or her element. When we are alone, out of context, together. My hand lingers in another's for a brief moment, then releases. My middle finger sliding slowly down the center of his palm as if to leave an imprint there.

We all climb into the van. Some of us are going home. I am returning to the house I rent, the maison, where my two cats are waiting for me. They will be my sole companions the next six months. They will sit next to me while I read and write. While I grade papers late into the night. While I curl under the covers and cry. Until the time will come to pack up the boxes. Then they will look at me curiously, as I put them in their carriers, set them on the seat next to me. We will pass this place on our way West. But we will leave it behind.

We'll arrive, through wind and snow, on the other side of the mountains. To Portland, City of Roses. The weather will be mild. A gentle mist will be falling. Strong arms will be waiting to help us unload. They will belong to a man I know, or to one I have never met. I'll hold my tongue out to catch the drops. I'll offer my full face to the
cleansing water. The man and I will laugh as I twirl around on my new lawn. My three square feet of garden, with nothing planted in it yet. No seeds, no rows of beans; only empty, waiting soil.

I'll kick my shoes off and make tracks in the mud, knowing full well that the imprints won't be preserved, that the sand won't wash over them and harden into stone to say: this is where I walked. The rock that will form when my footprints are long gone will have no trace of my existence, and I won't mind. Because I'll know that someday, someone will look at this ground, and read a story in it, even if the evidence isn't there.
My Mother Brings Me Grapefruit

It's such a misshapen fruit, and nothing like the other that shares its name, but that's why she likes it—because it's paradoxical. And besides, she says, he brought them to me all the way from Texas.

To tell you the truth, I'd forgotten about them, I confess two Sundays later: the two odd globes rolling around my produce drawer among the wilting lettuce, a few tomatoes, an onion growing mold.

Their skin like a soft sunset: pale yellow, muted orange, a bit of pastel pink. I set one on the counter, while the coffee gurgles in the background like a contented child. I find the midpoint with a paring knife and divide the fruit, save one half for later and commence the delicate process of freeing each section from its hold. The fruit like a wheel on the plate.

And it could be because all afternoon I've been reading Boethius, but I imagine old Fortuna looking down from the sky, saying, This is the true fruit of the gods, as I take the first bite. So sweet.
So sour.
Recalling Grief

Blood Sisters

The first person I remember missing was Melissa. After Mom moved us out of the mountains, down to this shit city by the muddy Mississippi in the corner of Southwest Iowa. When I came home from school there was nothing to do but wander around the sidewalks or shut myself in the attic stairwell and read. No swing set or sandbox in the backyard, no blood sister living across the street.

In fact, there weren't any children near my age on the block. No one whose house I could escape to and hear stories of Hanukkah or eat artichoke hearts with for dinner. No one around with a grandfather who would agree to prick our fingers in the bathroom, band aid them together for that magical minute, grinning as he held the inside of his wrist near his face to count. Skillfully hiding the blue numbered tattoo. There was not a single little dark-haired, olive skinned girl who could loan me the stuffed Gremlin she got after she had her appendix out while she played with my green Care Bear. The lucky one I gave to her when I moved away sure that she would always be my sister. The truth is I haven't heard from her in over twenty years.

Nikita

Mother insisted that we call her “Princess,” because Nikita was too long and too hard to say. She was afraid she'd look silly calling out that strange Russian name up and
down the street. But it was my dog, and Nikita was her name. When we first brought her home she lived in a box in the living room, yelping through the night, missing her mother, peeing on my Pound Puppies sleeping bag. Daytime, she'd hide under the microwave cart in the kitchen, watching my mother's feet pace back and forth across the floor.

In December, when she was a few months old, she got to experience her first Christmas. She tore into the wrapping paper with her teeth. And just like a child, she was more thrilled by the process of revealing than the actuality of what was inside. My step dad received a new set of barbells, and because Nikita was a Siberian Husky, a "working dog," he attached one to her new blue harness with a piece of baling twine and laughed as she dragged it around the room.

When my parents went out, she'd watch in the window until their taillights disappeared and then jump onto the couch where they wouldn't allow her. And every night she slept in my bed, underneath the covers on her side, her head on the pillow next to mine; patiently waiting for me to wake up and take her for walks in a climate she was never meant for. Or tie her up to the chain in the yard because my parents were too cheap to put in a fence.

Each brushing I gave Nikita would yield a paper grocery sack full of hair. I remember wanting to weave a blanket out of it once but not knowing how. We had four
good years together, or maybe it was three. It's been so long the only thing I remember is the bite she gave to that woman, and how it meant I had to learn, again, to say goodbye.

Madison

I only saw her once. Drove the two hours to my mother's home on a cold January morning, just before the start of term. We stayed huddled inside the house, my mother, Madison and I. Babysitting while my sister was at work. She was just a few weeks old and the first grandchild in the family. Nine pounds of sweet soft skin. Her blue eyes were alert and rolling around the room, one of them a little lazy, giving her a dazed look of wonder. Mom would prop Madison on her forearm, her little legs dangling over the crook of Mom's elbow and they'd do what we called “Grandma's swing.” Madison would rise a few inches into the air and the smile would come, the small squeal of delight.

When I laid her down for a nap, a little later, I stretched out next to her on the bed, brushed my lips across her flushed cheek. I could smell my sister's milk on her face.

In a soft voice I laid out our plans for the coming years: the trip to the zoo, the bedroom I'd do up for her in my house. How I'd buy her a plane ticket to come and visit me, because even then I knew I was already on my way out of this place. I just didn't know she was, too.

And at her funeral, a few weeks later, my fingers wanted nothing more than to reach out and touch her one more time. But the small, white casket was empty. A secret
we kept from my sister. How does one inform a grieving mother, remind her of the
natural processes that must still go on? It was winter, and the animals were hungry. All
that was left was a bit of bone. And the pink string of a balloon, sliding through my
fingers as I walked out onto the icy church driveway, one of hundreds floating up into
the gray February sky.

Nicole

I remember her choking on a nacho, across the choir room, my breath catching in
my throat as I ran to pat her on the back and her loud echoing laugh after the chip had
been ejected, cheese all over my shirt. The long drive to Lincoln late on a Friday night
for food at the Rock and Roll Runza. Vanilla Cokes and French fries...a large sundae
wheeled out by girls in roller skates. All for an hour of flirting with a man who was gay,
but she never gave up. And I “took one for the team,” because I owed her.

In high school she drove me the long two hours to Maryville, Missouri, so I could
meet with my college age boyfriend behind my parents’ backs. She lay in a borrowed bed
in silence listening to us kiss, never having had a boyfriend of her own. And she was the
one I went on senior graduation trip with down to Kansas City and St. Louis because we
couldn’t afford “the islands.” Her car radio broken, so we had to sing an off-key rendition
of “Date Rape” by Sublime the whole way down. Well, I was off key, Nicole had a
beautiful voice. And she’d sing to me the songs from her favorite off-color, off-broadway
musicals. The ones that only Nicole would seek out and find the sheet music for. And then in St. Louis the Geo Metro deathtrap died and her step dad came down with a trailer to haul our asses back home. And we abused the short-wave radio to its fullest extent. And I was sure, again, that we’d always be friends. And I was wrong this time too.

And now I can only think of her, in the crazy costumes she’d make for Japanese anime conventions. Her hair that was sometimes cornrowed, dyed pink, platinum blond. How she bubbled over with forceful opinions, sure she possessed the magic to bend the world to her will. How her own will defeated her in the end, abandoned her until all that was left was a shell of a self, lying in a white casket, her face made up darker than it ever was in life, looking older, smaller, and so far from peace that I could barely rest my eyes upon the scene.

Under an Orange Moon

The jar slips out of my hand. Glass shatters. A dull yellow spreads slowly across the cold tile floor. I clean it up with a whole roll of paper towels, tears diluting the mess of mustard. I scrub furiously at the stain, not realizing that I’m rubbing it in, that I’m making sure the yellow tinge will haunt the floor forever.

At home, my roommate is in her bed. Her body bruised, the skin on her knees shredded. Band-aid wrappers litter our bathroom trashcan. As I got ready for work this morning, I saw her through the crack in the door, her knees pulled up to her chest.
made coffee, sat at the computer, jiggled the mouse like I always do to rid of the screensaver and read the Sunday Times online. But I wasn’t prepared for her news. The typed words waiting for me that blurred on the screen as I read them. Violence. Violation. The open document the only way she could say it.

And when we talk, later, I can envision the scene in my head. The blood spatter on her tank top. Leaves tangled in her hair. Bruises where they shouldn’t be. And “up there,” he didn’t leave fluids, but dirt. As if the whole business wasn’t dirty enough. How do I tell her I’ve spent years trying to get clean? That what he left behind is there to stay.

Survivors

Nearly all the women close to me have lost something dear to them. A breast to cancer. Their sense of security to rape. A loved one to suicide. A child. And now I must welcome another into the grim halls of the Survivor’s Club. Another victim. Another grief-stricken girl. I must hold my roommate’s hand at the police station, while she makes a recorded phone call that we hope will be enough to arrest the man who hurt her. While she bravely holds back tears for all the pieces of her he took away.

No matter how much time passes, or how much love fills your life, some scars never heal. I still wake sometimes, fetal and frightened, eyes darting around the room as
if Andy were still in it. I cling to whoever is with me, sure that I will die if I let go. It's funny how hard we grieve for the lost parts of our selves. Harder, I think, than we would ever grieve for anyone else. Strange how precious your own life becomes to you after it is torn and shattered, the pieces of your heart ripped from you and nearly blown away.

But I don't know how to tell her this. And when the phone call is over, and she doesn't reach him, doesn't gather the evidence she so dearly needs, I'll tell her how I've moved through it, and the women I have known. Each of us in different ways. Eyeing the large scrapes on her legs, I'll tell her how important it is to heal. Her hand squeezed in mine, I already feel her pulling inward, pulling away.

And I won't lie to her. I'll have to tell her that it's a journey one must eventually make alone. I remember her getting ready to go out that night, her curls piled on top of her head, a ruffled skirt with yellow flowers on it. Standing in the bathroom doorway I teased her. Told her she looked like Shirley Temple. And it's true she seems so young to me, the younger sister I never had. Following in my footsteps just a little too closely this time. And when we arrive home from the police station I can already see her eyes turning a darker shade of green. Hardening, as the last vestiges of the young girl smiling broadly into the mirror get ready to leave... No— they're already gone.
I have already decided

Sister, your child is cold and languid
long removed from the love of this world

I once laid my cheek next to her
flushed face and we shared secrets, she told me

how sweet was the scent of your milk –
that is all I have left of her

now you and I tell our own tales,
through the static over the cell – you say

you are trying again, and I chastise
your blue collar lifestyle, your deadbeat boyfriend –

but maybe in your way you are much
braver than I, as you kneel in sweats

every Sunday in the snow by a headstone
I have yet to see, as you tirelessly try

to leave your legacy in this world
Most days, I only want what’s immediate,

without care of consequence –
the hope having long slipped off my fingers

like a glove that rarely kept the warmth in –
if I am late next week, I have already decided

to get rid of it
Winter Girls

My sister was gaining on me. Her footsteps reverberated through every floorboard in the house. I'd been found out. I had to hide before she locked me in the closet, or worse.

“Damn it Amy, where are you?”

I muffled a giggle from inside our closet. The door swung open.

“Get out here, you little shit!”

Her fingernails sharp in my skin, my hand gripping the frame, paint peeling, sticking to my flesh — “Fine, you want to stay in there?” And she slammed the door on my fingers.

“She did it herself, mom.” Tina’s eyes rolling, while I cried. They didn’t believe her, of course. The nail on my left ring finger turned black before it fell off. I was five, but I remember it. I would come to define her by it, measure every mean thing she’d done.

It used to be tradition. Every year someone would take a picture of Mom and Dad carrying their presents in one tall stack out of the living room. Then it was Mom carrying her presents. And Dad carrying his presents. In separate houses. Now no one at all. I stopped bringing a camera. Until this year, with the new baby and all. My sister’s — not her first one.
In my arms, she smiles up at me. One eye is open, unfocused, wandering around the room. We’re gonna be great pals, I can tell. I’ll be her favorite aunt. Already I relate to her. Unfocused. Wandering.

My sister walks in on us, pulls her daughter from my arms. I suck in a deep breath at the sudden sense of emptiness, cross my arms over my chest and remember Madison, my first niece, the one I’ll never hold again.

I used to take ski lessons. I was good. I was the next Picabo Street. We all knew it. See there? That’s me, in the purple snowsuit and the three sizes too big bright red goggles. Down the slalom run in 37 seconds at seven years old. I told you I was born gifted.

See that window? That’s the lodge. My sister’s in there somewhere. Drinking hot cocoa, getting boys’ phone numbers. She was always on the damn phone. I remember that much. She pretended to hate the snow. She pretended to hate everything. I was the winter girl, snowmen in the yard, our parents gone and Tina locked in her room, the cord trailing out underneath the door.

Sure, those skis are in the basement now, but I’ll take it up again sometime. What do you mean they won’t fit?
I look at my sister, search for recognition. A cigarette hangs from her mouth. I quit a year ago. We look nothing alike. Her hair is dyed maroon, for the moment. Mine is dark as ever. She used to be the pretty one. The cheerleader. I wanted to be her. She never knew it.

She scrutinizes my perfectly shaped ass as she walks by. *God you’re so skinny.* Perfect is what she means. If only she knew.

They’re having a party. We have to stay in our rooms. But first we get daiquiris. Virgin, of course. Tina glares at me. Maybe if I weren’t alive, they’d let her come to the party. That’s what the look says.

I sneak out to go to the bathroom, or get a glass of water. The memory is foggy now. I remember a clown. Two women in one big polka-dot dress. One woman dressed like an Indian with her arm around dad’s shoulders as they saunter down the stairs.

We mix drinks in the kitchen. The baby is asleep. Southern Comfort and a splash of cranberry juice. Mom’s is just the opposite. Tina’s somewhere in between. “So, girls....” We look anywhere but at each other. I start thinking of triangles, how the third element always manages to upset the balance of duality. Mom. Tina. Amy. The third.

“I think I hear the baby,” she mutters, and leaves us alone, together.
"Why ain't you got a boyfriend yet?" She talks this way. Got her GED when she was twenty-nine. She's got to hit the only way she knows how. And even though they all think I'm unflappable, I feel it. I collect moments like this.

*I ain't lookin'.* That's what I want to say. Or, *maybe I'm into chicks. You ever think of that?* But she wouldn't get it. And I love her too much. I'd feel the guilt for days. I'd sweat it out through my pores. I shrug, chug the drink. I over-exaggerate the sound of my satisfaction.

From where we stand in the doorway, I can see the presents in the living room. The shiny paper, the gold ribbon. The perfectly coordinated decorations on the tree. Somewhere in that pile are the misshapen ones that I brought. Probably hiding in the middle, toward the trunk. Somewhere in that pile is the blanket I bought for the baby I still don't believe won't die.

Nineteen and he said, *Let's go to Juarez. We'll drink the dust - we'll eat the worm.* Shifting into third, his tires spewing gravel. But I wanted to get out of the flatlands - the prison of these open spaces. There's nowhere to hide when the horizon stretches on forever.

I didn't see it coming, right under my nose. Sister, why didn't you warn me? You were the first to learn how they can trick you into trust. My blood on his sheets, my
footprints across the landscape for all to see. Broken in and down like a horse. Still wild
inside.

You spilled blood too that year. Your first child lost. A prequel for what was to
come. Don’t underestimate me, sister. We are more connected than you think.

The third drink always goes down smoother than the first. Of course. We’re down to
the dregs of the bottle. Mom is in her bedroom, stroking the child’s cheek. Tina and I
are looking at old photographs. Our baby photos. And the photo of the one we lost, the
one her bad choice in men took from us.

I am stoic. I am the webbing between our fingers as we grip hands, and her tears
soak once more into my sweater, mixing with an earlier stain: her new child’s drooled
milk. I want to say, Part of all of us died that day. I want to tell her how I sometimes
forget to breathe, thinking of that tiny triangular wedge of bone from my niece’s skull
that was all we were able to bury. Shaken until she was blue. Left alone out in the cold.
I want to tell my sister how I sometimes dream of her kneeling in sweats by the snow,
wiping the stone clean with her stubby fingers, nails bitten to the quick.

Look outside, Tina. The frost is forming on the windows. Look at the pictures.

Remember building that snow fort, at our old Colorado home? We were winter girls
once. Always. Remember? We built those shelters and took refuge in them together.
Part Two:
That Slow Struggle Toward Land
two vertical sweat-stains
mar the back of my shirt –
I slip my thumbs under the straps
to allow for a little air.

this is where we walked:
these switchbacks:
where we almost lost our way
packing out after dark, the trail
buried so far under shadows, rotting leaves
that we were forced to construct our own
out of footprints

sometimes I felt so dirty out there
I wanted to steal your Swiss Army
just to scrape off a layer of skin
and when the icicles hung
from the corners of our tent

I began to wonder who we were:
two figures huddled
in a revolt against a landslide
loosening for some time now

don’t think I didn’t see you : you
who professed the wonders of the pinecone
the whole car ride down : 3 squares
of your secret stash of Charmin
flapping so humanly in the breeze
Deadpoint

We’re on a roof in summer, cans of Coors in hand.

“You do what?” I ask, tilting my head to peer at him through the darkness. My bare feet are braced against the rough shingles, bare knees poking through the holes in my jeans.

“I climb.” He stands up, starts to walk along the pointed edge just above where I sit on the pitch. He spins around 180 degrees on the ball of one foot and I gasp audibly, not realizing I have only just begun to witness his talent for balancing.

A huge grin lights his face, teeth in straight white rows.

“I won’t fall,” he says. “And even if I did, it’s only, like, fifteen feet.”

He reaches his hand out to help me up and I think about those fifteen feet. That long fall towards solid ground. Even the five inches between our fingers is a distance I’m not sure I want to risk.

A few days later I find myself standing inside a converted racquetball court. In my hands I hold 150 feet of dynamic rope. Andrew is teaching me how to belay. How to tie a figure eight knot (he does this like a cowboy – tossing the rope into the air) and then thread the rope through my palms as if someone were on the other end. Someone whose life I’d be responsible for.
These past months, I’ve barely been able to roll out of bed in time to pour food into the cat’s dish and make it to work on time. Responsibility isn’t my strong suit, but I’m willing to give this a shot. I’ll try anything if it will mean that things will change. I haven’t done much physical activity since high school gym six years ago, but what the hell.

“Feed all that line through,” he says. The rope beginning to coil and knot on the spongy floor at my feet.

“And when I’m finished?” I look up at him where he hangs by one hand off of a large plastic horn attached to the climbing wall.

“Then you do it again.” Andrew proceeds to move in what seems like a preordained sequence: his taut forearms pulling, his feet (which are squeezed into shoes two sizes too small) delicately balancing on small pieces of plastic called “jibs.” Each movement is fluid, controlled. He glides up the twenty feet of textured concrete and back down, traverses left a few inches, then starts up again. He looks like he’s dancing. Watching him, hands moving without me being aware of them, I’m holding the slightly frayed tail of faded purple rope before I know it.

Not wanting to interrupt, I try to tie the knot the way he does it. I toss and twirl it like a lasso, but wind up with rope coiled around my wrist. His laugh floats down from somewhere above me.
“Hey,” he calls softly. He uses this word like Hawaiians use “aloha,” or so I imagine. It means everything and nothing at the same time. My cheeks flush a soft pink.

“You’ll get it,” he says, nimbly descending towards me. As if it were never a question. As if life held no questions, only answers. I look up at his odd proportions: his arms longer than they should be, his broad shoulders and far too narrow waist. I want so much to believe him. I unravel myself, brush my hair out of my face, and prepare to start again.

The weeks pass at the gym. Andrew and I go there, together, all three summer weeknights that it’s open. I am in training. He has become my coach and my lover, and I revel in this new motivation. For once I am fighting gravity, not simply letting it pull me down. For once I recognize the strong, steady pulse underneath my thin skin as my own.

We take our first outdoor climbing trip to Monticello, Iowa. A few limestone bluffs await us: moss covered, dirty and navigable. I have never been camping, outside of a friend’s backyard in junior high. My family preferred hotels, or at the very least, cabins. I have never used a toilet that didn’t flush.

Andrew warns me about “stinging nettles,” shows me jewelweed in case I forget. He sets up our tent in under two minutes, too little time for me to watch and learn. I have been invited along but I can see he isn’t waiting for me to catch up. He flashes up
the routes before the ropes are set. Waits for the other trip leaders to take the long way
around and meet him at the top to set the anchors.

Soon I find myself twenty feet up a limestone bluff. My fingers are deep inside
pockets in the rock, knuckles clenched to keep from losing my grip since there’s so much
moss and dirt on the surface. My right foot keeps losing its hold, and then my right hand
lets go, too. I swing out, one half of my body still desperately hanging onto the wall.
There’s a rope attached to me, sure, but that’s easy to forget, looking down.

Before I know it, Andrew is beside me. No rope, just his long limbs securely and
easily ascending the rock face. He grins, shakes the hair out of his eyes. “Hey,” he says
softly.

My body is tense and I am glaring at him. I look like a fool and he’s only made it
worse. Look how agile I am, he seems to be saying. How confident. How secure. He
points out which hold I should reach for next, shows me an easy sequence to the top. But
I’m no longer listening. I let go, prop my feet against the wall, and point toward the
ground with my right index finger, signaling the belayer to lower me. Andrew tries to
intervene, but I shake my head, yell at the poor boy stuck down there holding me up,
“Just let me off this goddamn thing!”

Later that afternoon, once Andrew is around the corner, climbing the harder
routes with the rest of the trip leaders, I do fine. Once I am alone with the rest of the
beginners, no one’s eyes judging me, everyone letting each other climb in silence
punctuated by a few outbursts of encouragement, I make it to the top twice.

That night, we zip our sleeping bags together to form one big cocoon. His kisses
are his apologies. I rest my head in the sunken hollow in his chest. This strange
depression he’s had since birth. *My cereal bowl*, he calls it. And my head fits there
perfectly during the quiet breathing of the aftermath. But I’ve never been able to sleep
that way. Once he starts to snore, lightly and evenly, I slide my naked skin off of his and
curl up with my back to him. I have always been content with only my own arm to
support my head in the night.

I tended to forget that Andrew was a summer romance. That perhaps our hands slid so
easily together because they were already slick with sweat. The intensity and singularity
of purpose that I focused on Andrew, he seemed to absorb and turn outward to use on
each route he ascended. Soon, the only way we were connected was when one of us was
attached to either end of a rope. But all the goals got confused. Was it Andrew waiting
at the top of the rock or a part of myself I had yet to claim?

Being five-foot-three has its advantages when it comes to rock climbing. My weight is
centered on my small frame, so I can balance easily. My small feet can grip a half-inch
ledge without much effort. But on more difficult routes, there is only one correct sequence of holds to the top.

The key to climbing, usually, is to make every move dynamic. In one fluid motion your body tenses. It moves vertically, horizontally, or diagonally to make the next hold. When this happens successfully — your arm reaching smoothly upwards, fingertips landing, gripping, “sticking” the hold at the point of least resistance — this is called “deadpointing.” It is a moment of connection with the rock in which the primal and the habitual even out their struggle. A moment in which your body suddenly remembers where it came from before it sets off again to find a new place to belong.

Most often, however, your muscles are tired, shaky, uncooperative. Your calves grow weak, and you get “Elvis leg” — so named because of the way it shakes uncontrollably as your toes desperately grip the hold. Your arms grasp at the hold, rather than deadpointing it. Your fingers slip, your triceps contract, and you flail at it again, barely hanging on. Or your foot slips off of its delicate perch and you swing out from the wall — palms and soles out in front of your body to keep your fragile skin from scraping against the sharp granite, sandstone, whatever. If you are climbing on lead, you take what they call a “whippet” and fall twice as far as you have climbed since setting your last placement. Sometimes you fall headfirst, clutching at the rope to right yourself, forgetting all you have learned about safety.
On the wall, it's you and your core instincts, and, tentatively, the person on belay. Up there, you are focused or dead. Your eyes scanning ahead to find the next pocket, the next logical move. It's a little like chess, but with higher stakes. Move in the wrong sequence, and you end up ten feet to the left of the route with nowhere to go but back down. You must retrace your steps, stare at the rock awhile, figure out what went wrong, and try again. Or give up and go home. Because even though it may not feel like it, it's always a choice. It's a battle with your own strength, your own wits. And because every body type is different, no one can solve the puzzle but you. You must know yourself well enough if you want to overcome the challenges of gravity – to go over the barrier nature created in your wake, instead of turning around.

A few months after my first outdoor climbing trip, I stand and pace a stone slab, high on a plateau in the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas. My tongue is gritty from the makeshift coffee I made with a plastic French press. It tastes of weak water and instant Tang. I crouch under an outcropping of rock, out of the fierce, cold wind of the November morning. No one else in the camp stirs. They huddle inside their sleeping bags, surrounded by stuffed-in clothes. It's twenty degrees cooler than we had anticipated. Our water supply is frozen, our spirits still and somber.

It's the first trip I have taken since Andrew left, and I have gone five days without a shower, without a decent conversation. I huddle in a mummy bag at night with no
sleeping pad, my tiny tent pitched on a slope of ground covered in rotting leaves. My feet push against a rock that protrudes through the tent floor to keep myself from sliding to the bottom of its kite-shaped interior. Freezing rain pelts the roof inches above my head, as the tent stakes slowly ease their way out of the cold soil.

We are camping at a site called Sam’s Throne. Named after a man who went crazy in 1843 after his sister went missing. Trapper turned preacher, he stood and shouted: *The Injuns took her, and I’ll scalp every last one of ’em. I’ll stalk the souls of the ones who get away. I’ll live for a thousand years!* Or so the legend goes. From where I sit, huddled, with the rust brown liquid already gone cold, I can see the spire where he stood. I can hear his voice echoing out among the acres of firs and maples in hibernation, his followers looking up at him with the same trusting eyes that I turned toward Andrew those short months ago.

Landscape affects everyone differently, I have realized. For most of the trip members, this place has turned us inward. The cold, sparse landscape has turned us into shells of our former selves. Our hands slide across the rope as if no longer part of our bodies as we hunch under down jackets on belay. Our vacant eyes vaguely watch the person whose life we are responsible for. But for a few, like Sam and Andrew, the desolation awakens hidden energy – as if they could warm the cold rock, awaken the sleeping trees, and bring the missing home with the heat of their sudden hearts.
But Andrew is gone. I have come to count him among the missing. As I stand, again, atop the plateau, I want to join Sam’s ghost, haunting these hills, searching for the part of myself that he took with him. Because, after all, we never really mourn the lost—only the part of ourselves we have yet to understand that they carried away without knowing it.

No one really thought I’d keep climbing after Andrew left. After he disappeared without a note or a phone call. I arrive at the wall with a smile and a wave and their eyebrows lift just slightly. Up and down the routes I go, following in the footsteps he made there before me. Often, I feel like a pretender, a fool. It’s difficult to make it up that wall, any wall, without picturing Andrew’s fluid movements, his sure and steady form.

But each time I touch the ceiling at the top, I still feel that small ounce of elation at having accomplished something. That shared sensation, the knowing looks we all give each other after “sending” a route. It’s what keeps us together. It’s a place where we keep a communal CD pile, where even if every face is new or strange, I know one of them will readily be my partner for a few hours, encourage me on my quest to the top no matter how easy or difficult it proves to be.

At a rock wall, indoors or out, I feel part of a common tribe. Daniel Quinn, author of the bestselling novel *Ishmael* and pioneer of an idea called New Tribalism, says in his new work, *Beyond Civilization*: “The important thing to see is that we were not
'giving up' something by being tribal. We were *getting* something by being tribal—something that would have been out of reach otherwise.” In climbing, there is literally *something that is out of reach*. The top of the route, or in mountaineering: the peak of the mountain. The pioneers of mountaineering and rock climbing have put in place a system. A set of rules that loosely guide the members of the tribe along.

It always shocks the newcomers when a stranger shows up alone with his harness and a pair of climbing shoes. When he doesn't hesitate to ask if he can use our anchors, our ropes. How does he know it's safe? Because we are a tribe, a community. Because we have realized that as an individual, one can only make it so far.

It's true that Andrew may be forever out of my reach. But the safety net he put in place underneath me will never go away. I tie the figure eight knot through the front loop of my harness with confidence. I tug on it to make sure the connection is secure. I place my foot in a hole in the limestone bluff.

"On rock!" I call out to my tribe.

"Rock on!" they reply.
Dreaming in Color

Undissolved powder swirls on the surface of my hot chocolate like galaxies, then coalesces around the spoon at rest -

but mine is only an inadvertent art.
From the living room I hear your pencil lead drag across the canvas like claws.

I imagine your not quite black strokes as shadows against the off-white fibers - like diesel deposits on week-old street side snow.

Later, when you add the color, the house will be quiet. I'll be asleep, the cats curled around my feet in lazy whorls. Hours later,

you'll shuffle down the long twenty feet of carpet to our room, to end your day as mine begins. Fuchsia under your fingernails.

And I'll wake to remember my first lover, how he asked, *do you dream in color or black and white?* How only now do I know the answer.
Phone Calls From Prison

Mom has just carved the turkey and my sister has just lowered her awkward pregnant body onto a chair at the dining room table when the phone rings. I am in the kitchen, licking the cranberry sauce off of my index finger, which I have just removed from the circle of sticky gelatin. But I still manage to get to the phone first. The familiar recording reaches my ear. Will you accept the charges? I hang up quickly, before Mom can get suspicious, but she's already eyeing me.

Tina chimes in first. “Who was that? Your boyfriend?”

I roll my eyes. We're too old for these games.

“Tina,” I say, “he’d call my cell phone.” That is, if I had a boyfriend. “It was no one. Telemarketers.” But I was always a terrible liar.

Mom sets the large serrated blade down on the platter next to the turkey. She stares at me. “It was him again, wasn’t it? I told you he tried to call the other day, before you got here. Would you please write him and tell him you don’t want to talk to him? Tell him to leave us alone.”

I want to explain to her, again, how I threw all the letters away three years ago when I moved back to Iowa. Remind her that she threw away the ones that came to her house since. Instead I reassure her.

“Mom, I’ll contact him somehow, ok? I’m looking into it.”
The fingers of my right hand are still sticky with cranberry. Bits of red have appeared on the white handset of Mom's cordless. I see them there while I try to look anywhere but into her eyes. I have yet to shoulder this burden. I've only been adjusting the weight of it all these years.

_Somewhere in a box in Mom's attic or underneath my bed there's a picture of me in a green velvet dress. A Renaissance pattern with long sleeves, a braided maroon and silver belt with tassels. Senior prom. I wanted to be Lady Guinevere, or a lady in waiting. If you discount the steel-toed Doc Marten combat boots underneath. Next to me is a tall young man with ruddy cheeks and curly brown hair. His face is boyish, mischievous. He wears an impish grin that radiates there above the black tux, a dimple in his left cheek. I am on his arm. My smile is coy and uncertain._

Brian wasn't my boyfriend. He was my guardian, my protector, the one whose back I followed through the dark adolescent nights. He went to college with my high school boyfriend, Jeff. There was a group of them that bonded like family. And when Jeff moved away, I graduated from high school and drove myself to Missouri to take his place. His family became my family. _Welcome, my daughter_, they told me. _Hello, little sister_, they said.
There were six of us that became inseparable. Mara, Greg, Phil, Travis, Brian, Amy. And Thomas, the storyteller, who occasionally wandered in our midst. We needed his voice to guide us through the night. The five of them did anyway. While the dice rolled, I sat at the corner of the table and watched. I admired the way Brian mediated the conflicts in the game. I followed every move of the thief he chose as his character in *Dungeons and Dragons*. And after a while, I studied how the grins started at the corners of his mouth and slowly crept upwards until one side would shoot up faster than the other and send a glint into his blue eyes.

The "family" called him *Loki*. In Norse mythology he is the trickster, the shape changer, the killer of Balder, the god of light. Yet he is also known as the one who crosses boundaries, sometimes even becomes the boundary himself. He is often depicted as the misunderstood God, synonymous with Anansi the spider of West African lore. He has the ability to simultaneously charm and repulse everyone he comes in contact with.

_Somewhere in a red box in the attic or the storage closet or the corner underneath my bed there's a dried white corsage that I haven't touched in years. Perhaps the petals have all fallen off now, sweetening and scenting the contents of the box. Certainly they have browned and become brittle. And the straight pin stuck through the stem of it has started to rust, the pearl on the end of it chipped to reveal the gray plastic underneath._
Fast forward to Travis' apartment, some night when we weren't playing games. Not the kind with books and rules and eight-sided dice anyway. Perhaps we were playing "asshole" or some other drinking game. Travis was in his kitchen, sitting in the dark on a metal folding chair. When I stepped into the room to pour another Jack and Coke he held a red candle in his right hand and dripped the wax onto the underside of his left forearm. His jaw was set. The muscles in his cheek barely twitched. His eyes were unfocused. I came and went undetected.

When I returned with my drink to the living room, I stood with my back to the wall and then slid down, stared into the dark liquid. Mara, the only person I've ever known to be allergic to alcohol, sat cross legged on the floor not far from me, glaring at her too-drunk boyfriend where he lay with his long head of hair in her lap. Thomas was playing video games. Brian was on the porch with Phil smoking a joint.

When he came inside, I looked up at him. His eyes searched my face. I'd been avoiding eye contact all night. He knew I knew. He was ashamed. I quickly glanced away, but he pulled the drink from my hands, dumped it out in the kitchen. I followed him out the door while Travis grinned strangely at us, the wax having cooled into a dull sheen on his arm.

*Somewhere in a box in a drawer under my metal dorm room bed, there's a folded square of white paper. A printout of an email I received from Jeff. There are two paragraphs on*
the page: typed words of warning and a cut-and-pasted article from the Nodaway News, dated a little over a year before I received it. A crime was committed, the culprits still at large. The page has clearly been crumpled and smoothed out, the ink smudged from moisture that may have been tears.

It was a short walk back to campus but Brian found a back way to make it longer. If I returned to that town, I’m sure I couldn’t retrace it. I seem to remember brick and vine, and large looming shadows. I remember reaching the dock at the small pond, hanging our feet over the edge of it. The small pool of light on the murky green water, my boots threatening to pull my small body down into it.

Brian’s eyes were sodden with tears. They were shape changer’s eyes. Swimming in and out of focus. Changing colors from blue to green to grey. He choked up words, spit them out like hairballs. I tried not to look, to stare straight ahead. I tried to deny the natural fact of periphery.

The October night was cool. I wanted a sweater. I wanted to listen to that song Brian always played for me when he deejayed at the college radio station. Everything’s going to be alright, rock-a-bye. But I could only rock myself back and forth on the dock, trying to tune out the confirmation of the rumor, to veer my life away from another moment in which everything would change but it was too late. The moment had already passed.
Her name was Gracie Hixon. She was sixty-six years old. She had a daughter, if I remember right, a husband called Clyde: Sixty-six and still working. Late nights at the Stop-N-Go. They must have been just scraping by. Perhaps her husband received disability, social security. Perhaps she had been a housewife and accrued no retirement fund of her own.

That night, from what I gather, the three boys were experimenting with cocaine. Travis, Brian, Phil. For two of them, anyway, it was a new experience, some excitement in that small Missouri town. Travis wanted to stop, needed something out of the trunk, pulled out a shotgun Brian could see in the rearview mirror. Brian frozen in the front seat while the other two went inside, went inside and came back out with enough money for a night's drinking anyway, Brian breathing again because it was OK, no one was hurt and then Travis halting in mid-motion as he opened the passenger door saying *Wait, she saw my face. She saw my face.*

*What do gunshots sound like? What does an old woman's face look like after it's hit with a 12 gauge from ten inches away? How loud was the silence after the shot? How loud is it still?*
Brian, Travis, Phil and I went to a movie. And a couple of girls from my dorm floor. I had hooked them up with the boys before I knew what I was getting them into. We drove the hour and a half to Kansas City to see it. John Carpenter's *Vampires*. We laughed at the fact that John Carpenter wrote the score, knowing we should have walked out then. But we stayed, of course. Through the whole terrible thing.

On the way home, on some twisted impulse, Phil drove us past the site. There were bars on the windows now, a security camera scanning the small paved lot.

"Anybody need anything?" he asked. Melissa and Jenny shook their heads, still laughing at some absurd scene. Oblivious to the silence of the rest of us in the car.

Fast forward to those two poor girls sitting on a picnic bench on the sloped hill behind the dorms. Staring through blurred eyes at the field where we played intramural soccer. Their red hair bright in the early morning sun, their hands clasped like sisters. Across the bench from them my hands were folded in my lap for I was no longer one of them. I had known before the arrests were made. I had introduced them to killers.

Yet we stuck together for a little while. We snuck around the dormitories like thieves, pulling things from the boys' rooms before the cops could get them. The books on role-playing, the vampire movies, any music that might prove questionable. We wanted to spare the two boys who hadn't pulled the trigger. From the media, from any
added weight. And of course, we were mostly protecting ourselves. Eighteen and fresh in the world, what else was there to do?

*Somewhere in a box is a photo of two faces: Brian and I, close up, cheek to cheek. My sunglasses are resting on top of my dark hair, and I am looking up at him. Loki is grinning for the lens, for the imprint on the film he knows he will make: those two charming dimples, those incorrigible curls. Just before that night on the dock I had thought I had arrived at the beginning of something. It was Halloween and it was our first night together. But it was also one of the last. Two weeks later the cops pulled him from class and his mouth was already halfway open before he was through the doorway, those words choked back on the dock now ready to spill over again and again until he could absolve himself of them. I haven't spoken to him in seven years, but I'm trying to fill in the blanks. I'm trying to do what I can with the words I have been given because this is not my story.*
Quimby St.

I am sitting in a park in Portland
watching children play in a fountain.
Many of them are half-naked;
one of them is completely nude
and shakes his small wet bottom
in the shaded summer air.
The picnic table is rotting and the cracks
are filled with moss. At my feet
a dog's lost tennis ball has come to rest,
dried slobber still visible on its surface.

I realize that these details
won't add up to anything whole,
but I want to record them anyway.
I want to grab a yellow apple
from that tree by the sidewalk
because I know it's the last thing from logical
and yet it will still taste good.

My father is dying. I am going home
to a man who does not love me,
who will sit in silence at the kitchen table
while I call my father, while I throw
the used apple core in the trash.
Clouds Like Headlines

He tells me he used to be an artist, a potter, and I can almost see his hands at the wheel: his palms moist with clay, his fingers wavering in a gentle dance. I love him for it, but I don’t know where any of this will lead. Here in Oregon, everything seems possible, but almost nothing is actual. The firm soil of the trail in Macleay Park a mile from Matt’s house. The moist moss. The oxygen-rich air.

On the record player Tom Waits is singing the blues. The turntable spins like a potter’s wheel. The music molds my thoughts like his hands once molded clay. A million questions rise to the tip of my tongue but I stay silent. I want to know, though, the color of the clay, the shapes that emerged from long hours of passionate production. I want to know how the brain that once conceived of the slender neck of a vase now calculates for hours on end. Solves other people’s problems instead of his own.

I look around the apartment at all of his functional furniture: the clean lines of the black couch perched on squat metal legs. The perfect right angles that every piece contains. Not a single round object adorns the room. Not even a clock on the wall or a curved vase with flowers in it to brighten the stark empty walls. The only circular items are the records, hidden inside their squares of cardboard protection. And the lonely black one spinning away as I sit and stare into space.
So come on and swallow me, don't follow me/ I'm trav'lin' alone/ Blue water's my daughter/ 'n I'm gonna skip like a stone...

In the kitchen, Matt is making pancakes. It seems to me a huge step for someone who once lived out of the bed of his truck. A whole summer spent in the back of a red Tacoma, sleeping on a shelf. This domestic side of him is one I haven't seen. The records only have two, but he has multitudes. And I wonder if, looking into the batter, he can already see the perfect round shape that will emerge – its slightly ruffled edges. If he can envision the thickness, the weight of it on his plate like I envision the shape of his stomach beneath his shirt and how it would feel so firm against the gentle slope of my own skin. And how his hands could mold me into the shape I know I can be, that I am struggling so hard to become. Could spin out a structure for the skin that waits for me to step into it.

I hear a plate clink down and I rise, follow my nostrils towards the scent of blueberries and strong coffee. I sit down across from him, where he's already started eating, his eyes scanning the paper, and I pick up the white mug of fresh coffee, press it to my palms to let the warmth soak in. The cool northwest air blows in through the open windows, freshening, awakening the apartment. But I put the mug down after only one sip because I know there's only so much I can hold in my hands.
I was thirteen when I first visited the Atlantic. I stood on the shore in Camden, Maine, and watched the sun slowly burn off the field of fog that had descended during the night. My feet were rooted but a part of me dove into her gray waters and still lives there, exploring. There's a photo of my face, hair blown across my pale cheeks by the wind, a dead seal purple and rotting on the beach behind me as I squint at the lens, bits of sand lodged in my eyelashes.

I had visions of the posters that hung on the beige walls of my biology classroom. Those metamorphosing forms in their slow struggle towards land. Standing there I felt something calling me back, something that still calls, the black water beckoning me to return to my first home.

Shortly thereafter I decided I wanted to be a marine biologist. I watched this documentary on orcas until I'd memorized the narration. The gravelly voice rising and falling in rhythm with the black fins following the waves. That worn out video dad bought for me in the gift shop at Sea World. I wanted to run my fingers over the rubbery skin of a whale. I was sure I'd find answers there.

Matt leaves for work, but he's left me a set of keys. I'm free to come and go as if this place were my own. I spin the record again, and this time spin with it, barefoot on the
hardwood floors. *The fog’s lifting, the sand’s shifting, and I’m drifting on out/ Old Captain Ahab ain’t got nothin’ on me now...*

I pull on shorts, a tank top, running shoes. I tie the two keys to the drawstring at my waist. I grab the maps from the coffee table where Matt left them for me last night, after leaning so close to show me the trail I could smell salvation on his skin. But it isn’t mine to have. He found his own way, alone. Through his silent stares he’s trying to tell me that I should do that, too.

I strap a water bottle to my wrist and take off down the street. I pass the Patisserie he told me about, where the people “pretend they’re European.” And it’s true the patrons look so relaxed and satisfied. Mugs of steaming lattes, the frosting on éclairs seeming to shine in the sun.

I walk past the park where I sat yesterday reading poetry. Where I watched the families with their children spread out on blankets. A man carried his injured young daughter from the car, her leg in a cast, while his wife carried the crutches. A small boy who had just emerged from the fountain, stood patiently while his mother undressed him and then shook the water onto her as if he were a dog – his bare bottom twisting while everyone laughed.

I pass “For Rent” and “For Sale” signs. And the single vacant lot in the neighborhood. That small landscape of possibility. My mind latches onto the image of a house rising up from the embers of my life thus far and planting itself here. Of Matt in
the kitchen making pancakes, of a small boy shaking his bottom while the record player spins and spins.

But although it is my destiny to create endless narrations, I cannot make them come true. This naked toddler, I can give him a name. I can cull him from the park and keep him on a page. I can tousle his hair and smile at Matt and let the word "son" rise to my lips. But the image ends when the ink runs out. I cannot make any of it live. I can make up an ending to belie my beginnings, but as I try to reach it, the middle inevitably grows longer.

I am not a strong swimmer. I had the obligatory two years of lessons, and after that I went to the pool solely to splash and play around. My father lived in California, by the ocean, but he didn't own a boat. He's no sailor, and when he fished, it was always on the safety of a landlocked lake. Not even the rush of rivers caught his attention. But we went to the beach often, because that's what Californians did. The parents lay on the beach with books or lovers and the children ran headlong into the water, throwing their small bodies into the force of the waves, relaxing as the water carried them home.

But I always had a different sense of it all. I'd beg to go when it was cloudy, when the crowds were thin or nonexistent. I'd wander along the shore, letting the foam settle over my toes, and stand there entranced. I'd imagine my heart beating in some primal
rhythm with the tides, imagine it speaking to me in a language I knew but could not, can
not articulate.

My stepmother, who also has a great affinity with the ocean, must have thought I
wasn't enjoying myself. I must have looked so sullen, so lonely, wandering along the
waterline, stopping occasionally to examine a shell or small crab. In reality, though, I
was listening. I was trying to tune into a frequency I had never heard but knew,
instinctively, was there. The waves did not want to push my small body gently toward
I'd read. Those waves, they wanted to pull me, all of us, home. They wanted to bring us
closer to the center we have come so far from, now.

When I reach the park, I check the map at the entrance to make sure I have come to the
right trail. The Wildwood Trail stretches 27 miles throughout Macleay and Forest Parks,
winds through the hillsides in the heart of the city. At the top of one switch-backed
section of the trail is the Pittock Mansion. A mansion with miles of old-growth forest as
its former residents' backyard. But no one resides there now. It is a tourist attraction, a
façade. Just like these words.

My feet are hitting the ground but I detect no rhythm in the sound. I focus
instead on my breath, on keeping my mouth closed as long as possible, nostrils flaring to
their limits. I reach an old stone house and slow. The antithesis of the Pittock Mansion.
This "house" is one wall of an A-frame, built of mortared gray stone. Moss-covered stairs lead up to a landing. Whether anyone ever lived here, or if this too, is for tourists, I can't say. I walk around in it, peer through the arched window, and then continue on. But I never make it to the Mansion. I left the map at home, and when I finally think I've reached it, I end up staring instead at a housing addition, some condos that all look the same.

Matt laughs when I tell him I couldn't find the Mansion. The biggest house in the hills. But then again one can't see over the trees. We climb into the Tacoma and he drives me up there. Braces his truck carefully against a guardrail because the emergency brake has gone out. We don't enter the Mansion, though. Something about it bothers me. The sandstone walls surrounding the circular interior, the two turrets on either side of the large bay window. Supposedly the hallways radiate out from the central staircase like spokes on a wheel. There are tales of the place being haunted, but everyone says they are happy ghosts. The Pittocks had six children and eighteen grandchildren. Henry came from Pennsylvania, penniless at age nineteen. Georgiana came from Keokuk, Iowa — in the opposite corner of the state from my hometown. I can't bring myself to look at empty rooms where a happy family once resided.

Instead we walk around the lawn. A group of artists has set up easels, situated them so they can overlook the city. I watch their fingers grip small pieces of chalk, or
charcoal or brushes. I look at Matt’s hands and try to detect a twitch, a longing. Because I want him to long for something, even if it isn’t for me.

I place my hands on the split rail fence edging the property. The style of it seems out of place. I’d expect white picket, or tall posts with elegant wire strung between. This fence reminds me that Oregon hasn’t forgotten its place in the West. While I’ve always seen this city as distinctive, a Shangri-La of sorts, it occurs to me now that while it may have risen above its roots, it has not forgotten them.

Portland prides itself on being at the frontier of change in America: it is the greenest city in terms of politics and environmentalism and Cycling magazine ranked it “No.1 cycling city in America.” The park I just jogged through is the largest urban wilderness in the country. And yet, when I took a carriage tour through downtown, our guide pointed out two adjoining parks that less than fifty years ago were segregated by gender. She also pointed out that while Portland boasts the largest urban park, it also has the smallest: it measures two feet across and holds a few flowers.

I turn to smile at Matt and hoist myself up onto the top rail of the fence like I used to as a child in Colorado. My small hands holding out a round red apple for the neighbors’ horses. While jogging earlier I had passed by an apple tree growing so incongruously in the space between the sidewalk and the street. The fruit was yellow, ripe, ready to eat. I picked one and devoured it on the way back to Matt’s and that is what I think of, now, as I hand Matt my camera to immortalize this moment: a woman
alone in the frame, legs dangling off a fence. A smile caused by a stolen moment that I have kept all to myself.
Spectral

I can't fathom how the artists do it:
create distance on a two-dimensional plane.

I am drinking tea made from silver needles
I am staring at a painted path into the green woods,

fighting the urge to get up and walk right into it.
I have been sitting too long sipping tea

and my surroundings have become too well defined.
In the painting, the leaves of the trees

are fading from green to yellow:
backwards through the spectrum.

And it occurs to me that I create distance, too,
with the black ink of this pen on this page.

Sometimes, they are distances
I do not want to have traveled.

They are too bold in their strokes, too heartbreaking
in the convergence of all colors into one.

I want to step into the painting.
I want to keep walking until I reach white.