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Petals and Mortar

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Petals and Mortar

Amanda Rose Bramley

An Abstract presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Lindenwood University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Masters of Fine Arts in Writing 2010.

Abstract

The stories in this collection focus on the little, almost insignificant symbols that appear in our daily lives. People, in general, don't notice how certain objects gravitate toward us. The symbols in my life and in my writing appear in places and forms unexpected: a bird outside of a windowsill, flowers that grow by themselves in our backyards, a scarf purchased at a discount store, domino tiles in a common game. How easy it is to take pieces of our lives for granted. They can, for many, hold an almost transcendental power. They provide landmarks for the steps we choose to take and the parts of our paths which we cannot control.

As humans in a free society, we can choose who we marry. But we do not always decide how marriages change, how they turn out. We cannot decide who our parents and siblings are, nor can we control how much effect these people will have on our identities. The stories in my thesis, along with simple forms of symbolism, center around the people who make up who we are as an individual. The characters are shaped by the people in their lives.

We all have choices, objects, people, and unpredictable circumstances that remain in our past and shape our future. These stories center around characters and families who search for an understanding, who are trying to make sense of it all, who are trying to reconcile with what they can and cannot control.

Petals and Mortar

Amanda Rose Bramley

A Culminating Project presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Lindenwood University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Masters of Fine Arts in Writing 2010.

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Introduction

I don't know when I first fell in love with words or with ink or with the power of language and literature, but I know it happened early. Not too long ago, I was visiting my grandparents and my grandmother handed me a packet of yellowed paper.

"Look what I found," she said.

What she placed in my lap was a story I wrote when I was about eight years old. Unlike most children, the pieces of paper did not focus on the drawings or the colors, but on the words. There were characters, made up of animals such as squirrels, and a plot in which the protagonist furry rodent ran away from home. Overall, the piece of writing was a bit cliché, but still impressive for someone so young. What's even more interesting, is that the writing was not an assignment for school. I wrote the story for myself. I did it because I wanted to write. The need to compose, the inspiration to put words on paper in a creative way was present in my personality before I even really knew or understood what it was, what it is.

In high school, I took the only creative writing classes that were offered twice each. I started keeping not only a journal of writings, but a log, a true diary. These calendar books appear briefly in my story, "In Between." They consist of a page for each day of the year, labeled with the date at the top. Each night, before

bed, like a ritual or a spiritual calling, perhaps even a form of prayer, I would describe all of the day's events in marker in a list form. I did this for years. I wanted to capture every moment of life: the real life I live and the imaginary ones I can't help but create.

I also thought that if I ever needed material for a story or for a personal essay, I could always use those calendar books for ideas. I never did, though. I never went back to use the bits of my life for my writings. The parts of my life that incorporate themselves into my fiction and personal essays are events and details so minor in comparison to the overall day, that they would never have made it into my books. Perhaps that is one of the reasons I stopped keeping them.

In my late teens, I started collecting books about writing. Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones* was a gift from my aunt that began a library's worth of a collection. Goldberg talked about "seed books." She suggested carrying around little notebooks where ideas can be jotted down at any time. Such ideas can "grow" and "sprout" into bigger pieces of writing. I still have my seed books from my high school years. As a high school teacher of creative writing, I advise my own students to keep seed books.

My seed books are just as important as my calendar books, but are completely different in structure. My seed books may have a song lyric written down, one that remained stuck in my head. The juxtaposition of words that would normally not appear together appear throughout these seed books. Under each dated item, I find poetic lines, ideas for characters, something I was thinking at that specific moment in time. I still keep seed books. I carry one with me in my

work bag or lunch bag or purse, wherever I go. It's instant writing or writing something short at an y time during the day.

Looking back at my ideas in seed books, my calendar book of days, my old journals, and my old stories, I get to look at my life as an outsider. I get to experience days and moments I have lived, whether in reality or in my imagination. I can have as many personas as I'd like. Maybe that's one of the reasons I have no choice but to write.

I have to write. It's hard to explain, but it has always been a part of who I am, the way I'm allergic to penicillin or the fact that I have never (and will never) like the taste of bananas. It's an urge I cannot control.

Fictional stories interest me because I get to create a world, the world the way I see it. I look for symbols and meanings in my life and I tend to write stories that are heavy in metaphorical meaning , like in my story, "Cereus Things" for example. It helps me make sense of the craziness in which I live.

I try to create characters that are both a lot like me and also a lot different from me. What if I wanted to be painter or a mother or a person with a big secret? In fiction, "I" can be all those people. I can experience lives that I don't have time to experience or I don't want to experience in real life.

Sometimes I'm inspired by someone who bothers me or someone I can't understand. There's a woman I used to work with who I did not get along with. Just the sight of her appearance would put me in a defensive, angry mood. I may want to make a point about people like her, about how evil they are and pretentious. If so, I'll write a story from her perspective. Or I may use her for the

inspiration of a character in one of my stories like the sister in "What Should Not Be Touched." The writing may turn into something worth working on, maybe not. Sometimes I just need to feel the pen move across the cotton of paper. Sometimes I just need to see letters and words made tangible by my hand.

I write about the "things" that stand out in my life because I want them to stand out to other people. I want to be heard. For example, I was experiencing a difficult time when a lot of my friends were/are getting pregnant and starting families. Even though I'm happily married and a thirty-something female, I have no desire to have children at least not right now…or for awhile. To me, this choice seems weird. I didn't and I don't understand why I don't want what such a great number of women want. So I wrote a story about it, about a woman who experiences emotions that she, as well as the people around her, can't figure out.

In the same way that people change, the story changed. It became something that I wasn't expecting. The narrator character changed. Her inner conflict changed dramatically from my first draft until the draft I have included in my thesis. I wasn't planning that change in her. She evolved as the drafts did.

I surprised myself by the way my story changed. I see myself reflected in my writing, the same way that looking at my seed books at calendar books are like reading the life of someone else. I also make choices in my life that I would not expect. These types of surprises happen in many times. I'm sure I'm not the only one. I think each person is capable of doing things and making decisions that we wouldn't normally expect. In this way, I hope my audience can find some trait in a character or some event in which they can connect.

I look for many symbols in my life. It's my only form of something other-worldly or spiritual other than writing, because writing is a very out-of-body, spiritual act for me. When I was having my strange emotions about not wanting to be a mother, a bird made its nest outside of my bedroom window. It was April and I really wanted to open the window to feel the spring air. But, at the same time, I didn't want to open the window and destroy the bird's nest.

I felt trapped. This bird was protecting her eggs, her soon-to-be children. She had the quality, the want, the desire that I did not. The fact that I don't want children, that a bunch of my friends are having them, that there was this bird outside my window, it all seemed connected to me. So I wrote a story, and in a sense, the simple object in my life that I may have overlooked gave a different type of birth: to prose. It was also very symbolic that on the day I finished my first draft of "Presence of Zenaida Macroura on Mourning Houses," my bird and her three children were gone. The nest sat empty and I could open the window. It may be a coincidence. I could believe that it is, a coincidence. But I choose to see the simple connection of the empty nest and my first draft being complete as a small sign. It does not make sense even to me, but it is something I believe.

Fiction is an outlet for all that does and does not make sense in the reality we are forced to live. The connections between things in my life like the bird and my issue with societal pressures of being pregnant, are what make me want to write. I want to *show* these connections in a way that is entertaining and beautiful. I want to make a product, a story, a reality, a piece of art, and I want to be proud of it. Sometimes I am proud of what I've written, other times, a lot of

times, not so much. And sometimes, the rare and wonderful times, I surprise myself.

Recently, I was extremely shocked at myself and my writing. There was seriously, this is true, a two-pronged fork outside of my house by our night blooming cereus flowers, we really have those. I had no idea why there was a fork out on my patio. I knew that my husband put it there, and had left it there. It was so strange to me. I'm a neat-freak, he's not at all and I nag him a lot about house-keeping, organization and cleaning. I "don't get" why he "doesn't get it" about being organized and keeping the house clean

At the time, I needed to write a short story for my M.F.A. class. That sounds like a chore, which writing, creative writing never is for me. I wanted to write a symbolic and meaningful short story and my "due date" was rapidly approaching. I'm not a procrastinator. In fact, I see myself as a workaholic, perfectionist, over-achiever. There are so many days which I wish I were alright with doing just average work, but that's not who I am.

Somehow, Monday came and my story was due the next day. All I had was a paragraph about this two-pronged fork. I sat down at my desk on Monday at four o'clock and wrote a story. I disappeared. It sort of felt like the "me" who goes to work at six in the morning, the "me" who teaches six classes per day, the "me" who can only use the restroom at specific five-minute passing times between bells ringing, the "me" who worries about everything all the time, those "me's" stepped back and left. She didn't exist. That evening, from four until eleven o'clock, I lived through words. This voice, this "Sally" person took over

and my fingers typed her thoughts. I had over seven pages, my head was spinning, and I went to bed. At least I had something that I could turn in, I told myself.

I don't know how I did it. I don't know how I got in that "mode" that day when I wrote. But the story that came out of it, "Cereous Things" is a piece of my writing that I'm actually now, actually very proud of. I surprised myself in that I wrote what I thought would be my worst piece and it turns out that it probably is one of the best. As one of my former instructors put it, I was "in a writing hole." How I found that hole, I don't know.

I get into that hole about the stories I write that I care about. That's how I felt after writing the story about the bird in the window, "Presence of Zenaida Macroura on Mourning Houses." It is such a rare feeling. It's not anxiety or stress or exhaustion. It's a feeling I enjoy, however brief it may last. But that sensation is addicting, like chilly Friday night with friends outside by a bonfire. It's a fulfillment and I want more of it. I want more of *that feeling*. So I write more.

Here's the ironic thing: when I can't get that "after writing" feeling, all I feel is frustration. I end up in agony more than I am in fulfillment. Yet, I write more. I don't know where this need came from. I only know that I have it, that I have to write. I can write and hope to surprise myself. I can write and hope that it will turn into something worth keeping. It's having control and losing control all at the same time.

I can hope. Writing does that. It surprises me. It gives me hope.

What Should Not Be Touched

She's back in the extra bedroom. Again. My extra bedroom. My sister in my extra bedroom. Luana and her red hair. It's not supposed to be attractive, not red hair. But it's always worked for her, even if it's the only thing that actually has. Those burning strands spill down her shoulders, around her fragile frame, her slender trunk. The tangles that surround my face may share her color, but the power and effect of red hair, Luana took it all before I was born.

Back there in the bedroom at the end of my hall, she's there. Door closed. She might as well be twenty years old again, sneaking into my closest and stealing my forty-dollar black silk blouse. We shared a square bedroom in the last house all five of us occupied together, but that closet belonged to me. The closet and the clothing. My shirt, all smooth, collared in cursive waves of lace, I was saving for the one date of my senior year. A shirt saved for the older boy with the convertible and the leather jacket, saved for nothing because he drove away, with her, before I made it out the front door. The silk, the boy, the hair, and now a room.

Not a closet, not even a black blouse, but at the moment, a room. A whole room in the house that belongs to me, she steals, just like everything else.

I could have pulled her hair out twelve years ago. I could now. It coils in the brushes and clumps into balls and flurries. On the bathroom floor, my bathroom floor, those tresses remain, like red pompon blossoms of the ohia tree.

Our brother, Kale, the chanter, the mea Oli, has always told me stories, the myths of our land. Including the stories of the ohia tree. *It's in the Mo'olelo, the stories, little sister, Alika. It's like the lava rock, left and meant not to be touched.* A sinner, seducer and goddess of fire, Pele throws fire and ash. She will punish those who wrong her, those who take what is not theirs. She will turn those who leave her into the ohia tree and let the red Lehua flowers grow.

If Kale's words have truth, I would let myself turn Luana into that tree, burn her with Pele's volcanic eruptions and let her return to live, grow in the ash. But I wouldn't be able to touch her hair. I would be expected not to want it for my own.

Had she asked me to borrow the shirt, to get into his car, to stay at my house again, all the times, I would have said yes. Just to know that I posses a grain of something my sister views as equal, as worth touching, as worth her time, would be enough to say yes. Just to imagine that there is a common trait in the blood we share would be enough to say yes.

Yes. I wanted to say yes when we sat outside the kitchen window. When we listened to our parents' last fight, Luana offered me a cigarette. Mom's shadow picked up the wine glass and threw it until it splashed into the wall, near Dad's face. The glass splinters reflected the cigarette glow at the end of Luana's fingers. The orange-hot circle moving nearer to her lips, she closed her eyes. Opening them, she looked at me.

She was telling me that we would be moving. This is the advice, the only gifted words I'd receive. The only time I'd get to be truly younger. She was

telling me that the three of us would be moving with Mom to the mainland. Mom had told her already to gather her things. We were going. It would be that night. So why not, she was saying, so why not? Reaching to me, one-handed, she offered the torching tobacco paper while the cinders, both white and black, landed on my freckled wrists.

Back there in the bedroom at the end of my hall, she's there. The first five hours are silence. Door opens and she emerges, walking, almost wading, to where I sit looking out my front window. It's late, but there is still light left, although it doesn't seem to come from one source. It just seems to be there, everywhere, outside from us.

What once had been a tight braid now forms loose, open curls on her shoulders. Luana doesn't lift her socked feet as she slowly gets closer to me. The palms of her hands turn and rub her eyes. Black circles appear like the wake of something heavy dropped in water.

She had to leave him, she's telling me. I want to ask if it is Brad or Burt or Brandon or if that was the last one, but she is still speaking. Yes. I let her continue speaking. There are words about what isn't anymore, about time, about forgetting things.

Will she cry? I can't think of a time I witnessed her do it. That's what I'm watching for, for tears to build. The more of her words that touch the air, the angrier they become, like heat getting hotter. But no tears, no water. No relief, except for a few sips of the dark wine. Her voice remains strong and thick, like the grapes must have been before belonging to her glass.

When Luana pauses, and I know she is taking a break, probably thinking that she's said too much, maybe feeling embarrassed, I go to the kitchen. I'm looking in all of the drawers. Behind the forks, under the extra purple placemats, even taking out the rolls of aluminum foil, I search and eventually find them. One half remaining in the cigarette pack that Jamin left here, the last time he slept here, three weeks ago. They probably weren't important enough for him to come back to claim. I hadn't thrown them away, just in case. Now I have a case, a reason, for my sister instead. I can say yes, why not.

I have them in my hand waiting to be lit. They are waiting to take the shape of fervent syllables and turn the sound into white air. When I return, the couch is empty. A door closes, and she's not there. She's back in my extra bedroom.

I don't know how long she has been with me. The days and weeks bleed together. Items in the laundry basket, a white V-neck, ankle socks, torn denim, cannot be distinguished by owner. The floral scent on our sleeves is now our common trait. Besides our matching copper hair, it is the only one. But clothing is not a good keeper of time, neither is Luana.

For her, evenings mark their difference from the day with doors. The opening of the front door, the exiting and the doors of cars. Doors and vehicles are how Luana must be able to tell that she has been with me awhile. How long it's been since I listened to her and searched for a sign of the inside, of the waters, her tears. She slides into the passenger seats of different vehicles, a sports car, a

minivan, an oversized piece of machinery, disappearing with exhaust fumes. When she returns, I am always sleeping.

It is morning when I remind her of our brother's wedding. The light beams yellow lines into the kitchen window and onto the counter. Setting my coffee cup in the silver metal sink, I turn to see her at the table, her head between folded elbows.

I ask her again, does she remember we are leaving tomorrow.

A slight movement marks a nod and her red lengths spill from the wooden surface as she sits up. Her blue eyes squint against the brightness. She covers them with a flattened palm and stares at me as if I know where she has been the night before. As if I feel the headache she must be experiencing. I wish I could say yes.

The airplane lifts us into blue open space. Luana is sitting so that her knees are bent and her sandal-covered toes do not touch the floor. Instead, they dangle and I think about how that floor is not really a floor, but just something between us and nothing.

In my head, I'm practicing the E Pili Mai I promised Kale I would perform. *`Auhea wale ana `oe Ku`u lei o ka pô Where are you my sweetheart of the night?* He should have asked Luana, her voice always sounds more solid. My notes seem too ripe, like raisins with too much sun. Grapes not yet ready to be wine.

But I'm sure Kale will be surprised to see Luana. He couldn't really have expected her to show up, to be dependable, to care.

We are above Hilo just before the four o'clock rain. Luana and I arrive, the rain is above the land, above the shore and the volcano. So are we. The way the slices of water, in parallel lines, hit the oval window remind me of Kale as a child, beating on his paper drums outside his sisters' shared bedroom.

Luana is sleeping, stretching her arms over her head as the wheels beneath us make contact with earth. Yes. All at the same time. I tell her yes, we are here. We have landed.

Our brother sees me first. Luana is not paying attention, just keeps pulling the straps of her carry-on over her shoulder, up again, as if it is really falling off. When Kale notices her, he raises his eyebrows, dark and heavy, one at a time. Luana does not see this. She still fights with that corduroy satchel. A pack of cigarettes slips from a side pocket and hits the gray concrete floor. This time it really is the ground.

Kale smiles from the side of his mouth and wraps his arms around me. Bending over, Luana picks up the rectangle box, tucks it back where it belongs, then finally looks up at us.

"Hiwahiwa," he whispers in my ear.

His hands firmly grip each one of Luana's shoulders. He shakes her left to right a couple of times, then breathes as if he's been waiting for something to happen.

"Kaikuahine," he sighs. Luana rolls her eyes, noticeably. "Sorry. Little sister. You're here. You're home." When he moves, it is as if he were about to embrace her and then thought better of it.

No longer raining, the thunder outside is sweeping away, still audible. Still audible, even though Luana insists that she is not home, she came out of family obligation. Family obligation is not what I considered it to be when I purchased the plane ticket for my older sister.

The automatic doors slide open. The sun returns so quickly and so vividly that until the glass moves aside, there is a reflection of us. We are in order, Kale, Luana, then me, shoulder to shoulder. It is the way I like to remember us together, like a portrait, done professionally, with acrylics. The doors fully open, the picture now is vapor.

Luana walks around Kale and enters the passenger side. She tosses her bag on the floorboard, sits, and rests her head back. Had she asked me if she could sit in front, I would have said yes.

We pass Keaau Beach and Luana says how many more lava rocks are there than she remembers. When Kale first told me that the white sand is actually shipped in from the mainland, Luana told me he was lying. Telling me more stories, more *Mo'olelo*. I believed her then. I don't believe her now.

The number of the objects, objects made by heat and earth, are the same. She even says how ugly they are, sitting there like dead animals. My fingernails grip the seat cushion.

It comes in view. The summit of Kilauea Volcano. The Naval of the Earth. Pele's Volcano. My volcano. When Kale told me that the volcano belonged to our land's ancestors, Luana told me he was lying. Its massive almost-trunk, the fissures, the places where lava can bleed, seeing them, I become alive.

The blood rushing from my heart could be magma from the earth. Just knowing that I'm within her grounds, on Pele's soil, a place that so easily could be under water, a place that so easily could not exist, all I can think to say is yes. Yes, I am here.

In the morning, Luana asks Kale if they will be doing the log throwing off the cliff ceremony. Old fashioned and unnatural, she's saying. Why can't you just have a normal wedding, she asks, especially if we flew all this way.

Luana had been the one to tell me about the ancient custom when I was seven. Kale, outside, beating his little fists on the cardboard, she made gestures of each action. *The groom, climbs the ledge of the earth*, her hands go up like bear claws. *He lights a small log,* she says, *flicking her thumb like a match. If the bride can catch it, only if, then they are together. And they burn, they burn, they brand themselves, Alika, they brand themselves, on their arms*, she says.

"No." Kale answers without commentary. Simple ceremony, he tells her. "Won't take but fifteen minutes."

Luana is wearing a long skirt and a pink shirt. Both of them, they both belong to me. No, she did not ask. Yes, I would have said yes. They look better on her anyway. My hair always clashes with the shirt. The length of the skirt fits her more than it does me. When she takes each step, it is like the surf moving along skin.

On the beach, we wait for it to begin. Luana smokes and traces the lines of wet sand with her bare toes. The other guests sit patiently on their thin fabric Kihei where the water cannot touch the six of them. The sand in the shaded areas

looks almost green. Between her deep inhalations, Luana complains about how it doesn't seem right. For a moment, I think she means that neither of our parents are alive, present, but realize she is speaking about the look of the wet sand. She has to insult the lava, insult the sand. As much as colors may agree with her, she pays no homage.

Especially not when she picks it up. Yes, she knows the stories. But she picks it up anyway. Even after having just called it ugly.

She picks up the lava rock.

I watch her reach down, glide her fingers across it. She turns it around in her palm. The black, tear-shaped object falls from one hand into the other. I'm waiting for her to repeat yesterday's words about the physical appearance of the stone. It's not really a stone, she'd say. It's a solid piece of ash, she'd say. She doesn't.

Instead, she brings it closer to her face. But it doesn't belong to her. It doesn't belong to me either, so I don't have the right to decide yes or no. Studying it, she's examining its edges, its coarse texture. It fits in her hand when she closes her fingers around its sides.

Open and close. Opening and closing. One finger at a time, she opens her palm, closes a fist. Again, she is the ohia bloom. Slowly, coming to life, not in petals, but in feathery feverish threads.

I'm about to warn her, about to remind her of the parables. Even though she probably never believed them. *These should not be touched or taken, Luana,*

I could say, sounding more like her than like me. *It will bring you bad luck, Luana, if you take it off the beach. It will curse you. If you touch it.*

The things I should say are about to form into voice, but the ukulele strings vibrate into noise first. They are waiting, for me. They summon me to begin the sacrament, to sing so the bride may dance. Luana follows my footprints. She hums behind me, through my entire solo, her tone carries each note. Her aria sustains my singing, so that my voice doesn't fall flat, fall through nothing, land on nothing. Yes, she gives me harmony.

Yet nothing is different when we return home, to my house, nothing except for my magma longing. We are both back and she's back there in the extra bedroom. I suppose it's her room. And she's out the door again, as soon as the light westwardly sinks.

I do not know where she is. I don't know what car she may have gotten into, what mysteries is living, but I notice it.

She's not here, in my house, when it begins. Something invasive seeps my breath. Heavy and hot, it grows, more noticeable each moment, almost angry. I should know what it is. I recognize the smell, like fireworks and paper. It's coming from her room, the back bedroom, door shut. Something stings my nose, makes me dizzy, becomes present and more present.

It is as if the room, her room, my room, is expanding. White smog rises from the small opening between the wood frame and the floor. Rises fast, slaps my face. It's laughing as I cough. Roaring as I beg for air, it's radiating as I run from my home into my yard. This time, it is me exiting my door and disappearing

into fumes. But the vapors follow from inside. Begin from her room and follow me outside.

Turning around, I witness it for the first time. I've wanted to see one come alive since Kale played his drums, ever since I believed Luana's lies. I imagine the magma chamber finally sighing. But my house is not exhaling. It doesn't look like a crater. Nor is it black with electric blood. I've always wanted to watch a volcano come to life. Pele speaking to me. But it is not a volcano.

It's not even red. I always expected we would have color in common. Orange spikes reach like fingers from what used to be my roof. Illumination separates the night ceiling from the melting tiles, reminding me of the way Luana's toes made that line between shore and ocean. Only hot, searing, turning to dust and not to thick sand. A giant circle of heat grows closer to me, steps in my direction, follows me down the driveway. I watch my house turn to flames. The fire is alive.

I used to think an eruption would sound gentle. To vibrate in a quiet release. To hum or whisper. A quiet, harmonious song. Wrong. Yes, incorrect. Crackling and glass breaking. Smashes all around, surround me. Noise.

Everything in silhouettes. Sharp shapes, black against a glow, move around in a space I owned, a territory we shared.

I'm used to her exits. I should be accustomed to her arrivals as well since Luana always returns. Returns to me. Invited or not. I say yes.

Luana's outline steps towards me. It's not real, not real, I think. Until she's standing in front of me with her purse on her shoulder. She's saying she's

sorry. Accidents happen. She's apologizing again and again. There are more words. She is still speaking, yes, I let her continue. Still mumbling, she's still crying, when I notice it. When I notice it again.

Her hand opens, blooming, fireworks. Everything in silhouettes. Luana drops it, because I won't touch. Shaped like a raindrop, a piece of the earth's interior, a solid piece of heat lands between us.

Cereus Things

I don't know why, but it was the two-pronged fork that made me completely drop my marbles or lose my basket or whatever it was that my mother always said happened to women at certain times of their lives. *Especially if you get married, Sally. You'll have to set fire to the house like I did. Oh, you won't have a choice. You'll drop those marbles.*

She told me many times "it" would happen to me too. And it did.

For a whole week, this fork sat on our back patio steps. I had never seen it before even inside our house. Yet there it appeared, positioned awkwardly, almost aiming at feet descending the stairs.

Nothing ever gets moved in our house. Well that's not true. Items get picked up, used for a purpose, and then set down wherever they stopped being useful. They're simply dropped like something terrible had happened to the person holding it (to my husband), so that he suddenly had to abandon the object, leave it where it landed. That is, until someone (me) found it as a clue or an artifact of the past.

It's a predilection I know he inherited from his parents. The few times we visited them, before we bought our house, they had stuff everywhere. Rooms stacked with random bills, used Q-Tips, old heaters, screwdrivers, tubs of toys. I don't even remember all of it. But, wall to wall, floor to almost ceiling, there was just a bunch of stuff. And it didn't bother them. It doesn't bother him.

Nothing really ever gets put where it belongs in our house, not by Owen. The pink plastic ring from around the skim milk carton is one of my favorite disregarded items. Owen peels it off of a new gallon and sets it beside the sink. If I don't throw it away, there it would lie, three days later, waiting to fall into the disposal, the mouth of a nasty hell. There have been many nights I have reminded him about how things need to be put away. Put away where they belong. Where they should be.

"Doesn't it bother you? How can it not bother you?" I'll ask. He doesn't have much to say as he looks blankly at me with his eyes wide open. But when he is looking for something, say his cigarettes or the ketchup, he'll ask where it is before he's even started looking.

"Where did I put my smokes?" I can't tell if he's asking me or himself, but usually, under my breath, I add a comment.

"Well, if you would keep track of the things when you have them in your hands… If you would put things where they belong…" It never makes any difference though.

When I come home in the evenings from Rhonda's Paints and More, where I log at least forty hours a week, I like to change out of my paint-splattered green t-shirt and denim apron and then sit outside with a cold beer.

I bring swatches home and I shuffle them like a deck of cards while the dog chases fireflies. It's how I unwind. For five days, the fork was there: a carving fork with a light brown wooden handle. Outside of our house.

I first noticed it on the day I painted the living room yellow. Canary yellow, I think. Fred, the other mixer, and I are always getting to take home different gallons of paint, especially if we "accidentally" mess up a customer's order. So about once a month, I come home with a new color—Sea Side Blue, Plum Crazy, Yellow Alive—and renew the wall colors of different rooms in my house.

I alternate between the kitchenette, living room, master bedroom, and the den. No two Julys ever have the same combinations of rooms and shades. I don't think Owen has ever said much about the current (or even past) shades on the walls. As long as the television plays "Wheel of Fortune" and he can tend to his petal babies outside, he seems pretty happy. Well, content at least.

Since we bought the house, before we were married and against our parents' wishes, he has planted numerous blooms throughout the seasons: hydrangeas, irises, gardenias (I like the smell of those the best), jonquils, and right now it's the night lilies. Usually, he scatters the seeds and sometimes forgets about watering and caring for the sprouts. So they grow, fade to brown, shrivel and die. He hasn't been forgetting about these night lilies though. But wait, he's always correcting me:

"They are called Night Blooming Cereus. Why can't you ever remember that, Sally?" He has a large area of the yard dedicated to these white horn-shaped things that only bloom at night. He even gives them each their own name. I'm not kidding. He names them: Brandi, Tammy, Missy, Brenda.

"Why Brenda?" I asked the day before the first fork day. I hadn't painted anything in awhile and I guess I was getting moody, bored as he would put it. Brenda sounded like a name for a brunette. All the other names seemed like they would be given to blonde women, like me.

"Because that one is a Brenda. She's different. Someone special," he said after he shaved off his thick beard I had grown to love.

So I stood in silence for a moment, staring at the black wisps of hair that had landed on the white sink. Of course, he didn't clean those up. I didn't really have a response to his "Brenda explanation" and anyway, he didn't give me any room to ask for further information because he was busy guessing the puzzle for the Phrase category. The contestant had guessed an "R" and my husband was already yelling, "The answer is: When You're Hot, You're Hot. It's easy, you idiot!" at the screen. His large calloused hands waved frantically in the air. And Brenda escaped my thoughts.

I had been flipping through a new set of sample hues and was trying to decide between Canary Yellow and San Francisco Saffron. One of them had been used in the den before and I wanted to do something new to the living room. I didn't want to reuse a color.

Which one had I used before? Wait. Which one did I end up using?

Fred might remember. I always talk with Fred about paint, about how I was supposed to have become an artist. He's a widower and he listens well. He says it's because his home is so quiet. He doesn't mind my constant talking. We

discuss the abstracts I would have painted with oils. He knows proper names for things, like fresco and tempera. I think I even told Fred about the fork.

The first fork day, I came home before lunch, ate a piece of shepherd's pie from the previous night, and had the two main walls of the front room complete when Owen called. The phone rang and I got nervous. He said he would be meeting his brother at the range to shoot a few ammunition rounds.

"Go ahead and eat without me," he said.

When I share anecdotes about Owen to Fred, he never believes me that I married a man who likes to garden and also likes throwing lead with his dad's old nine millimeter. Fred's only met Owen once when I had a flat tire and Owen had to come pick me up. They didn't really say much to each other. Owen probably made a joke to Fred about feeling sorry for him because he has to spend all day with me or something like that.

Although when we got in our old pickup truck, Owen laughed and said, "I thought I had something to worry about with Fred. Boy was I wrong. You never told me he was old, bald and ugly." I just rolled my eyes and smiled. I always told him I wasn't attracted to Fred. But he liked to make me think that he had something to worry about. Like somebody else would want to snatch me up. I think he knows it makes me feel good. I can't make those kinds of jokes about his job. I don't think he works with any women, except for the care he gives those white things that come alive and open up in the dark.

I don't think Owen had been working the first fork day. He works odd hours for the Illinois State Department of Transportation. Sometimes he is up in a

little bucket and is attached to a truck when he's working on light poles. Other times, he drives a riding lawn mower in the little places between highway lanes.

I used to worry about cars. Those speeding cars. They move so fast and people don't pay attention to those signs, even though they say things like, "Fines Doubled in Work Zones" and "Hit a Worker, Go to Jail."

"Sally, listen," he would say after I cry and tell him how I don't want to be a widow. I go on and on about one random day I would be adding magentas, yellows, and blacks together in chemical formulas and I would get this phone call. I dreaded phone calls for the first few years of our marriage.

"I'll get this phone call. A voice will ask if he is speaking with Mrs. Morrison. I would have to say yes, even though I would know what he would say next: I'm sorry ma'am. I hate to inform you…your husband has been… Those are the only words I would be able to hear, Owen. Think about it," I would make my fingers into the shape of a phone, for emphasis.

"Sally, listen. I do my job. I do it well. Please. You have other things to worry about. Please don't add this to your anxiety list." He always calls it my anxiety list. I don't know why. I didn't, I don't have a list. I mean, I keep a running grocery list and a to-do list, but I've never even heard of an anxiety list.

I meant to mention my anxiety list on the first fork night. When I had finished with the two walls, the San Francisco Saffron accent walls in the living room, I cracked a beer and went to sit outside.

I decided on San Francisco Saffron after all, I think. Not the Canary one. I mean, I didn't want my living space to be named after a bird. But no matter the

color, the fumes begin to get to me. You'd think I'd be used to them and in fact, I do actually enjoy the smell. It's sharp. It's powerful. But two walls in one day is my limit.

So this fork remained. Not on the ground or on the patio table, but on the steps. At first I didn't notice it. I tilted my head back and let the cold bubbles fizz down my throat. And then I saw it.

This two-pronged fork. Outside.

Why would there be this devil-looking thing out here? Owen hadn't grilled anything in awhile. Could he have been using it for those girls? For Brenda? I didn't see any dirt on it. There existed no evidence, no good reason why this thing would be there. This fork. I was going to ask him about it. I was going to tell him that he was adding items to my anxiety list.

I would have related it to the way I feel when he throws his dirty clothes in random places around the house. He likes to drape the sweaty fabric over the tops of open doors. I don't understand it. We've had many fights about this. I know it's a left-over effect of his parents. Or it's proof of what my mother always told me about marriage.

Something always happens, she would say. And then she would warn me. I would drop my marbles, the few that I got from her and not from my dad. If she were still living, she would tell me it always begins with clothes. It happened that way for her. She would remind me all the time. She found a shirt, two sizes too small for my dad to have said that it belonged to her. And then she knew. And then she dropped her basket, lost her basket, dropped her marbles.

For awhile I resorted to leaving notes pinned to those dirt-covered shorts. *Please put me in the hamper. I want to go in the wash.* But it never helped. It never changed. In fact, the first fork day there was a set of day-worn clothes on the bedroom door knob.

I went inside early, after my two beers because the mosquitoes were especially vicious that night. I had been so excited about the new color (that took me so long to pick), Canary Yellow, no, San Francisco Saffron, so I only noticed the laundry when I came inside. And by the time he came home, I had forgotten about what was outside. The fork slipped my mind.

Then after the first fork night, I had evening shifts at Rhonda's for the rest of the week. His girls, those cereus things, began expanding, taking up the whole side of the fence and reaching up the steps. They reached out at ascending feet. I know they never would grow thorns, but there was something almost evil about the way they wanted to touch me when I came home.

I thought they were jealous of all the splatters of color I wore. The yellows and purples on the bottom of my jeans passed by the flowers as I stepped up those stairs.

They were jealous. I know it. After all, they only wear white. I get all the colors I want. And Owen wears grass stains from all over the city.

He could have been anywhere in our city when I came home on the fifth fork night. He didn't even give me the nervousness of a phone call. I came up the steps in the back, passing those cereus blooms, the pointing petals, the wide mouths. Concentrating on what they could possibly want to say to me, wondering

if there had been a new gallon of milk opened or if shorts would be hanging in some random place and waiting for me.

Then I noticed the fork. Five days later and that fork still sat on the steps. Brenda and Missy or whatever Owen called the flowers almost covered it, but I saw the silver. The sharp silver points.

I thought about the night my mother made the fire in the living room, set the room on fire, I mean. Coming down the stairs to the heat, the white flames, I remember running outside wearing ripped pajamas. But it was dark outside, so she said it would be okay. She said my dad wouldn't get to come home. The heat reached us in the yard like it wanted to touch us.

It was definitely sharp. I touched the miniature pitch fork with my index finger. A small drop of blood ran down to my wrist. Maybe next I would use crimson in the bedroom, at least one wall. That's a good name, not after a flying animal or a city, not after someone special who I didn't know. My blood landed on one of the white petals. One drop of color.

I used the object. It could have belonged to Satan. The fork worked well. One by one, those two parallel lines of metal ripped, dug, pulled. Roots, pieces of white silk, pollen in the air. Samples of flowers, like swatches absent of color burst through the dark sky. Calyxes and foliage flew up like flames. Cereus petals rained and marbles dropped.

Questions Without Keys

Darcie hadn't seen her mother, her real mother, in fifteen years. But Darcie was looking for her. She was asking questions and doing research. Even as Darcie Plume interviewed the widower, gathering information for the weekend obituary, she thought of finding her mom.

She wasn't unsympathetic for the short, older man. Mr. Rutledge wore a light blue shirt buttoned all the way to the top. His clean fingernails made Darcie wish she could give him a hug. She wanted to ask him how he was holding up. How his life would be without his wife.

But what she really wanted was to ask her own questions. Questions that did not belong to the newspaper. Questions that could lead her closer to her mother. *Did your wife drink coffee with drug dealers? Did she sing alto in the church choir? Did she take care of any children the state needed to give away?* She held quiet many inquiries, the ones that could lead her a bit closer.

The questions sat in her mouth, tasted like cider vinegar. She couldn't swallow them and she thought she was going to choke.

"Are you…you alright?" Mr. Rutledge asked. He placed the tea cup in its saucer. Chink. Chink.

"Yes," clearing her throat, Darcie continued, "thank you." She picked up the white linen napkin and wiped the corners of her mouth free of sugar cookie crumbs.

"Quenzel. Spelled: 'Q'- 'U'- 'E'- 'N'-'Z'-'E'-'L' correct?"

He nodded. Didn't lift up his eyes to look at Darcie. Mr. Rutledge focused on the edge of the oval blue rug beneath the coffee table. Only *his* coffee table now. Not *theirs.*

" Quenzel Rutledge. Born, September 9, 1939. Drenthe, Holland. Deceased, June 18, 2009. Dwight, Illinois?" Darcie drew a downward and then an upward line to slowly form the checkmarks by each fact. Flipping her pencil over and erasing stray smudges, she imagined the words and numbers produced in permanent ink on her Corona 4 Typewriter.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap.

Each round key, a black circle encompassed by a solid silver ring and filled with its own letter. Forty-six keys total were better than the keys to Darcie's home. Better than the keys to any of the eleven homes in which she had lived. Darcie's typewriter keys, as well as the people—always the deceased, understood her more than anything, than anyone living. Old fashioned, maybe. But more personal than the plastic letters on any computer. Corona 4. The keys. A connection to a possible past, brought Darcie closer to the letters, the words, the blank ink that appeared. Possible answers.

Darcie brushed away the rubber shavings. When they fell to his floor, she looked up at Mr. Rutledge, a bit embarrassed by her messes. The crumbs and the eraser flakes.

"Quiet." When Mr. Rutledge spoke, Darcie thought she was being reprimanded, but she couldn't even remember the last word she said. *Did one of my questions escape?*

"My wife, my Quenzel was always quiet. I like to think she saved her voice for me. Because she would sing. She'd think I was outside in the garden, watering my tomatoes, but really, I'd be right around the corner. Lullabies usually. Perhaps she knew."

The lead in Darcie's pencil scratched the phrases "tomatoes" and "Q for Quenzel." She wasn't even looking at the yellow pad of paper while she kept tracing the circle and the line of the letter Q.

"Did she know anyone with the last name of Warren, Connelly, Shackelford, or Sherwin?" Oops. When she heard them herself, Darcie's fingers looped the word "oops" onto her notepad. Did she say "oops" out loud? She hoped not.

"Friends? She didn't have many friends. Only learned English five years ago." Mr. Rutledge picked up his cup again and took a long quiet sip.

Darcie thought quickly about how she could possibly respond if the widower asked her to explain. *Just trying to get all of my facts straight. I thought someone at the funeral home had mentioned surviving family.* She considered the option of honesty. *I'm just curious if perhaps she knew my mom, before or even after she went to prison. I thought Quenzel might have had contact with one of my blood siblings. It's selfish.*

"It's selfish." Oops again. Did her breath smell of vinegar? Maybe to a stranger it would permeate the air like red wine.

"I'm sorry?" he asked.

"Me too."

Darcie wrote the draft of the obituary, the version she wanted to be published. In her home that evening, Darcie felt as her fingers fell heavily to the letters of the typewriter. She put on paper the life she thought a woman with the name of Quenzel deserved.

Her key ring still dangled from the outside of her front door. The wind chime sent chilled breezes through the open window. Her yard in the back absent of vegetables or flowers, Darcie learned another lesson from the recently deceased.

The letter "Q" is more important than it may seem. Many people take for granted the awkward consonant, but it is still a part of the language. It is still present. It still belongs to names.

Even after leaving only a few relatives to mourn, Quenzel Rutledge put positive use to her life. She gave to charity nurseries in the community and cared for children who weren't her own. She missed the life she left behind in the Netherlands, but flourished happily with her husband here in the states.

Before typing out the version she would submit to her editor, Darcie let the image of Quenzel and the blank picture of her mother blend into one, for just a

moment longer. A blue sweater with handmade buttons, long hair pulled into a low tail, silver with age. She could have been married to a man like Mr. Rutledge instead of the four or possibly five mysterious men who came in and out of Darcie's childhood. A man like Mr. Rutledge would definitely be an improvement. *What man wouldn't be*?

There could be only one father, both biological and present. If that had been the way it was, Darcie wouldn't have found left over pieces of laundry. Each man had his own wrinkled and stained garments. Brad Warren left brown socks, mismatched, once white, then brown. Chip Shackelford forgot his white sleeveless tees, ribbed, holes under the arms. Jed Sherwin left her mom with stitches, four above the right eye.

Darcie knew it was really her own fault.

She shouldn't have left the chipped coffee mug full of hot, practically boiling, soup so close to the edge of the counter. A teenager, a girl, should not have been running in through the kitchen just because David Allan Coe sang, "You never even call me by my name…" from a small radio speaker in the other room of the trailer.

Four step fathers that she knew of and three foster fathers. In her mind, Darcie combined them all into one person. A tall mass of hair, a figure who smelled like stale beer and spoke with a twang. Definitely, Mr. Rutledge would remain the version that Darcie liked the best. Mr. Rutledge wouldn't walk around in his boxers, wouldn't swear. Mr. Rutledge would not leave in the middle of the night.

At her next interview, Darcie found a plethora of orange prescription bottles on the kitchen counter. *Does the urge run in my blood? Is it genetic? Is there a technical phrase for it like compulsive medication necessity?* But Darcie didn't want to steal the little tubes. She didn't want to peel off the labels and make a profit. *Prison is not hereditary.* Honest and hopeful. *Prison is not a disease like cancer. It doesn't run in the family.*

"We've been preparing for this for over a year. You're still never ready for it," Sheri Foxwright said and touched her lips.

"Prostate, correct?"

Ms. Foxwright nodded. "We tried all the treatments. He was up in Chicago at a hospital, but wanted to come home to…" She touched her mouth again. "My dad's lips were always chapped. That's all he would complain about. But we knew, my sisters and I, he had to be in pain."

Did your insurance cover the cost of medication? Did you have to seek the black market in order to make him comfortable? These questions made sense, but Darcie kept them down in her chest. She could feel them, but didn't let them rise. Besides, the Foxwright's ranch-style, brick outside with shutters framing the windows easily answered Darcie's questions.

My mom could have helped. She could have gotten you the prescriptions. Cheap. She could sign a little square pad with a signature that looked like it

belonged to a real doctor. All scribbled and such. But she's out of jail now, I'm sure. She's put that behind her. I'm sure of it.

She's reading my letter. She's touching the ink that touched my typewriter keys. The correction center should have forwarded it last week. She's just waiting for the best moment. Thinking of the best way to respond.

Darcie enjoyed the fact that one of Mr. Foxwright's daughters still had his last name. Sheri Foxwright. And there were sisters. They would be attending the services, flying into the small town from all over the country. Present at a moment's notice. It just took a phone call. A phone ringing and then horrible news, predicted and expected.

I'd settle for horrible news, if it brought them home. Her and the rest of us. The ones who have the same mom as me.

Something was missing from Mr. Foxwright's obituary. After pulling the paper through the reel of the typewriter, Darcie typed the final draft one more time. She really wanted to keep the last line. *Bring chap stick.* But Darcie knew her editor would catch it, remove it. Before she sent the draft, Darcie typed the words anyway.

It could have been worse. Darcie parked her teal 1956 Chevy pickup in the Lammert's driveway. Curtains covered the two square windows on each side of the front door. There was no wind. Nothing moved.

There had been twins which made this story especially difficult for Darcie. One life born. Only one.

I lost twins too. Both of them, not just one. Sisters, I know. I was eight and Mom gave them away. Gave away. Before I was taken away. A mom's got to have guilt for that. A mom must wonder where they are and what kind of mother they ended up with. What kind of dad. A Mr. Rutledge? Hopefully.

"I lost," Darcie began. "I'm at a loss. Don't know what to say."

Mrs. Lammert covered her face with both hands. When Mrs. Lammert leaned over, Darcie could see a framed photograph of an older woman with a black shirt and a cream afghan around her shoulders. Must be a grandmother. A mother and a grandmother, yet one person.

A husband, a father, sat on the floor in one of the other rooms of the house. She could see his legs on the carpet through the hallway. Darcie let the quiet remain for awhile.

When she closed the door behind her, Darcie knew she would write only one line: *An unavoidable tragedy on June 23, 2010.*

Darcie never understood why she stayed. Stayed in Dwight, Illionois as an adult. Why her mom let her stay until the two men came. As a fifteen year old, Darcie had been aware enough, smart enough to have seen it coming. To have seen the lights on the wall at midnight. Red. Blue. Blank. Red. Blue. And then the knocking, the banging, loud and strong like her fingertips on keys.

"Geneva Sherwin?" It was a question and a yell.

"No," Darcie said, sitting up from the couch, both the couch and her bed. She hadn't been sleeping. Laying awake, eyes open, she pretended her eyes were closed, looking for the darkness in the lack of light. Waiting to blink as long as she could, the room produced shapes and colors. Darcie liked to think the walls were a prism. *Must be like this for Mom. Must be like this for the people who take her pills.*

Mom slept in the bedroom. One arm draped off the side of the bed. Her feet, one with a sneaker still on, propped up on the pillow.

"No." Repeating her response, Darcie was making a statement instead of answering his question.

The officer on the right held a white piece of paper in one hand, the other rested on his holster. On the left, the second officer stood with both hands on his hips. The new light through the doorway spilled from a streetlamp. It flickered and made the policemen appear as paper dolls cut with sharp angles. They moved in block-like steps closer to Darcie.

"No. No. No. No. No."

Darcie lasted through the marriages, through the nights alone, from the time when she could remember time. She outlasted the five other half-siblings, such young ones who became gifts to group homes and real houses.

The day she turned fourteen, Darcie cleaned up Mama's vomit from the bathroom floor. Two tiles were missing and the crumbling grout stuck between

her toes. She made Mom walnut cookies for Christmas every year. She kept her mouth shut when Mom didn't want to answer questions.

"My daughter, always got to be asking something," Mom would say. So she wrote them down instead of putting them to voice. *Where do they go after they leave your belly? Why don't we have the pink and blue signs outside like the people in the big houses? Who was he? My dad, what was he like?*

"No."

The black paper cut-outs moved closer. They used words and phrases like, "warrant," and "custody," and "stay here, you can't come," and "finally."

One strand of Mom's blonde curly hair had been dyed purple. Darcie saw it as the officers turned on the lamp. Mom sat up and rubbed her eyes with her fists. She tucked her hair behind her ear and revealed the crosses of the scar. With her arms at her face, the dolls placed locking cuffs around her wrists.

"No, please," this time, Mom's voice. It could have been Darcie's.

Mom also told Darcie "No." Told her not to visit. "Just don't," was all she said. Geneva Sherwin knew when she used a definite, confident tone, Darcie would obey. Wouldn't ask questions.

On her next assignment, the coroner informed Darcie that the cause of death was an overdose. One family member remained to confirm the facts. A man in a wheelchair and in a boy's body, sat across from Darcie and her yellow

pad. The keys, to her house, to her car, to her little locker of a mailbox, stabbed the side of her thigh through a hole in her linen pants.

"My sister," Michael Aldridge said and made a small curved turn to shield his view of the sun. It made lines on the floor of the apartment. "She couldn't help it, or herself."

Sister? Mom had two sisters and a brother.

"You don't want me to include that, do you?" *Did your sister change her first name at seventeen? Did she jump on a moving train and disappear into the west? Did she come home? Did she return before she left one final time?*

"Include what you want. I don't have anything else to say." Michael placed his hands on the rubber wheels and began to roll backwards. It was his way of turning around, his way of closing the door behind him. His way of asking her to leave. He didn't want her to stay.

"Did she have children?" Oops, oops, oops again. *Darcie, you always got to be asking something.*

"It's time for you to go."

Darcie needed the comfort of her keys. The typewriter somehow gave her words a noise much better than the sound of her voice. They could all ignore her voice, the dark shadows of people like paper dolls, the mourners, the readers. They could block out the letters in ink. And as much as Darcie couldn't ignore

her questions, she knew she would not be able to ignore the mailbox. Even if she knew what wouldn't be waiting.

The sound of the truck's emergency break had a rippling effect. Tap Tap Tap. Just like when an idea got moving. But now she was stopped. But before going into her duplex and making her typewriter click and then hum, Darcie would walk up the concrete steps and unlock the outer door. She would unlock the metal mailbox door labeled 2W.

Darcie knew what she would write for Lydia Aldridge. *Unfortunate. A mother of six passed away this morning in her hometown of Dwight, Illinois. A memorial service will be held Wednesday, given by an anonymous donation. Lydia wanted to find each of her children. She wanted to explain to them that she didn't have an explanation. Unfortunately, her search will go unanswered.*

Darcie would turn the miniature key in the mail slot. It would sound like a scratch, like a pencil on paper. A light breeze would enter the foyer behind her. It would push her hair across her forehead. *Maybe I'll put a streak of purple in it.*

Darcie would lift the mailbox lid and find an empty space.

Presence of Zenaida Macroura on Mourning Houses

I cannot open my bedroom window. Each day, the minutes of light and air swell. And only a short time on the calendar exists between the agonizing iciness and the sweltering evening hours. Between December and July.

But I cannot, I will not open the one window by our bed.

It's a personal sacrifice, I guess. But I do not see that I have a choice. Thankfully, Davis understands my instinct to protect this piece of nature. To shield a bird's nest with the structure of our home.

Spring's breezes stroke the glass pane near our pillows. The wind remains outside. It is unable to brush the hair from my forehead. The scents of leaves blooming are powerless at reaching us. Without them, I suffocate in grief. In want.

It started with a banging, disturbing my Saturday morning sleep. A tapping on the glass begged for attention, uninvited. At first I wanted to crash into the noise, to fight back, to pound on the window with my fist. Instead, I pulled the covers over my ears, pushed Manhattan, our chocolate lab, down to my feet, and ignored the sound.

I pretended it was a noise from an unconscious event, a piece of a dream that needed to play out from behind my closed eyelids. The Jungian world wanted my presence. It was my attempt to allow two realities to intermix, breed.

Never content under the sheets even minutes past dawn, Davis had already left the bedroom. He would have been keeping busy alone, either shaping the shrubbery in the front or fiddling with his jigsaw puzzle pieces. Either way, he wasn't in bed with me to witness the colliding, the banging, the knocking. I forgot to tell him about it. Or I chose not to.

Sometime that morning, I slept again. And I failed to remember the warning. I disregarded that noise. I think I dropped the memory of it in my dream, near the place where the bridge ended and I dove into a river just before waking. I should have noticed the foreshadowing, the little hints that life gives about what may come. Such signs, intimate symbols between me and the divine present themselves frequently. I usually am aware of them, at least.

I ignored the pounding. And now, an intricately designed and remarkably constructed bird's nest finds foundation on the sill of our second floor bedroom window. Twigs, dandelion stems and April mud fit flawlessly into a ring-shaped home. If I were to slide the pane open, to the place it should be, the nest, the bird, and the emergent eggs beneath the gray and charcoal belly would shatter on the concrete patio below. I do not have a choice. I will not open my bedroom window. The quiet mother inside me won't allow it.

I think she knows I'm watching her. The mourning dove. Between the blinds, I peek and look at her close up. One on one. A light blue ring circles her black pellet eyes. She's positioned so she can shift her vision unnoticeably and stare back. She envisions what I cannot. She keeps her future warm beneath her

belly. Patiently waiting for her eggs to hatch, she cares for her unborn. It's an urge I cannot desire.

Each morning I check. Is she still there? Have the chicks hatched yet? Did the thunderstorm last night harm them? And in the evening, when I get out of my car, parked behind the house like most city buildings, I look up.

Davis doesn't mind. He actually does understand this. He even cautions me when I observe her.

"Don't bother her. Or startle her. Any motion she finds threatening will make her abandon the nest," he says and rolls over to face me when he speaks, blinking slowly.

So when he calls me into the kitchen with panic in his voice, I ache a little, hoping that I will not find broken, fragile, white pieces of shell outside the kitchen door.

"June! Hurry! June!" He yells for me a second time when I hesitate to arrive.

Wooden white shutters blind the westward window, only slightly. The partially concealed square still allows the dimming, dusking light to produce silhouettes of shapes, even though the view of all actual objects in the backyard remain blocked.

Except the fluttering shadow.

The outline of a bird shifts from the shrubbery up to our windowsill, to their nest, like two hands waving in opposite directions. It sounds like a musical

instrument that has not yet been invented, a harp and a maraca spliced together into an original harmony. The Aeolian harp in the form of a flying bird.

"It's the mate. They're changing shifts," he tells me. Placing his hand on my shoulder, he leads me outside. We take silent steps into the yard below. Bending down, he whispers to the back of my head. "They're the species zenaida macroura, the mourning dove. The male incubates the eggs in the day, and the female takes over at night. Sharing responsibility." After two years of marriage, his knowledge and his after-shave smell make me want to wrap my arms around his torso. He makes me want to share such a natural responsibility with him. I can feel that want alive in him too.

Stepping closer, I try to speak. I get out a sound, not even a complete word, and he hushes me with a finger over my lip. And he holds my forward movement still with his arm.

"Don't disturb them," he exhales. "Don't send them away, June. He won't come back to her if you do. She'll have to abandon the nest." I can't argue with his advice. We stand motionless in the grass for a long moment, not speaking. And with the dispute we shared last night still echoing back inside, between our walls, I let this moment last.

He doesn't want to talk about our disagreement. He cannot make sense of it. He'll converse about the birds. Let his fingers fall over my elbows while we watch them and hold me in front of him, secure. He tucks a hair behind my ear. But he does not want to restate those words. The ceiling fan still pushes their sound around. Their thickness makes me cough.

"It's not about you, June. And it's not about us. You're turning this around and centering it on you." Davis's words from last night, accentuate the word "you" like a sharp slap. He closes the door behind him, jolting the wall. "We don't have to be like them. Nothing's changing," he adds. Nothing's changing. I know he's right. Right about us at least.

"Everyone is changing. Everyone but me. Ashlynn's just like everyone, but me." I sip wine and swallow the assurance in my language. "She has what I never will. What we never will. It makes me different. It makes me unnatural. Wrong. Why don't you get it?"

"Do *you* get it? Why does this make *you* so bothered? So angry?" He runs his long fingers through his hair and rolls his head to stare at the tile floor.

I cannot answer. I do not have one.

Letting his last words become stale, he smacks the light switch with his palm. He leaves me in the kitchen's darkness.

I can't say I felt shock when we found out about Ashlynn's pregnancy. Neither did Davis. But I stand alone as a mourner, wearing the black funeral veil. It constricts my vision.

I stand solitary, feeling something wilt, silently inside me, again. Like it did last year. I didn't want a child and I felt relief when the growth in me only lived for two months. It'll never happen for me, they said. We could try again, but most likely find the same results. The diagnosis closed a window. It left me outside.

Davis is not asleep when I enter the unventilated room. He stares at the ceiling. When I put my head down on the pillow next to him, he turns over and faces the wall.

At their house the next afternoon, Ashlynn tells me that they painted the extra room, light green. I am not really listening, but she continues. "And we'll put in a border, I'm thinking it will have trees." I twist open a brown bottle and take a long drink, drowning out her voice.

I shouldn't be surprised. She has wanted this from Keith for a long time and I've known that. It's been her plan all along. Her desire is apparent in even her frailest gestures. Especially in the way she places the white cap back on the clear, plastic bottle with her ring-less and unpolished fingers. With a tender, purposeful motion, Ashlynn picks it the water bottle and embraces the transparent liquid, cooling off from the sun. Her hand remaining over her round, growing middle.

Now she is irreplaceable. She has been touched by nature in a way that has given her more worth than any other, solitary person. Over her belly, she rubs her palm, glances towards her naval, smiles, even with her eyelids. As if she's unique, as if she's the first. Nothing else will matter to her now, until the created one appears. Will we even remember her name before it became "mother?" Will she? Swallowing the water like a brief kiss, she beams and nods at herself.

Ashlynn's face, pink and shinny, always makes her appear to have been ripping weeds and tossing them across Keith's patio. Her random wild flowers and clovers don't make a round home or a nest. They cover the pavement in

green and mud splatters until Keith sweeps them away. She digs places for the mulch, for tulips she has hand-chosen. White and yellow petals line the perimeter of the house. Covering the cracks in the brick pathway, she decorates steps with pebbles. The white rocks appear almost embryonic, lining the bushes in a straight row.

It's as if I can feel their texture in my mouth and they keep me from speaking. She has created a place for herself both in and outside of my brother-in-law's gray house. She has what she sought. It swells. It grows. It develops.

That grin widens across her face, as she glances her vision downward. She says they talk about names: Greta or Jackson. Her mousey hair falls over her eyes and her hand descends to her waist. She protects her abdomen with her palm, proud and satisfied.

She is fulfilled in a way that I won't experience. Maybe never. Unless we're lucky. Her presence proves that I am unusual. It makes me want to spit out those rocks and scream. Let them crack on the pavement. Tell myself I don't want it anyway. I don't. I don't.

Davis isn't paying attention or I would have pointed out her motions as evidence. Evidence that now she is better than us. He stands near the grill with Keith, who is also not speaking. The two men take turns flipping the raw meat, watching it change color, listening to the flames break. Keith pulls another beer can out from wet ice of the cooler by his feet. He wipes it across his face before opening it. No loud stories. No laughs rolling down the concrete street. They quietly think together, sharing a serious idea.

Ashlynn is wondering out loud what her mother will think of the names. "She'd want me to pass one down from the family. I don't like Marietta, though." She pats her white t-shirt in the area that soon will be too small for her to wear. There is a grass stain near the edge of it, I hadn't noticed before. She has mud around the bottom of her jeans.

It seems as if she is speaking to herself and I am just a witness. But she continues anyway. She tries to make me listen. Almost begging for a high pitched "congratulations" to spill from my lips. Those letters would taste like dirt.

"I bet Keith wants it to be a boy. I really have no…" I'm still not listening.

The men are behind her. A cloud shifts to shade the area where they stand. I can see Keith's face in the reflection of the sliding door. He rubs his temple with his fist and shakes his head back and forth, getting smoke out of his eyes, and perhaps protesting. Eyes shut, tight wrinkles form over his lids. He whispers something to Davis. In a profile view, Davis seems confused. His face contorts into a question mark. It seems he doesn't know how to respond. Whatever Keith had said to him, it causes Davis to look over at us. He glances at me and then over to Ashlynn, then back to the fire.

I'm pretending that whatever Keith said, it would make him similar to me somehow. That it would prove him to be a victim. A victim of what cannot be controlled. Then I could tell Davis that there are other people who understand how I feel. And Ashlynn's precise rows of tulips would not seem as vibrant, as alive.

Ashlynn says that she, well that *they* had wanted to wait until after the wedding. But that things happen. Davis begins to walk in our direction. I can't tell what he's thinking. I don't know if he realizes that I haven't contributed to the conversation.

Before he can reach us, I stand. Ashlynn's still in midsentence, but I walk away. Straight for the sliding door and into their kitchen. A plastic bowl filled with chopped lettuce, bottles of ketchup and mustard, and a decorative platter covered in peppers, carrots, cauliflower, all line the table. Two unopened bottles of filtered water and one wine glass sit at its corner. I pick up the empty glass and hold it in my palm.

Davis is talking to Ashlynn and Keith has joined them. The air conditioning clicks on and I can't hear what they are saying. I watch them through the wine glass. It makes them look wider, rounding their bellies. Keith must be telling a joke because the other two lean in and then laugh simultaneously.

I cannot control it. As I raise the glass above my head, Ashlynn pulls herself out of the ribbon netting of the lawn chair, waist first. It seems to be a strenuous move for her and she's already being cautious. She's already caring for her unborn. Keith reaches a hand to her and she wraps herself under his arm. They can't see through the door, they don't see me.

A short moment after I slam it out of my grip, the glass makes a purposeful sound on their kitchen floor. Only one splintering, high-pitched crash. Sharp and jagged pieces shoot back through the air and only a few manage to

touch my skin. Broken debris covers the tile. The long stem is the largest surviving piece. It lands the closest to my feet. I crunch over the shatters as I grab my purse, pick up my keys and walk out the door.

I drive for awhile with the window rolled down. The moving air touches my face in waves. Passing over bridges, going through streets lined with square homes, I watch the daylight change to the night.

Pulling into the carport, it is the first time I observe the dove during the dim hours. Tucked in her corner, she sleeps. I creep on the brick pathway, trying not to step too heavily. Between the blood-colored slabs of stone, small stalks of green grow vertically, like pieces of thread. Some are headed with cotton spheres, others sprout silk-like petals of yellow. But these weeds bend and reach for the solid dirt ground.

I take off my sandals, slid them over in the dense grass. Letting my toes flirt with the plants, I sit with the company of the earth, the weeds, the fertilized dirt. A few dandelions I pick, piling them up with random pieces of broken branches, twigs in the center of the yard, in the center of night. A circle around me begins.

Davis peeks out between the blinds and sees me sitting in the grass, alone. I still do not know how he made it home. I refuse to ask. He sees me stare back, not moving from my position. He does not make any sudden movements. I suppose he does not want to startle me. He only watches for a brief moment, but he knows I notice him. I can tell from the way he blinks back, before he closes the shade. I know he will be waiting for me.

One day I will glance up, expecting the usual. The glass pane closed and the small nest covering the left corner of the sill. I would expect the dove to look back at me, but she will be gone.

The nest will be empty. A left over mass. A swollen mound of earth. It will simply become a decoration outside of our open bedroom window.

Breaking Roots

I let the Diet Coke get warm in the center consul, following Jack's advice. The dark liquid looked like a solid object unable to move in the sealed plastic bottle. I knew that when I twisted the red cap, the hissing would sound like all our Sunday mornings at High Cliff State Park. I knew the carbonation would taste like him.

The pavilion near the asteroid-shaped boulders became our regular meeting place to vanquish the previous night's events and the previous years'. Jack always said the best way to cure a hangover and to forget unchangeable circumstances was to drink a warm soda and listen to the planes from Austin Struabel Airport.

We contemplated the movement of people from one place to another. The people leaving and the ones arriving, their passing in the air, and the passage of time. We discussed the value of a second. Both second chances and the things we cannot control. The choices we cannot make.

"We're little nothings to them," he said pointing to the wood panels above us, to the people in the planes, to the people from whom we came. "We can't choose who we're born to." He drew his fourteenth domino from the bone yard and I wrapped a flannel blanket around my shoulders. Rain tapped the roof, but we remained dry at the picnic table in the center of the cement floor.

"Other people make things happen. Moving on and leaving things, leaving people behind," I added. "We are the effects of other people's decisions."

We are like the waves that hit the shore surface below us. But I didn't tell him that. I didn't want to ever get too close. Not to Jack.

The white tiles in front of us were still pure. We couldn't see the colored dots, all those numbers, all those possibilities. Once we put them out there, in the center of the table, trying not to get splinters in our fingers, making our choice, our moves, the domino would be done. Plays made could not be taken back.

"And we can't change our past, Cecelia. We can't change who we were when we were born. Or who our parents happen to be, our heritage." Jack placed his hand over the game pieces and spun them in a circle, hoping for the best outcome. My friend took his time deciding which domino to play first. He thought he had an ability to feel the best one, the perfect rectangle that would form into his long tree.

"It's a game of luck, Jack," I said. But it didn't matter. It didn't matter that the pounding of the water tried to reach us in sideways attacks. It didn't matter that the soda was warm. Although, I never really acquired the taste for the temperate fizz, I took a drink anyway. I left a few bubbles on my lips.

The waves of Lake Winnebago splashed the rocks below us. A fifty foot descent, we knew not to get too close. Along with the thunder, the pelting drops on the wooden ceiling, and the tiles tapping together, it all sounded like applause. Like we were being encouraged and commended. Just as my grandfather, the award winning and life-saving, lighthouse keeper, Grun Gustafson had been recognized before he died. Before his choices sank in the brumal waters up north in Green Bay. Death's Door, what a perfect name for a place just south of

Washington Island, mixing the waters of the bay and the lake, hiding copious histories. Hiding a place from which I came.

"Your turn." Jack raised a brown eyebrow at me and winked. His hand cupped over my fist, his flesh like cotton. I flipped over a domino and revealed a five and a one. Two odd numbers paired together and separated by one black line. Nothing matched it. I wasn't able to connect this piece to any branch on the board. I had no choice but to put it back in my pile. Already, I was losing.

Jack had a decent line going, six dominoes long with two doubles. Those provided for his numerous limbs to continue his turn. For an orphan, not knowing any divisions of his family's past, Jack's tree of domino spots spread in each direction between us.

The wind picked up as he placed down a twelve and a six. The gray dots matched with the orange leaves, reflected the day like a mirror. A reddish leaf landed by my elbow. I noticed the silvery veins running throughout its blades.

"I'd rather be like you, rather not know. You're lucky." I put the leaf in my pocket and picked up a random tile to play. It was all accidental anyway. It didn't matter which one I actually chose. It shouldn't have mattered that I knew what made up my blood. It shouldn't have mattered that Jack didn't.

"But you have something that I don't. That I never will." He pointed to the table. He hinted at the best place for opportunity, the optimal location for my twelve and six. Lifting his red Coke can, he toasted my plastic bottle. We swallowed at the same time.

I wanted to share my blanket with him, both of us under the same shelters. But then we wouldn't have been able to play if we could see each other's hands, each other's dominoes. Certain secrets had to be kept. Certain things neither of us would know.

"Yes I have something you don't, Jack, it's called a curse. It's in my veins. I'm a sin, the effect of a purposeful choice." My turn ended.

He waited, sat still for a moment. Maybe he was listening to the smashing of the water on those rocks below us. Perhaps he was searching for his next move, most likely ready to beat me and win. I hated it, both the silence and the fact that he almost always won. He also didn't know what damnations his predecessors may have committed. His ancestors may have passed to him temptations. I wished I could steal his ignorance. Trade his uncertainty for a winning row of connected dots.

"Alright, Cecelia, you need to finish." He sat his chin in both of his hands, elbows on the table, his eyes on mine. His words sounded as if he were spitting the pellets of water from the sky, pointing their sharp edges in my directions. A piece of my curly hair fell across my forehead. I wanted to brush it away, so he could really see me, really understand me. But I didn't. I couldn't. My skin felt covered in sleet.

"I have to draw. Can't play." I pulled the sleeves of my gray sweatshirt over my fingers and looked down.

"No. You need to let the past go. Forget it. Grun didn't know that what he was doing would affect the lines and branches of his family tree. Of children

not even thought of in his time." The water began to reach me. Each sound of his heavy voice splashed my forehead.

"But don't you think that there are things in our blood, parts of who we are, that start from our family's past?" They were out there. I spoke them and couldn't take them back.

My grandfather made choices years ago and the dominoes waited. My words had been verbalized, spilled. In the silence that followed, I realized how Jack could interpret my thoughts. How he could not apply them to his life. The things we cannot control. The origins he would never know.

"I didn't mean, Jack, I shouldn't have, I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking." I stretched my arm out of my sleeve, out from the blanket, and reached for his elbow. Still, he remained motionless for a long moment. "You didn't deserve that. I'm sorry."

Jack finally picked up a domino from the bone yard. He starred at the white side, the blankness of it. He didn't move his gaze, wouldn't look at me. Holding the ceramic piece in his hand, he took a drink and set the bottle down lightly.

Instead of telling him to play, I pictured those damn medals. The ones that decorated my mother's dresser, pressed against the glass of her polished mirror. The gold medal awarded to Grun Gustafson by the Life Saving Benevolent Association. The Silver Medal from the United States Government that he framed in black trim. So proud. But I knew they were tarnishing,

changing color. My mother used to make me dust them once a week. I hadn't looked at them since she died.

I reached into my pocket and handed Jack the fallen leaf. "But the other people didn't deserve to die. My grandfather put his life in danger, yes. He walked out on that icy surface and pulled out certain members of his crew. He chose specific people on that ship. Chose lives. One, his mistress, my grandmother, he saved. But the others, the ones who fell, who sank with the mast and died. With his wife," I stopped. A plane's engine pierced through the storm and covered the projection of my voice. I didn't want to hear the rest out loud anyway. I had never even revealed that much to my best friend before.

For the moment I had forgotten about Jack's parents. The ones who gave him life. The people who gave him up two weeks after he had been born. Being selfish, I forgot about his adoptive parents. Recently deceased in a plane crash.

Jack finally lifted his eyes. Almost looking at me, he set a double twelve down between us, connecting our branches and starting a new train. He picked up the leaf and traced the veins over the wet skin. Then he flipped his hand over and studied his palm. Subtle lines touched and arched in many directions. Such intricate patterns could not have been made on accident.

I stretched my arm, attempting to feel the rivets and creases that designed and decorated his hand. The side of my elbow, the bunched up fabric of my sweatshirt, crashed into the domino channels, the paths we created turn by turn. The dominoes fell in a random mess, a spilled competition.

"We're nothing to them anyway," Jack said. He stood slowly and stepped to my side of the bench. Pulling the blue fleece around him, he sat with me and shared the warm covering.

One domino hid inside his hand. I noticed it as his leg met the side of mine. With an abrupt movement and a slight smile beginning to form, he threw the domino on the table in front of us. It landed white side up. We didn't know how many dots were on the other side. It didn't matter.

In Between

In her next life, she won't keep count. Not like the way she has in the past, not like the way she does now. She'll turn those limitations off. Jayme won't track her events in a little calendar book, a page for each day, highlighting her failures and the ways she could have done better. A little rectangle book sits by her bed next to a neatly organized pack of markers that snaps closed with a silver clip. The red ink is saved for especially strenuous days. Especially days full of fear, regret.

The next time she lives, Jayme won't bash herself for not putting in full effort into every little detail. She won't wait for recognition or acknowledgement. In her next life, Jayme will just go through one day to the next. Let them bleed together the way she imagines time does for most people, the way she wishes it would for her.

But for now, she counts as she scans each of the items, ringing up the trinkets and the necessities. Since all of the merchandise in the store costs only one dollar, she tries to guess the total before she begins swiping the bar codes across the laser eye.

Looking at a plastic green cart full of toilet paper, off-brand milk cartons, candles, birthday cards, slinkies, and seasonal items (Halloween has always been her favorite—she loves doing those window decorations) she tallies an estimate: $36.15. Most of the time, she comes within a dollar or two, and then tells herself that next time she will calculate it correctly, to the penny.

The customers are always different. An older woman with a purse that would cost Jayme a year's salary chooses dog treats and chewy toys. Teenage boys purchase the BB guns that will break after shooting one round of gray spheres at each other's chests. A young mother picks out towels, the ones with the best sewn trim, probably to impress the father or perhaps his parents.

But for Jayme, it's always the same. She imagines what will become of the deals that they bring home. *Will the towels make a difference in a life? Will the dogs enjoy the plastic cow and the raw hides? Will the plastic weapons be left in a front yard during the rain? Where do they all go when they leave, exiting through the glass door, the door that causes the hanging wind chime to bounce its poles off of each other in a high-pitched sting?*

At exactly 10:23 each night, Jayme locks the door, hearing the chime sound one more time, but not really noticing it. When she reaches the end of the parking lot, she knows she will find Lewis waiting for her. Some nights he will have the window rolled down and be smoking a thick brown cigar. Other times, his eyes will be closed and he will have his music playing at a low volume, so soft, that when Jayme approaches the black and white cab, she thinks Lewis is asleep.

The first couple of times he drove her home he accepted money from Jayme. She watched the red lights on the meter move up number by number. He dropped her off in front of the duplex, seven dollars and seventy-six cents in his dark, wrinkled palm.

"Same time tomorrow night, if you don't mind," Jayme had said as she grabbed her book bag with the iron-on university symbol flaking off. She was counting out crisp bills when Lewis sighed. *He's going to say no,* she thought. *He's going to tell me that it's too close of a drive for him to make it worth the trip. I don't tip well-enough, that's what it will be.*

"You go to school around here?" He asked, pointing at the navy blue bag on her shoulder.

"Yeah, trying to be a nurse someday." Jayme didn't look up when she responded. She kept her focus on counting out the correct change for a ten percent tip.

"I'd tip you more if I could." She didn't want to lose a ride that she felt comfortable taking home. In truth, Jayme knew she could walk the five miles, but that would make it an hour and thirteen minutes later that she would arrive home, an hour and thirteen minutes less to study for exams and label the correct muscles on her diagrams, an hour and thirteen minutes less to sleep before walking up at 5:53a.m. to do it all over again.

Lewis took off his knit-woven hat to reveal a bald head with a few left over weeds of gray and white curls. "How 'bout this. I'll take you home, no charge, if you don't mind one thing."

Jayme looked at her shoes, dark blue sneakers her mother had forgotten. *She called them Chuck's, didn't she? Another name for a boy. Did she leave them on the floor on purpose? Did she abandon them too? Did she want me to see them? Was she in that much of a hurry that she forgot them?* But they even

looked like boys' shoes, so Jayme was always a little surprised that her mother didn't take them with her. *Or maybe, she left them here to remind me of who I am not.*

A size too small on Jayme's feet, they made her look younger. They made her look vulnerable. She knew she would list this under the day's date in her book in a new color. *What marker will I use for this?* She wondered when she couldn't figure a way to answer his question.

"Nothing like that. Nothing like that. I'll drop you off. It's on my way home, if you don't mind that I make one short stop each night. I won't even get out of the car and it'll only take an extra five minutes." Five minutes verses an hour and thirteen.

"Deal."

It easily became part of her routine. It's something Jayme actually looks forward to. Lewis always has music playing. Stuff Jayme's never heard. It's nothing like the popular songs turned into jazz that the store plays and it's not the usual Woody Guthrie that her father plays on his guitar. He has to play her at least one song every time he sees her.

But Lewis's songs have more aesthetic lyrics. Even the instruments sound like speaking voices that pronounce themselves in forms of flute and organ notes. The verses from the first night are the ones Jayme remembers most often: *We made mistakes and I'm still makin' 'em too. What would I do, what would I do without you?*

The vocals repeated themselves in a chorus when they made the stop. Lewis pulled the cab to the side of the road in front of a house. It sat opposite the woods, just south of the Great Lake, in the affluent part of town. Jayme knew the neighborhood well since she usually had to travel through it to get to her home. She always thought of it like bragging. The designers of the town must have known that to get to the smaller houses, the duplexes, the trailer parks, residents would have to make their way through the brick homes with porches, some even with pools, all of them with two car garages and some even with three. It was an obvious statement of what some people had and what others could only want.

The house had smoke rising from its grey brick chimney. Lights were on inside, but with curtains drawn shut, Jayme could only imagine what its inhabitants could be doing, what they were probably doing together. She pictured the inside as the opposite of her own home. The carpet would be vacuumed with parallel lines, the dishwasher would be swirling water around. If children lived there, they would be asleep with matching sheets and comforters. Two parents would sit by the fire, one reading, the other watching the news.

Lewis looked at the house. He touched his forehead with the palms of his hands and then placed them over his chest. For a moment, Jayme thought he might be having trouble breathing. But he lifted his head, said something that Jayme could not understand, it sounded like Latin, but she didn't hear all of the consonant sounds. And then they were moving again. And she was home.

"Tomorrow, yes?" he asked.

In front of the duplex she shared with her father (although Jayme usually phrases it as the home she "loans to her father when he's around"), Jayme realized that the meter had been off the whole time.

"Are you sure I don't owe you?" she asked.

"Tomorrow, yes?" he repeated.

Jayme nodded, pulled the bag over her shoulder and walked up the steps to the first floor door. Before getting out her keys, she turned to see the taillights down the street, going back the way they had come.

Her father was asleep on the couch. He wasn't even laying down, just sitting there with his head tilted back and a bag of popcorn in his lap, most of the yellow puffs surrounded his feet. It looked as if he had been completely awake one minute and snoring the next, without any time in between. *Wouldn't it be nice not to have time in between? It must be so easy to glide from one moment to the next without thinking about it.*

After slipping off her sneakers and setting down her bag, Jayme picked up each of the fluffy kernels one at a time. All twenty-seven of them. Making a bowl with her palms, they almost overflowed, almost spilled between her blue painted fingernails (she got that bottle at the store too with her fifty-percent off discount—fifty cents with her fifty percent discount. She liked saying it that way to herself).

Before dropping her father's crumbs into the sink, Jayme made her hands meet. The twenty-seven crumb pieces turned into probably over two-hundred. They fell in between a plate crusted with spaghetti sauce and a cereal bowl with

dried milk in the rim. *I can't believe I let it get like this, especially when he shows up. I knew I should have taken care of the mess last night, but then I wouldn't have been able to study for the Anatomy Exam. Maybe he didn't notice. He probably didn't notice.*

She hadn't seen her father in almost three weeks, 18 days to be exact. Two weeks and four days. He had been on a job driving the eighteen-wheeler all over the county to towns Jayme had never even heard of before, like Lamb's Labor and Hayfield County.

Jayme looked back at her father as she turned on the sink. The kitchen and the family room were really just one room, one room with two different names. She didn't want the faucet to wake him up.

The sink filled with dark warm water and white bubbles. She slipped her fingers beneath its surface and began to scrub. Flakes of blue paint polluted the purity of the suds. *I'll have to start all over now. The draining will make even more noise.*

Jayme looked back at her father one more time. His eyelids fluttered. She wished she could see what he was seeing at the moment, in a different world, a different life. Turning away, she ripped the stopper from the outlet, one quick motion.

"Jay?" He sat up, rubbing his sockets with his palms. Jayme wiped her fingers on the orange towel decorated with little smiling spiders, pulling more of the polish from her nails.

"You know, you kind of scared me. Wasn't expecting you and I didn't recognize you. Sure are lucky I'm not a violent person," she said.

The towel dropped to the floor behind her. When she sat beside him and wrapped her arms around his extra hairy neck, she noticed the orange fabric on the ground. She stood, ceasing the embrace. Making three sideways steps, Jayme picked it up and placed it hanging half in the sink and half dangling over the ground. Perfect symmetry. She coughed in her fist, turning her head away, and then slid back into the space between her father and the couch cushion. In between her father and the cushion, her favorite place in the apartment.

"You talking about this?" He asked pointing at his stringy gray strands. The length almost reached his shoulders. Paired with the beard, he could have been a stranger. His facial hair covered almost all of his cheeks and his chin.

Jayme nodded, smiling a silent laugh.

"Met this woman up in Lansing. You'd love her honey. Name's Summer. She convinced me to give what God so easily gave me. To grow my hair long and donate it to the Locks of Love Contribution. See, with Locks of Love, you let your hair—" He waved his hands around his head, could have been drawing Medusa in the air.

"Dad, I know what Locks of Love is." Jayme looked down at his feet. His yellow work boots were coated with mud. She hated showing her knowledge to him, but couldn't help herself at the same time. It was the only way she could take it all out on him, even though she really thought, really knew it was all her fault anyway.

"Summer's sister had the cancer, like your older brother, but she survived. People can survive." The word "survive" sounded strange between his mustached lips. He pulled at the hair hanging from his chin.

Jayme bowed her head again, this time without a smile. "How long you staying this time?" Her back spoke the question to her father as she made her walked back to the sink. The rush of water drowned his answer. She didn't really want to hear it anyway. But she made an estimate in her head. *Three days, maybe four. Four if I'm lucky.*

When the plates and bowls dripped water in the wooden holder, the dirty liquid spun down the drain. Jayme dried her hands, listening to the canned laughter from whatever sitcom played on the television. Her father, now horizontal, still wore his jeans and his gray sweatshirt. Still wore his netted ball cap, and the beige afghan covered his untied boots, still on his feet.

After highlighting and color-coding the new vocabulary in her texts and sketching the scale-size portrait of the human heart (she used blue colored pencils, though), Jayme went to her Book of Days. What had once been a simple composition notebook at the Dollar Outlet, now held so much more than the fifty cents used to purchase it. It became so much more. A life of its own.

Jayme had glued a yellow ribbon in its spine to serve as a bookmark. The inside of the black and white splotched cover held one photograph: a brunette, around the age of four, with her curly wet hair draped over her bare shoulders trapped the girl in a jumping motion through a spinning lawn sprinkler. A boy, about seven, stood in the left corner, blue and white striped trunks, laughing at his

sister's two legs, two feet, that for a moment, didn't touch the grass. The mother between the children, her eyes closed, her hands over her mouth—a mouth that must have been smiling, her eyes, after all, had the three triangular lines coming from their corners.

Jayme opened the book to the next blank page. She pulled out the black marker from her unsnapped pouch and wrote at the top of the paper, "October 10." Each entry, each listed item under the date owned its own color, even though it took Jayme an extra six minutes to switch markers so many times. October tenth:

–Drew heart, turned pulmonary veins (all four of them) into blue water faucets

--Dad home, long hair, new girlfriend, predict will last two months and one day

--Met Lewis, strange, nice, good music, different.

In the morning, all the dishes sat dry in the same position Jayme had left them only a few hours before, except for one. A half eaten bowl of instant brown sugar oatmeal waited for Jayme in the center of the round coffee table. It was the only evidence she found. Without it, she would have convinced herself she dreamed the whole thing, imagined the whole visit.

"Somehow" is the word Jayme always uses. Somehow, after making it through the hours and the minutes, the evening arrived. So did Lewis. Steam exhaled from the muffler of the taxi. He parked in the exact center of the parking

lot. Not too close as to be intimidating. Not too far away so Jayme might not see him, even though his was the only vehicle left on the empty concrete.

"Didn't think I'd show, did you?" He asked without looking up.

"I knew you would," she answered. She landed in the back seat.

The drive home was the same experience as the previous night's and the same as it would be for the following four months and eleven days. Only slight variations interspersed their routine. Jayme grew to look forward to the details that the visit to the one house, to the details that their drive would bring.

Sometimes Lewis would recite what sounded like a type of prayer. "Salve, Regina, mater misericordiae: vita, dulcedo, et spes nostra, salve. Ad te clamamus exsules filii Hevae." He could make it sound like a rhyming poem. Jayme didn't know what it meant or why he did it, but the sound of his voice, his pronunciation of few vowels made her feel something. *Something in between sorrow and hope.*

Sometimes he would give Jayme recipes for simple meals that could be made "for one." Broccoli salad. Sausage and Veggie Rolls. Potato and Mince Patties. Different specialties of curry. Soul Cakes. The ingredients and the directions were written in a bold capital print, always on a yellow legal pad of paper. When she would sit, in her spot, behind the passenger seat, Lewis handed her the paper, folded in fourths, and would have some story to tell that would be part of the meal. She kept his wrinkled pieces of paper between the pages of her notebook, her self-made calendar.

"Before we moved here, in a former life of mine, this would be a feast for a celebration. Eat it with one candle lit on the table. A white candle, for purity of sins." Then he would drive.

Sometimes he would quiz Jayme on cytology basics and endocrine functions for an up-coming exam. Lewis knew how to phrase the questions exactly the way her professor would. His knowledge, his words, his warmth all were a type of mystery and magic to Jayme.

The visits to the house shared the same qualities as Lewis himself. The only part about the ten o'clock trip home that would remain unchanged would be the house itself. The garage doors stayed shut, probably locked with a security system. Smoke drifted from the chimney. One light illuminated the front room, but the blinds made it impossible to even make out shadows or silhouettes.

The vehicle idled in front of the two-story. Lewis sat quietly. Jayme respectfully watched her toes, in those same boy shoes, cross and uncross each other. It lasted only two and a half minutes and then he would take her home, saying nothing for the remainder of the short distance.

Jayme never asked. She wanted to, but she knew some things were supposed to be left in between words and silence.

"February 21: Still Life Number One" she wrote at the top of the page.

Jayme had been thinking about him all day, really since the night before. After Lewis dropped her off, Jayme finished the second version of her heart. All of the markers in her pouch, all of the shades had been used, even the one labeled simply, "red." She made the superior vena cava into one large water faucet, the

aorta into one long orange slinkie, the right coronary artery formed a large piece of broccoli. Over the pericardium, Jayme had written, "Ad hominem: To the man," in perfect cursive. It was Latin, she had learned, for him.

She folded the white paper into fourths, making sure the creases landed where the septum separated the ventricles. Half of her yellow ribbon bookmark had been tied into a bow and taped to the top of the square. On her last test, Jayme earned an "A" instead of the typical "B plus" she had gotten used to seeing at the top right hand corner. She knew Lewis was part of her achievement.

At 9:47p.m. Jayme counted the last of the purchased items. One: a pack of mechanical pencils. Two: a Valentine's Day Card with a baby Cupid on the cover. Three: a red knitted scarf. *I haven't seen this in the store yet. I'll buy one before I leave, maybe two.* Four: a pack of white socks. The total came to $4.52, an easy amount to figure in her head. The customer had been a girl, a high school student probably. When she made the chime ding as she left the store, Jayme called after her, "Be careful going home. Raining pretty hard out there." The girl turned around and smiled at Jayme.

Wrapping the new neckwear around her two and a half times, Jayme took the other scarf and put it over the small piece of art, the most important part of human life. She locked the door behind her before she realized the parking lot, the spaces in between the parallel white lines, all were empty. The watch on her wrist blinked 10:17.

I'm early. So she waited. It was the prime example of when Jayme wished that time would bleed together, one moment to the next. By 10:48, she knew she had to start walking.

The downpour made her curls limp and stick to her shoulders. She kept her head down, avoiding the wind, and noticed the different shades of blue in her shoes. The darker blotches held the most water. The scarf kept her lips and nose dry. *What would the high school girl be doing with hers? Staying warm, making a fashion statement? In my next life, I'll buy an umbrella.*

She took the same route as Lewis would have driven her. Even though she could have cut through the wooded area between residence and nature, the concrete comforted her. If she could have remembered Lewis's heavy words, those thick phrases, the quiet praryers, she would have been humming them to herself to the tune of "This Land Was Made for You and Me."

She was trying to picture the images that came to mind when Lewis recited them. They always produced the same tangible objects in her mind. The pictures came so easily to her in that leather seat, but as she tried, she couldn't remember what the prayer made her visualize.

Two red dots, like a flattened equal sign, they were lights ahead of her. Two blurry red lights. *Which part of the cardiovascular system would those dots represent on an exam?* She slowed her approach and realized where she stood. Even though she never knew the actual name of the street, she knew where she was. About five hundred more steps and she would be finding herself in front of that house. It almost made her feel as if she were home, even though she knew

nothing about the inhabitants. They were not family. They were not friends. They were strangers, strangers she somehow knew so well.

His taillights came into view. *They were pieces of the sinoatrial nodal artery. It initiates the pulses. The pieces of life. That's how Lewis helped define it.*

The dots of water on the driver's side window made his profile hard for Jayme to see. The lines of rain shadowed his face. It looked like he was crying. His chin touched his chest and his eyes were closed. When Jayme tapped the glass with her unpolished nails, Lewis immediately jerked to attention. The window moved down, even through the weather, Jayme could hear its motor working.

"I didn't realize the time. Jay, I'm sorry."

It took her a moment, a short space in time, she stood there. She saw that it wasn't reflections on his cheek. Tears had dried and more moved with slow motion.

When she finally started moving her feet, tight in those shoes, she realized he had spoken again. "In front, Jayme. You can sit in front."

She waited until she counted to twelve to look at his face. *Another gift. The gift of time. Time to hide the proof of pain.*

"My wife. Former wife lives here. With my son. I think he sees me, sometimes, if I wait long enough. I'm so sorry." They sat there together, watching the lack of movement in the house, without speaking, without songs, without recipes, without prayers.

It was 11:37 when they reached her destination. She had come up with six different ways to introduce the gift to Lewis and as the windshield wipers moved in parallel lines across the glass, Jayme could not think of one that would fit. Unzipping her blue bag, she pulled out a red scarf and the white square. The canvas and the wool had not been enough protection. Jayme could tell that it would not look the same as it had the night before. *The broccoli and the slinkie probably merged.* But using both of her hands, she handed the lump to him anyway and she opened the door.

"Mother of Mercy, our life, our sweetness and our hope. To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve; to thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears. Turn then, most gracious advocate, your eyes of mercy toward us; and after this our exile." When Lewis finally spoke, Jayme knew what she always visualized when he prayed. That Raphael painting. Madonna and child.

"In our next lives…" Jayme said, not finishing the sentence.

He answered, "Tomorrow, yes?"

Bananas in Blue

"My life is a sham." He says this, really to his wife, and tucks the new pack of cigarettes in his back denim pocket. But it's as if he's confessing to the young clerk, a stranger, since it's her that he's facing.

She blinks a vacant expression. The cash register chimes, bangs shut.

Picking up the few bills and the change on the counter's surface, Toby does not turn to toward his wife. She stands behind him, almost hiding. The blonde cashier pops a pink bubble and rolls her eyes. He looks at the coins, they clink in his palm. He shakes them like he is about to roll dice.

Other cars have pulled up to the pumps when they exit the convenience store, a black truck, a station wagon. He can hear children in the backseat of the extended cab, an argument leaks from the half-open window, reminding him of his twin sister. Knowing Macey will not help him with what he has to take care of, that she will not leave her travels, her hiking in Cappadocia, he inhales the rising voices, the contagious anger.

His wife follows him. She grasps the purse on her shoulder as if keeping it from falling off and spilling her life's contents on the greasy pavement.

"I'm sorry. Really. Sorry. I…" She sits down in the passenger seat and gently shuts the door.

But he won't let her finish. Blaming her, even though no one is at fault, he says, "Just don't, Layla, don't." The ignition turns over, the engine's power awakens. Loud, blank noise.

He tosses the brochure onto her lap. There is the face of a man on the tri-fold glossy cover above the words, "A Variety of Options." The man's face looks down at the lettering. Toby wonders what had been said right before the picture was taken. Why did the man have a half smile?

Toby wishes someone else had told him the news. It shouldn't have been his wife's responsibility. It should have been an aunt, an uncle, or even a father. Such titles, though, he had never been able to use in his life. He had never met any of the people to whom they belonged. And Layla had been home, alone, when the nursing home called informing of their loss. His loss.

Layla had been sitting at the kitchen table, empty, except for the blue glass bowl filled with bananas, merely for decoration. Neither of them liked the taste of bananas. But she bought them because Toby enjoyed watching the yellow change into browns within the cobalt, liked to see decay as if the beauty of it could stop it and defy nature.

Every few days, he would notice the transitions, the way the ripeness took over, becoming too much. But he always hoped that if he appreciated the change, it would keep the bananas alive in the blue bowl. Maybe even reverse time's effects, make the pale yellow come back.

She still sat at the kitchen table, hadn't moved since she hung up the phone, when Toby walked through the side door and dropped his keys in front of

her. Biting the white off her thumbnail, she looked at him, watched him, waited for him to speak.

"What?" He asked, placing his hands on his hips and removing his utility belt.

She pressed her lips against each other, between her teeth, keeping the words quiet as long as possible. "They called today. Your mother…"

"Got it. She's gone."

When Layla nodded, he didn't respond again. He didn't speak for the rest of that evening, not even when he returned home hours into the morning, smelling of beer and burnt tobacco.

They both knew that Colleen had really left them the previous year when the disease had progressed beyond her short-term memory. So Macey stopped visiting, left the country, left Toby to deal with it.

Toby saw his mother for the last time two weeks before. He hadn't wanted Layla to go with him. What he really wanted was one moment of his mother's time to himself. Colleen had favored Layla over her own son. Toby refused to give up this belief. So he hadn't told Layla how he sang, "Loves Me Like A Rock" to Colleen. He didn't talk about how he had whispered at her bedside the only good stories he could think of, the two he could remember, while she smiled at the ceiling tiles:

"ONE: Our fifth birthday. We didn't have money to buy ingredients for a cake. So you and Macey decided to make one from whatever we had in the cabinet/laundry room—pancake mix, grape jelly, rice, an apple. You lit leftover

sparklers, the ones we found when we moved into that house that you said you were saving for a 'real special' occasion. And we danced around the room, in the dark, with flecks of gold jumping from our fingers.

"TWO: When we three slept outside, for an adventure, five nights. You said you were tired of the curtains from your former life. The ones your parents had given you before you told them about me and Macey. So we slept on the white fabric under the willow tree."

Toby never told Layla about that visit. Toby never told Layla those memories. It was a secret he shared with his mother, but really with only himself.

When he thinks of his mother now, on the way home from the funeral parlor, he can only see what she looks like in that black and white photograph. Her caretakers had given it to them, one of two personal effects, and now they carry it in their trunk. It was taken on her first and only day working at the food pantry. He remembers how excited she had been that morning. She had him take that picture with their folding roll film camera before she went to the bus station. She wore her best dress, pink with white polka-dots, a mock-mink shawl and her velvet pillbox hat.

He hears, only in his own voice now, how she had said that their lives would be different. Better. The three of them together. Better. He specifically remembers the sound of that word. How when she walked away, her black heals scraped the sidewalk, almost dragging, and he felt a little sorry for her, even though he didn't know why.

"Your life's *not* a sham," Layla says, faces him for a moment and then stares back at the flashing white highway lines, the few she can see in the cone of the headlights. She almost repeats herself, but decides it would sound too forced, as if she were trying to convince herself as well.

He pulls the pack of cigarettes from his pocket, accelerating from almost standing up. Lights one. Layla watches the paper burn from the orange ring, ash falling to the dashboard. The white turns to gray and then to nothing. It reminds her of something.

When they pull into the driveway, Layla folds the rectangle brochure in half, the only possibilities left for Colleen, and stuffs it in her purse, zips closed. It won't fall from inside her bag, even if it fell to the ground. Layla kept the information safe inside.

Toby spits the filter, all that is left of the cigarette, to the ground.

"It is a sham. And it was an accident. My life is an accident. I was an accident." He says this as he lifts the trunk door over his head, uses both hands, both arms, holds the hatch above him, doesn't move for a minute. Then adds, "Macey and I ruined her life." Pulling the quilt from within the car as if it had been on a spool, he sniffs the squares, the stitched blue and yellow squares, white threading. It smells like an orange, like pickle spices, like vinegar, like molasses, like all the scents sewn together, like his mother.

But Layla hadn't closed her purse all the way. As she stepped from the vehicle, everything—lipstick, loose pennies, a used tissue, and the funeral parlor brochure—rolled beneath her seat. So Layla let the rest escape her lips.

"I saw her. Went to see her two days ago. She looked shriveled, smaller. She touched my hair, even though she didn't know who I was, with fingers that shook and looked like spoiled celery. It was snowing. She told me it was snowing, where she was going, it was snowing. But it wasn't cold. And maybe it isn't real snow, she said. Maybe it is anything that is white, feathers or paper. Then she whispered something I couldn't hear and she went to sleep." Layla takes a step back when she finishes, unsure how he will respond to her admission, that she had a secret meeting with Colleen. Layla was the last to say goodbye.

He remains still, but somehow has a different color about him. Maybe it's the streetlight reflecting off the quilt. Because Toby is silent, not speaking, not looking at her, she wonders if she should have just let him think that she didn't have a chance to see Colleen again.

Maybe it's blood rushing to her face, maybe she just imagines it, but she is almost sure he has a blue tint to him. Waiting for his response, she can't see his face. He hides his expression in the blanket, wrinkled in his hands.

Complimentary Colors

She tells me she sees the divine in her dreams. Last night, my sister's vision was in the form of a cardinal.

"Perched on a branch and looking in my window. At me. At me, Lucia." Gabriella says this as I order a hot raspberry tea. The usual barista, Julian, listens to my request politely, although he knows what I'm going to want. He usually guesses my drink. Usually knows what I need. He smiles at me, not speaking. Normally, he has something to say. Something that stays with me.

Gabriella breaks my brief, silent connection. "He was red. The color of spontaneity." This is one of the many reasons why we meet on Thursdays for coffee: the source of my sister's inspiration. Energy always exudes her. It's a glow. The etheric aura of her body, as Gabriella calls it by its proper name, has a violet hue.

"In Reiki beliefs, it means that I am prone to intuition and imagination." Since I was nine and Gabriella thirteen, she has been telling me this. But I remember seeing the purple cloud around her even before that. That is one of the few things Gabriella does believe me about.

On the way to the café, I notice my surroundings more lately than I have before. I pass these streets daily, but have never noticed certain landmarks and pieces of my environment. A water fountain at Rockford Avenue, a lone house from the early nineteenth century at a random spot north of the interstate, church

marquees. Especially the signs outside the churches' stain glass windows. I hear their words in the form of a voice.

My sister may recognize details and colors during her sleep, I'm trying to take in more images during my waking hours. Today, the black letters framed in glass marquee outside of a small chapel caught my vision. *When is Enough, Enough?*

"Griffin left last night," I say. Gabriella's long black hair wraps her neck like a scarf. She pulls a strand away from her mouth and sips dark roast from a white mug. It's best if I ignore her dream recap, at least for the moment. Her eyes meet mine while she drinks.

"New York is where he belongs. He announced this while I was reading on the couch. 'Looking back, there are so many ways things could've been. My whole life can't be full of regrets, Lucia.' Picking up a suitcase, it was already packed, though I never saw him do it, he just dropped his keys on the table and stepped out the door." I speak slowly, monotone, like a contestant in spelling bee.

I wait for a response. Gabriella's hands surround that mug, taking in its heat, and she stares into it as if there will be some sort of guidance for her next words in the depths of the coffee. I want to roll my eyes at the amount of time it takes for her to speak.

"Lucia, I know. I also dreamt of you last night. Wrapped in a cocoon of blue blankets. Then the covers, the shelter, the constraints broke away. They fell off you. And I watched you fly away. The cardinal followed your new path with her eyes and then she looked at me, and smiled." Gabriella always speaks this

way. It enervates me to no extreme. She finishes speaking, finishes stirring her coffee, and sets her spoon on a napkin. "I knew he would be out of your life soon."

Her first response doesn't surprise me. Part of Gabriella's talent has always been to predict events before they happen. I've always been jealous of her ability. She will tell me to bring my umbrella, even on a cloudless day, but later, when the storm arrives, I understand that she could see it coming. I hate the way she talks. I hate the way she is right.

I am nine and Gabriella is thirteen. We climb the branches of our favorite backyard tree. It holds us in its thick bark-covered limbs, cradling us. We never really worry that we will fall. Gabriella gives me her turquoise, feather-filled coat. I don't know why, I am not cold, but I put it on. It feels like a type of protection. It feels like she knew I would soon be asking for it. I don't tell her that I don't want the jacket, don't need it.

The wind picks up. When she speaks, I know her words, her warning, are the purpose of her subtle generosity. She's being nice for a reason. I should have known.

"It will happen tomorrow," she says and makes sure I am holding on tight in the "L" of the tree. I think she is talking about another storm, the season's first snow, since the leaves have all abandoned our tree. They sit beneath us in an orange-brown pile, just in case we lose our balance. My sister pulls me closer to her, places her arm around my shoulder, an extra layer.

"Mama, Madre, she leaves tomorrow, Lucia. She's going to leave us tomorrow. A choice." Everything loosens around me. I want to fall. I want to land in the leaves. I want to wake up. Not believe. Call my sister a liar. But I sit, thankful for the coat. Again and again, she's right. I should have known.

"We will not hear her words, her singing in the morning. She will not be able to knit for us. We will not play with her long gray curls. She will be gone. Mama is leaving us. Do you understand? " I do. My sister can see that I comprehend. She sees my face open as if to make sound, in shock. She tries to grab me in time. She doesn't. My connection with the tree and with my sister is lost. I drop, fall. Land beside the orange-brown pile.

The second part of Gabriella's reaction to my announcement, does, in fact, startle me.

"At least you weren't married to him," Gabriella adds. These words sound as if they are coming from a stranger. They are out of place, for her. They sit between us, stale, awkward. For a second, I don't recognize my sister. The multiple piercings up and down her earlobes are like the buildings I drive past all the time, but have never acknowledged before. Seen, but never really noticed.

"Find power in the stillness of now," she adds as lavender circles return around her, sounding like the sister I know.

She repeats her advice in a softer tone this time. "Find power in the stillness of now. We focused on this in my last class. Just take some time for yourself, that's all I'm trying to say, Lucia." Gabriella sweeps left over muffin

crumbs from the table to a napkin, wrinkles it into a ball and sets it between us.

She instructs a yoga practice. I try to attend her Saturday morning classes. I go to watch her breathe. Electric energy rushes through her blood, the visual observation that she will visit with the divine afterwards. The way she moves, the sound of her voice, she is someone so different from me, I have a hard time accepting that we share the same absent mother.

She instructs in forms of verses. *Inhale. Feel the tickle, the expansion in your lungs, the source enters our bodies. A supernatural presence. Exhale. Now we greet unity. We have melted with the source and live from it. Splash into the waters. Balance with the waves. We are now water and wave.*

I beg my breath to bring me this power. Gabriella's power. I cannot feel the splash like the waves that strike my sister. Standing in the back of the studio, I struggle not to cry. And then I wonder if my tears would be part of those waves.

I come to the coffee shop on these Thursdays and on my shift breaks from my used bookstore. Julian brews the espresso while chatting with the regular customers. When I order an iced mocha, he tells me his imaginations of places he's never been before like Alaska or the ocean. If I order a double-shot in my cappuccino he whispers comments about random subjects, the sky, the last time he saw a good movie, or the daily news.

Sometimes, he quotes poetry. Gabriella is in the restroom when he comes to our little round table in the corner. He stands and waits for me to look up at him. The left side of his face seems a little like a grimace, a little like a smile.

"In my sky at twilight you are like a cloud/and your form and colour are the way I love them. You are mine, mine, woman with sweet lips/ and in your life my infinite dreams live./ The lamp of my soul dyes your feet, the sour wine is sweeter on your lips,/ oh reaper of my evening song,/ how solitary dreams believe you to be mine! It is a poem you should read. Here, you need all forms of art in your life." Handing me a postcard, he turns back to the line of thirsty customers. It is a four by six glossy. Clocks are slipping off of edges and tree branches. A mountain peaks in the background at the edge of a sea. Flipping the card over, I see the title of the familiar work, "The Persistence of Memory, 1931."

Gabriella returns, sits and pulls her chair closer under the table. She cannot see the index card painting. I keep it under the table, in my lap, and out of her view. Her brown eyes widen and she tilts her head as if asking me a question.

"Lucia, your aura. It's yellow. Strong and gold. It wasn't there before, just five minutes ago. You know, yellow is the color of healing." She touches my shoulder. Her fingers feel warm, like the steam from my tea on my face.

"Griffin didn't want regrets. I don't want to be a regret. And I won't let him have any of my remorse. We used to walk in the rain and swing on playgrounds at midnight. Years ago. But he's told me, many times, that meeting me was an accident." Through my almond shaped reading glasses, Gabriella looks magnetized. I haven't shared much of my intimacies of Griffin with her. She always said he was a weight, an extra body, pulling my energy down.

"But when I've come home lately, the remote has melted between his arm and chest. He said he would have news soon. Each day, 'I'm waiting, Lucia,' he

would say. He'd say that The Times's recruiter should be calling. The phone never rang, though."

Gabriella picks up the wadded napkin and unfolds it. She flattens it with her palm. The wrinkles are still visible. "You need to meditate tonight. Time zones during introspection are like waves which get us closer to peace. Rejoice in the space between thoughts. Let them be one object, one memory. Put all that past, those memories, put them away." She crumples the white tissue again, walks over to the trash, and drops it gently in the can. "You have to feel the pain to get through it."

I sigh and blink slowly. I could try this when I get home, but I know it would just be me begging again. Invoking that gift my sister received and did not leave any for me. It would be a waste of time. I would just feel the minutes slipping away from me into a lost place, like the space between the numbers on a clock dissolving.

"Look for that cardinal," Gabriella says. "She will be watching for you, if you're looking, waiting for her."

I am not searching for a red bird when I get in my car. I'm studying the picture on the postcard again. There is a figure in the center, I cannot tell what it is. It seems like it would be the weight of a dead, pink body. The cardboard is crisp in my fingers, opposite of that poor napkin that Gabriella had been trying to use to make a point.

When I turn it over for the first time, I notice what I had not before. Cursive handwriting, small letters curls in the upper left corner. Before I read the

words that the coiled symbols represent, I know what they will say to me. I know they are the rest of Julian's song.

"*... You are mine, mine, I go shouting it to the afternoon's*
wind, and the wind hauls on my widowed voice.
Huntress of the depth of my eyes, your plunder
stills your nocturnal regard as though it were water.
You are taken in the net of my music, my love,
And my nets of music are wide as the sky.
My soul is born on the shore of your eyes of mourning.
In your eyes of mourning the land of dreams begin. –Neruda"

Driving home, that water fountain seems highlighted even in the haze of my headlights. Another church marquee pulls my attention from the road. *Faithful Love.*

Gabriella is fourteen and I am ten. We stand should to shoulder and smile. We let ourselves fall. Falling. The time it takes for our backs to sweep into the swinging hammock remains like blurred slow-motion. Giggling together, like many summer afternoons, we stare at the turquoise sky from Abuela Maria's backyard, my backyard now. This moment is a bookmark in my memory.

"I know magic," Gabriella says this for the second time. I watch the butterfly-shaped clouds sway up and down as we swing. The light wind makes it seem as if their wings are flying.

"I feel magic. Secrets whisper in my ear when I sleep. It's like sailing in the worn rope of this hammock." Her voice jumps when we push the blades of green ground away, pretending to splash water with our feet. We hold onto the motion. She is not laughing.

Pages, words, books blanket me. Five years I have given to this bookstore. I am now part owner. On slow days, I wrap myself in poetry. A personal search for the gift. Gabriella owns all of it. Me, I am still looking. The sound of fresh words liquefies between my ears. They fill absences.

A woman has been standing in the Mythology section for twenty minutes before I notice her. She is a poem herself. Long, curly gray spirals jolt from her head. They roll down her back like metered rhyme. She wears a patched quilt like a scarf. And I know she has been here before. I understand that I have seen her before. I know her name, somehow, but can't remember it. Like words of a second language not often used.

The quiet silhouette of a woman holds her hands behind her back and wears a light smile. I listen to Gabriella's words. They provide me with strength to approach the woman. *Inhale. Slowly, exhale.* When I open my eyes, the woman looks deep into them. She stands in front of me.

All the melted words want to spill from my mouth. She has met their sounds before, has inhaled tasty metaphors. She has splashed into the waters. Her violet velvet aura invites me. I suddenly overflow with questions to hand to

the woman, this stranger. This stranger, who I know. I see the questions in complimentary colors: Purple and yellow: Why did you leave? Orange and blue: Are you really back? Red and green: Do you miss us? But, like all those pairs of pigments, when added to each other, they produce a neutral color: grey, white, or black. So their syllables and sounds turn stale.

She stands, almost waiting. Waiting for me to voice the energy surging between us. Energy like breathing. My lungs reverberate in a purr, the way Gabriella instructs her yogis.

I say nothing.

My sister tells me she sees the divine in her dreams. Last night, Gabriella's vision was in the form of an older woman.

"Surrounded by books and reading poetry." Julian hears my sister's words. He winks in my direction. "She did not look at me."

I am watching the memory of my sister search Abuela's summer sky as she speaks. Investigating the clouds, adding them together like a visual puzzle, she does not, she cannot, see the butterfly shapes.

Following Rules

Bobby cried after the funeral not because his grandfather had died, but because of something Grannie Rose said to him. He was standing next to the tuna casserole in Aunt Shirley's kitchen.

I saw it. I could not hear her voice. But I watched as she bent over like a stiff piece of straw, put her hand up almost touching Bub's eleven year old cheek. Whisper something into his ear. I watched my little brother as he listened.

Bub. After that day, he no longer would answer to Robert or Bobby. After that day, he no longer played in his baseball league. No longer sat on the rope swing in our backyard. I even found his plastic dinosaur, I always called it a Tyranasor to make him laugh, buried in the dirt by the back door.

I watched Bobby, transform to Bub, as he listened to Grannie Rose.

He stared down at the black tie, too lengthy for his short frame, as if he were looking for a stain that wouldn't appear. Grannie Rose's secret seemed drawn out. Whispers were supposed to be simple, quick. But Grannie Rose spoke. Spoke too long. Her words must have been loaded. Don't look her in the eye. I knew that. It seemed Bub did too.

I wanted to ask my two older sisters what she could have said. But they were the first to leave, to remove themselves from our lives. They didn't, they wouldn't have come with us on the Texas visit. The Texas visit that Bub first

thought was a vacation and didn't understand why we couldn't swim at the Sleepy Bear Lodge. The Texas visit that I thought we were taking for an uncle's funeral. But not an uncle, a grandfather. A new word, a new person. Another person already gone.

"We have a grandfather?" I knew I'd only be allowed to ask Mom. Never ask Father questions, before or after supper.

"Yes, Miriam. He left for awhile, but then came back. You saw him when you were…" My mom hesitated and counted backwards on her fingers. "Oh, you must have been about three."

"Thanks. So I had a grandfather fifteen years ago. Then I didn't. Then I did. Now he's dead." But don't ask too many questions.

I never had even heard our father talk about his father. His mother, yes, I had heard of her. Not his father, no, not him. Not father. Not Dad. Not Grandpa or Papa. I wanted someone to tell me stories that would make him real, make him better than any of us. I wanted older my sisters, Jillian or Vanessa, to tell me what they knew. But at the time of the funeral they had both already moved away. Jillian was studying abroad on a scholarship, somewhere in Spain. Vanessa had packed an overnight bag three months earlier and eloped. Taking a toothbrush, her favorite Sunday dress—the one with the black lace around the collar—and married someone named Justin I had never heard of before. Vanessa became the second to leave. I knew as much about my grandfather as I did about where she went. Where she could be, at any moment.

The remaining four of us packed our luggage and took a trip. A trip to mourning. Not to swim. Bub still stuffed his trunks in his suitcase, even though Father said, he said it three times, there would be no swimming, no swimming, no swimming at the motel.

"This is not a time for laughing or splashing."

I knew better than to question our father. Not to stare at his shiny round head. Not when he meant business. Not when he gave an order, made a decision, set a rule.

And we drove. The only good part of my sisters not being present was that Bub and I each had our own row to stretch our legs out in our mold-green station wagon. I let my bare toes leave little oval prints on the sticky window glass. I pretended we were moving, starting over, and never turning around. Just like my sisters, we could end up anywhere. We could. But it would be Texas. Don't ask why. Don't ask how.

We stopped half way, finally getting off of the gray, gray, white-dashed interstate, and stayed in a motel that had adjoining rooms. Mom and Father shared one. Bub and I took the other. I didn't know how to answer him when he asked why Father wouldn't let him swim when there was a pool right outside of our window. It even had a white slide that curved around in the middle and poured water into the deep end. It looked like a long, slimy tongue.

All I could think of to tell him was, "You know how Mom's afraid of water. Thinks we'll drown if we even step too close to the edge of the concrete." I'd like to think that made him feel better since he didn't bring up swimming or

the pool again. He did say to me, quiet enough that I almost couldn't hear him, quiet so that our parents wouldn't hear in the next room, "What a waste of a vacation." Don't speak too loud. Whispers should not be wind. A lesson Bub, still Bobby at the time, would learn at our destination.

Before we left in the morning, Father made us put on our black outfits. On the first half of the drive we had been allowed to wear our night clothes, my long red cotton gown and thin white shorts, which made the ride about as comfortable as it could be. But for the remainder of the road torture, we had to be formally dressed. The rest of the drive we could not sit with our feet touching the windows or door handles. We had to sit, backs against the seat, feet straight down below us. Don't wrinkle your clothes. Don't misbehave. Don't. Don't. Be a silent present form of a body.

Five hours later, when we pulled up to an unfamiliar brick house, my black stockings had crept down from my waist to my knees creating a drum I had been silently beating. I didn't even care that my fingernails had punctured three holes in the nylon. The round bone of my knee stuck out. I didn't care if they would see. Grannie Rose or Father.

I played with the rip, watched it run down to my ankle when Grannie Rose passed by me. She must have looked at me, but went to Bub instead. In my aunt's kitchen, watching my brother who just looked uncomfortable in one of Dad's faded ties, I wished we would have just stayed home. Options not available.

Bub's blue eyes held a gaze, strong and short, as if he were contemplating that tuna casserole. It looked solid in the glass bowl. Bits of celery covered the glass hearts around the top of the serving dish. One of Aunt Shirley's seven daughters had brought it. I always got those cousins confused from one another, seeing them only every few years. But I figured whoever brought it, that dish was probably at least a week old.

I want to think that's what Bub was thinking. Nasty salad. Poison. Stay away. I like to think that Grannie Rosie was warning him not to eat the tuna. I'll never know what she said to him, but that wasn't it. Don't eat the casserole. That wasn't it.

Her arm swung down to her side when she stood as if she were bolted together at the waist with hinges. And as if somehow she were attached to Bub, he fell to the green linoleum floor when she walked away. Taking the tuna bowl with him.

I had heard Grannie Rose's name before. A few times. But of course, don't ask questions, Miriam. Don't ask. Just be.

I had heard of her as *that* Grannie Rose. The woman who gave birth to your father. That woman. When I first heard her name, I'm sure my mom must have said it. I pictured red petals trailing each of her steps. Silk follicles as her personal train. Now more like blades. Bloodied, sharp blades follow the sound of her name.

But I only could think of one story involving Grannie Rose. When our father was five, he had a Rottweiler. For six days. His two older brothers had

never been allowed to keep pets around the house. One of Grannie Rose's rules. No animals. But this one dog followed Dad home from school. Our mother accidentally told me once when I wanted a puppy.

"Miriam, we can't get a dog. Your father would get too upset." She spoke while she pulled molasses bread from the oven, new then in 1964. She gave me this answer as if I would understand.

"Why? Why would Dad be upset?" I had never seen my father show much of an emotion. Except for when he would be singing in the church choir, twice on Sundays and again Wednesday evenings. His eyes would move. Come alive. Halleluiah. Alive. Risen. The first time I saw him sing, I thought he looked like a puppet with his mouth attached to his eyebrows, moving in easy conjunction with each other. But stepping from the tiered rows of white cloth, stepping down from the alter, his facial muscles would go still and he wouldn't say a word. Until later, at home when he asked my mother to bring more coleslaw to the supper table. In a statement, not a question.

"That doesn't make any sense. Why can't I get a puppy?" I had to repeat myself a few times before my mother heard me. She wore her giant patterned oven mitt and waved it back and forth in the air over the steam. For a moment, I couldn't see her face through the fog that came from the mouth of the oven. Don't overstep your boundaries. But I would. Trespass and rip away.

"You know, dear. Because his *mother*." She stopped and took a deep breath, adjusted the round glasses on top of her nose. "Because Grannie Rose. Because he had a dog once." She looked down at me for the first time when she

paused again. She ran her vision from my bare feet to the top of my head, hair dirty and still ironed straight from the previous night.

"Go upstairs and wash up for supper."

There would be no more talk of getting a dog. That was the only time I remember my mom referring to Grannie Rose as his "mother." No more questions.

Later, in our room, after I heard Dad hack from his throat and spit into the sink, I asked Vanessa about it. Usually Vanessa would tell me she was busy. Talk on the phone downstairs in the kitchen with the curly cord stretched straight into the mud room. But that night, after I asked her about Dad and Grannie Rose and the dog, she rolled over in the other twin bed and sat up on her elbow. She stood and shut our door.

"Don't you know that story? Grannie Rose poisoned Dad's dog. She blamed it on the neighbor kid." Vanessa twisted her waist-length hair into a round nest on top of her head. She sat on the floor and crossed her legs. She wanted to talk to me. To me? Sharing parents, sharing blood, even sharing a room, only means so much. Until that night, Vanessa and I had not shared a moment.

She gave me the list of Grannie Rose's commandments. No singing. No laughing. No pets. No bicycles. No sports. No friends. Especially no friends. No belonging. Hair cut every Thursday. No speaking unless spoken to. "Remember that if your father ever returns." Grannie Rose would remind them every day: *If your father returns, you are on your best behavior. It is, after all,*

your fault he left, Daniel. Your fault. Your sin. Our father's wrongdoing? Right. Just like Bub pulled the tuna over his head on purpose. Right.

The commotion of Bub falling and the empty ringing of the casserole bowl on the floor brought my mother running. Running to Bub. Then running outside in the yard to our father. Bub didn't move. He sat on the linoleum, covered in tuna, still looking at his tie.

Immediately, my mother piled our belongings into the station wagon, my suitcase not even zipped the entire way and she drove us home. Father did not come with us.

"Get your things, we're leaving now." I wasn't used to Mom giving directions, making decisions. I behaved. Asked nothing more.

As we pulled away from Aunt Shirley's house, our father stood in the living room window with his hands on his hips. My parents saw each other, but didn't acknowledge it. I don't think Mom raised her palm to wave. I know she didn't smile.

Bub's window was down and the wind ripped my hair into knots. A pair of my underwear flapped between the zipper's metal teeth. Until we made it back to the Sleepy Bear Lodge, Bub smelled of rotten canned fish. The sound of Mom's teeth grinding back and forth filled the station wagon. Neither complained. Neither spoke. Still following rules.

The three of us shared one room. Bub went straight to the window.

"Miriam, why don't you take your brother and go swimming for awhile?" Mom pulled out his trunks from the suitcase and threw me her one piece suit, the

yellow one with a little skirt attached. Bub spun around and looked at Mom and then at me. I shrugged back and we both silently asked each other, "What the hell?" Bub and I would use this word, this tone to one another, but never out loud in front of our parents. Never directed at one of our parents.

How Bub went down that slide. His arms up in the air, I knew he was no longer thinking of the tuna, no longer thinking of whatever it was Grannie Rose had said to him. There were little pieces of gravel between my toes as I waded through the four feet of water. But I didn't care. I liked the sharp edges present on skin.

Three more days. I didn't know why, but for three extra days Mom let us stay in Sleepy Bear Lodge Room 17. Bub and I spent most of the daytime in the pool. At night, we ordered room service, whatever we wanted. Hamburgers, pizza, tacos, ice cream Sundaes, with extra cherries, and watched movies until we fell asleep. Such gluttonous behavior would usually never be allowed.

Mom didn't even make us say our prayers before getting into pajamas. We just slept where ever we fell, in whatever clothes we had on, even if they were still damp from the pool. It felt like a real vacation. We didn't really notice that Dad wasn't there or if anyone did, we didn't say anything. We didn't speak of Dad or Grannie Rose. Silent rules. Don't spoil it.

The cicadas were screaming when we finally pulled into our own driveway. I know one of us must have said something immediately, but I couldn't hear over the high pitched insect squeal. Mom's rows of tulips and daffodils, once shades like a painter's box, had all wilted over, had drained of color. And in

her blue and white checkerboard apron, Grannie Rose stood in front of the door, Dad standing beside her, almost behind her.

Around them and above them, cicadas covered the wooden siding of our house. A few dead ones fell to the ground, making a crunching sound when their wings hit the pavement. I didn't want to walk inside. I didn't even want to get out of the car. I knew there were more of those creatures in the tree limbs above. I knew I would have to walk past Grannie Rose to get inside.

Dad didn't ever tell us that Grannie Rose would be living in our house. He never said those words. Her permanent presence slowly took its own shape like the heavy heat hitting that July. No protests.

At first I didn't notice anything different about the sewing room. There had always been a bed in there and a dresser. The sinking indentation on the mattress wasn't something I would have paid any attention to. But things began appearing in a way that made it seem as if the room were growing objects. Large beige bras would hang down from the little knobs on the dresser. Plain white socks littered the floor. In the hallway bathroom, a brush, my brush began filling with strands of black hair, overtaking my blonde thin knots. I guess I always thought that she would just go away. That one day I'd wake up and she'd be gone, like a season, like the cicadas, like the color in my mom's flower bed. Just gone.

But I behaved. Didn't ask any questions. Neither did Bub. But his eyes were never quite the same blue. More like murky, muddy water.

It was raining when school began. The whole first week consumed by water. I had dreams that week where I'd wake up and the flood had reached outside my second floor window and I was trapped inside. Each morning I would wake up struggling to breathe. I swear I saw Grannie Rose's feet slip out of the doorway as I sat up choking.

I knew the rain was coming to an end. I had been walking home from school under an umbrella, splashing my feet in the puddles. I watched how the lightning would flash and strenuous arms of electricity seemed as if they were touching my house, reaching for me.

Our father was away on business. Had been down working with NASA for a day or two. The yellow glow from the kitchen window, through the cream-colored curtains made the moving shadow inside look amorphous. It must have been Mom baking the break or stirring the stew for the evening supper. I could see her round shape moving back and forth. Holding a wooden spoon and shifting through the heat.

But the door was locked. I couldn't get inside. I knocked. Pounded. Shrieked like those damn cicadas. Louder than I had ever heard my voice. Power I didn't even know was alive.

My mom couldn't have heard me. Not over the noise that came from the kitchen.

What was it? Really? A radio. Yes. "Where Did Our Love Go?" The Supremes sang from inside our house.

On the rope swing at the end of our yard, swaying slightly, rocking almost, sat Grannie Rose. A trail of puddles splashed with footprints behind her.