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Eternal Note of Sadness

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Eternal Note of Sadness

Pyra Intihar

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

Abstract

This collection of poems and short stories is an attempt to answer what Matthew Arnold calls "the eternal note of sadness." The thesis contains poems, two short stories, and one personal narrative. While each of these can be read with different interpretive slants, I choose here to show how each work in this collection is a response to the eternal note of sadness. The poems and personal narrative in the first part of this collection are concerned with the writer's quest, and I will go into depth discussing each of these poems and the narrative because I think they directly relate back to my understanding of the poet's duty. This section is followed by a collection of poems in the section, "Nature's Melody." Also in this section is the short story, "Leaving," which uses imagery from nature (i.e. falling leaves) to further cement the idea of separation. This story also looks at the sadness inherent in a broken mother/daughter relationship. Furthering the relationship theme is the next section, "Playing in the Band." These poems look at the brokenness of several different relationships in an effort to ask how much we really know one another. The last section of poems and one short story are labeled "Caught." These poems are concerned with catching and holding the note of sadness long enough to realize it in these particular instances. The short story is "Neff Road Pier." This short story examines a teen caught between relationships and loneliness.

Eternal Note of Sadness

Bonnie Intihar-Colemire

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

Committee in Charge of Candidacy

Beth Mead

Associate Professor of Humanities
Director, MFA in Writing Program

Glenn Irwin

Assistant Teaching Professor

Mark George

Instructor

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Introduction

Earlier this year, I took a train to Albuquerque for the annual Native American Literature Symposium. As the Amtrak pulled out of Kansas City's Union Station—on time at 9:50 p.m.—and those first spaces of darkness appeared in my window, I considered Matthew Arnold's "eternal note of sadness." I don't know why that line from "Dover Beach" came to me. Maybe the train whistle bellowing at each crossing as it travelled behind the city's façade that evoked those lines from memory. The city puts on a good face on the street side of things, but trains travel the rails behind cities. The roar of the diesel engine pushes against the buildings seeking escape in the shadows. Darkness and light pass by the window. Patches of light reveal the dumpsters, worn buildings, tire graveyards, and graffiti. The pretty houses aren't built next to the train tracks. There exists no "other side of the tracks" because, in reality, both sides of the tracks reveal despair and lack.

What, then, is the "eternal note of sadness"? The word "note" would seem to indicate that it is a sound. Arnold links the eternal note of sadness to the cadence of the waves washing up on shore, but he takes it a step further to something beyond a mere sound:

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

According to Arnold, the Greek playwright Sophocles was also familiar with this note, heard in the waves, which illuminates the plight of humanity in the surge and swell of the

human condition. It is interesting that Arnold alludes to Sophocles here because all that remains of Sophocles' work are seven tragedies. From those seven tragedies, we catch a glimpse of the playwright himself and learn Sophocles was interested in the psychological make-up of human suffering. What causes our miseries in life? Are our problems self-imposed, or are we at the mercy of some higher force or fate? Sophocles sought to ask those questions with his work. And, through his work, we are privy to human suffering on multiple levels. We become aware of the tragic flaws found in mankind and begin to question our own hubris. Like Sophocles, Arnold admits to hearing that same note of sadness as he looks down upon the waves at Dover Beach, but the sound of the waves is more than just noise: it ignites thought. In the poem "Dover Beach," the thought has to do with loss of faith and values and the impulse to cling to love however uncertain it may be. The connection here is that this sound, the eternal note of sadness, is an impetus to a thought, and for the poet the thought must be crafted on the page. A study of Arnold reveals his own frustration at not being able to articulate ideas the way the ideas need to be presented. The note was heard, but how does one translate that note for others?

As a poet, I've also heard that note, but I cannot articulate it. I don't think any words—no matter the arrangement on the page—can ever articulate it. Many poets have tried. Consider Walt Whitman who screamed at the sea, asking for one word, above all others, and the sea answered "death"¹ That word alone does not adequately represent that eternal note of sadness, but taken in the context of Whitman's poem, the note is heard resonating on the page within the text.

¹ "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" (1859).

Victorian-era thinker and writer Thomas Carlyle calls the poet a hero, but in doing so, he also acknowledges there is no perfect poet. If we take the idea of hero as poet and run with it, we find ourselves faced with the idea that the poet must face some type of daunting task as he or she moves forward on a quest². Along these lines, then, we must consider for what the hero quests if not a word or words to express a particular flash of insight or idea. The difficulty the poet faces is finding the right words in harmony with the original vision. A word needs to be at the right pitch, for if it is one octave higher or lower, it can obscure the entire vision and the poem will fail in its intent. Carlyle recognizes the difficulty in this task.

If your delineation be authentically musical, musical not in word only, but in heart and substance, in all the thoughts and utterances of it, in the whole conception of it, then it will be poetical; if not, not...A musical thought is one spoken by a mind that has penetrated into the inmost heart of the thing; detected the inmost mystery of it, namely the melody that lies hidden in it; the inward harmony of coherence which is its soul, whereby it exists, and has a right to be, here in this world. All inmost things, we may say, are melodious; naturally utter themselves in Song. The meaning of Song goes deep. Who is there that, in logical words, can express the effect music has on us? What kind of inarticulate unfathomable speech, which leads us to the edge of the Infinite, and lets us for moments gaze into that!³

Carlyle embraces the idea of sound. Sound penetrates beneath the surface-level of things. Even in Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" the narrator is content until he hears the sound of the waves⁴. It is the sound which evokes the melancholy. Carlyle says it is this sound that goes deep cannot be expressed in logical words. Perhaps this is why Carlyle says in his lecture that there is no perfect poet. A perfect poet could craft perfect words and logically

² If we look at the poet hero, then we have to consider the poet as on a hero's journey (i.e. Joseph Campbell's notion of the monomyth).

³ Carlyle, Thomas. "On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History." *Prose of the Victorian Period*. Ed. William E. Buckler. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958), 116-117.

⁴ I credit this flash of insight to William Mayhan of the University of Missouri—St. Louis. Mayhan also reminded me that the poet's response as he or she tries to articulate the human condition can also be seen as a type of sound.

articulate the sound. But the sound heard through an imperfect heart (due to every poet's own human condition) pings around the poet's mind, and it is filtered back out of the poet through his or her own limited abilities.

The note is illusive, and sometimes it is easier to mask the note than to apprehend it directly. William Carlos Williams, in "Burning the Christmas Greens," heard the sound but recognized the futile attempt to keep the eternal note of sadness at bay when he described bringing Christmas greens into the house as decoration:

At the thick of the dark
the moment of the cold's
deepest plunge
we brought branches
cut from the green trees
to fill our need, and over
doorways, about paper Christmas
bells covered with tinfoil
and fastened by red ribbons
we stuck the green prongs.

What is the "need" that needs to be filled in the darkness of the winter solstice (i.e. "cold's deepest plunge")? Is it the need to quiet the noise of that sound? In Williams' poem, the eternal note of sadness can only be temporarily masked. There is no permanent fix. It is ever present and yet intangible.

To hear that note and make a feeble attempt at conveying its meaning is what drives me to write. Mere words cannot communicate those things which touch—like an ice cube on a raw, exposed nerve—the ragged edges of the soul. Is it Duende⁵? Is this what Lorca meant when he tried to define the duende? Does Duende point us to Arnold's eternal note of sadness? I don't think so, but I think it's a movement in the right direction. Duende is

⁵ I've chosen to capitalize Duende in an attempt at personification. Federico Garcia Lorca does not assign proper-noun status to the duende.

passion, but Duende also brings pain. It is he who touches the soul with his icy hands, revealing the soft (vulnerable!) underbelly. Duende's teeth drip with blood, cum, and vomit. His gaping smile, a grimace really, reveals that the universal truth is wrapped up in death, sex, and the attempt to submerge the eternal note of sadness beneath banal trivialities and drink. All three must be understood if we are to understand Duende as a sign post pointing to the eternal note of sadness. It is not just about death or passion, but it is also found in that fear of facing Duende. He pulls off the temporary mask and forces us to behold that from which our natural proclivities turn away. In doing so, Duende reveals the universal truth in the particular.

But, Duende alone cannot give words to the eternal note of sadness. That is the frustration of each poet or artist. For to do that, we must face Duende. And, in facing Duende, we recognize our own inadequacies and shortcomings, our own hubris. It is when we perceive ourselves thusly that we are most alive and part of the human community. It is then we hear that background music, the eternal note of sadness, echoing in our ears. Its tempo and rhythm stay with us long after Duende is gone. Thus, we find the eternal note of sadness rolling across a Kansas field at midnight in late winter. The eternal note of sadness residing in an old Creole woman's voice as she speaks to her husband hushed tones. The eternal note of sadness standing in that child alone at the edge of the playground, watching others and waiting for an invitation. The eternal note of sadness sounding and resounding in the remote echo of a train whistle. This is what I hope to achieve with this thesis. I hope my labors in some small way give voice to that eternal note of sadness.

This collection contains poems, two short stories, and one personal narrative. While each of these can be read with different interpretive slants, I choose here to show how each

work in this collection is a response to the eternal note of sadness. The poems and personal narrative in the first part of this collection are concerned with the writer's quest, and I will go into depth discussing each of these poems and the narrative because I think they directly relate back to my understanding of the poet's duty. This section is followed by a collection of poems in the section, "Nature's Melody." Also in this section is the short story, "Leaving," which uses imagery from nature (i.e. falling leaves) to further cement the idea of separation. This story also looks at the sadness inherent in a broken mother/daughter relationship. Furthering the relationship theme is the next section, "Playing in the Band." These poems look at the brokenness of several different relationships in an effort to ask how much we really know one another. The last section of poems and one short story are labeled "Caught." These poems are concerned with catching and holding the note of sadness long enough to realize it in these particular instances. The short story is "Neff Road Pier." This short story examines a teen caught between relationships and loneliness.

Writer's Quest (or the Hero-Poet)

In recognition of the difficulty expressing the eternal note of sadness, I begin the collection with the poem "The Broken Poet." In this, the narrator acknowledges her own brokenness and inability to adequately hear and voice the note. Not only do others stand in the way, but the poet recognizes she, too, stands in the way of full realization. Sometimes the human condition and its myriad of relationships and drama can overpower and drown the clear voice of the song. Again, the song has to filter through an imperfect being who tries to translate the note, and the poet recognizes this.

The second poem in the collection could be interpreted in a variety of ways. "Ice Fishing" could be simply seen as a narrator fishing for trout on a frozen lake. Another way to look at it—although it was not my original intent when I wrote the piece—is to examine the line "beneath dark waters." That's key to a hero's journey reading of the poem. After the hero has left the known (or familiar), he or she must journey into the unknown where the hero faces trials before attaining the triumph, or the original goal of the quest. If we read this as a poet-hero's journey and the goal is to find the precise word for the vision, the poet must tap into the dark waters (subconscious, collective unconscious, primordial goo—take your pick) and trawl the depths for that one word. And, if the poet is lucky, the water will respond with the one word as the sea did for Whitman!

The next poem, "Walking home from babysitting at 1 a.m. in Chaska, Minnesota," is a nod to both Walt Whitman and James Wright. The poem was originally modeled after Wright's poem, "Beginnings." I was always drawn to the mysterious woman who "steps into the air" and is "gone wholly, into the air." One way of reading Wright's poem is to see the woman as his muse. In this way, it reflects Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" and the idea of the outsetting bard. This poem is a nod to the period in my own life when I first considered writing as a type of art. I had to ask myself at what point would my muse have been visible if I was aware of her presence. More than anything else, I know that she would have been seen in the glint of the moon on a quiet snow-covered street. She would have been seen in the frost etched on the cars parked along the street. She would have been watching me walk home alone, reveling in the absolute perfect quiet on the street, at one in the morning. At this point in my life, she would have had to have been seen as a prophetess because I couldn't imagine myself beyond the confines of my mother's

alcoholism. Standing on the precipice of adolescence, I didn't realize that the drunken rages wouldn't last forever. It would have required a prophetess to reveal these things.

"Edyn" is about beginnings and germination. Surprisingly, the original intent of this poem had to do with the collaborative effort of writers. The male and female binaries in this piece represent the union of collaboration. Workshopping a piece of writing is a very personal and intimate act, and I wanted to align that act with the physical union of two people without being blatant, so I used the metaphor of the garden to represent that union. If a writer takes the ideas and suggestions planted during a workshopping session and nourishes them, then the birth of the poem or short story is the inevitable result. Notice here again is that allusion to darkness (i.e. "dark soil"). This refers back to that secret place from which ideas spring: the subconscious, the collective unconscious, etc.

The next poem concerned with the writer's quest is "Apparently, I'm not a Universal Story." This poem represents the hero poet's journey and the quest to find the right text. Whether the narrator finds the text within herself or without, the answers are unavailable. Unlike Whitman who cried to the Atlantic Ocean for the one word, this narrator cries to another sea: Google, a veritable sea of information. Certainly the answer can be found on Google. As she cries to the sea with new phrases and key words, the results ebb and flow like the tide. Sometimes a scrap of "transient text" or a "fragment of information" will wash ashore on the results page. Other keywords net no answers. Further, the narrator feels the brevity of life rushing upon her, and while she realizes her individuality, she feels she hasn't tapped into it yet. This calls to mind another Whitman poem, "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life." This one that must be read to gain a broader understanding of the birth of

the poet on Paumanok, and one that must be read to gain a broader understanding of the influences on my poem.

Aware now that amid all that blab whose echoes recoil upon me I have
not once had the least idea whor or what I am
But that before all my arrogant poems the real Me stands yet
untouch'd, untold, altogether unreached

Like Whitman, my narrator feels the emptiness of her own work, and the memories she trawls don't yield the right expression of that eternal note of sadness she hears. Instead, she draws blanks: "empty shells devoid of seed." That line in itself is interesting because a reader informed me he thought this narrator was infertile and searching for a way to conceive a child. He said she was the shell that couldn't produce a child. Many writers actually refer to their work as their children, so in that context, my reader was correct in his interpretation.

"Ghosts of the Firepit" recognizes the inherent need we all have to tell stories. We tell stories to ourselves, and we tell stories to others. Stories are what bind us; they can be seen as a type of communion between individuals. In this poem, the narrator has some friends over for drinks, and they sit around the backyard firepit telling stories. In the second stanza it is crucial for the friends to share their experiences with one another, but by the second stanza, the friends realize that there are some stories that cannot (or, maybe, should not) be shared with the group. There is still an aura of warmth about the fire, but the friends begin to distance themselves from one another ("like a city seen from an airplane"). By the last stanza, all the guests have left and the narrator ponders her own stories, the ones she did not share.

How the writer communicates ideas is part of the hero poet's journey. The writer must determine whether that eternal note of sadness can best be represented in a poem or

prose. "Poetry and Prose" reflects the difference between the two and seems to lean toward poetry's brilliance. This is no mistake. The idea is explored in a poem, so the "poetry" of this piece is really played up. If this same idea were explored in prose, the "prose" would probably receive preferential treatment.

The final poem in the section dealing with the writer's quest is "The Rejection." This is an attempt to poke fun at the whole literary establishment as seen through the eyes of a writer. Of course writer's want to be read and literary journals want only to publish the best. Any writer, especially those starting out, will confirm that for the one acceptance letter, there are a heap of rejections littering a drawer somewhere. To some this is the most difficult part of the poet hero's journey: revealing the work to others and being rejected. It is certainly not for the faint of heart. Because the writer's product is the result of intense scrutiny and intimacy and because the writer's own emotions are tied to the piece (remember, these are the writer's "children"), it is often difficult to hear: "This piece wasn't good enough." Worse still is the impersonal form rejection letter. "The Rejection" plays with the notion of a writer refusing to accept that rejection. The writer here is actually vying for the original vision of the text, which often relates back to the note of sadness. Perhaps the writer didn't really read what type of work the literary journal produced, thereby not really "reading" the vision of the journal. If the writer's submission is a note, maybe the writer did not submit the piece in the right octave. Likewise, the writer probably feels that the journal didn't see the vision of his or her submission, however true the note rings to the writer.

I've chosen to include the personal narrative "Ashes and a Photograph" in this section. It is a response to an event I witnessed at Garden of the Gods in Colorado Springs,

Colorado, in June 2010. The event strangely moved me and prompted me to write an immediate response. After I had walked away from the group, I found a rock outcropping, pulled the journal from my backpack, and began recording the event. I have no idea as to the name of the family or whose ashes were released, but even to this day I feel a peculiar bond with these people. This narrative also points to that eternal note of sadness and the writer's desire to transcribe that note or to give voice to the human condition (what Arnold refers to as "human misery"). If I hadn't been there to witness this sad little group, who would have given voice to their suffering? Further, the piece recognizes the inevitable fate of us all and our own fallibility. Whereas Whitman heard the sea cry "death," I heard it in the Colorado sandstone.

Nature's Medley

One of my favorite lines comes from the movie *Smoke Signals*⁶ and is relevant to this section. In the film, Victor's father dies and Victor asks Thomas how he heard about the death of his father. Thomas replies: "I heard it on the wind. I heard it from the birds. I felt it in the sunlight. And your mom was just in here cryin'." A writer will often find inspiration in nature; other times the writer is inspired by more obvious signs. The five poems in this section look at the ways nature can inspire. Some of the poems are simply odes to a particular setting. Others convey different themes, but the natural—or in the case of "Conservation," the not-so-natural—is the impetus of these poems.

The short story I've chosen to include in this section is "Leaving," which started off with the question: What if the unknown in the hero's journey was turned upside down?

⁶ *Smoke Signals*. DVD. Directed by Chris Eyre. Miramax Films, 1998.

According to Joseph Campbell's idea for the monomyth, every protagonist (or hero) moves through specific stages as a story unfolds. Campbell calls this the "hero with a thousand faces" because it is the same story every time, but with each story (no matter the culture or the story's place in time) the hero wears a different mask. Central to the idea of the hero's journey is the hero's movement from the known to the unknown. The hero must travel into the unknown and face psychological and often physical trials before obtaining the object of the journey. Thus, the hero leaves his known kingdom, home, or land and journeys into a space that is often physically and psychologically unfamiliar.

I wanted my hero to journey into a realm that other heroes of other stories consider familiar: home. Home is a place that is familiar to the individual. It is a place of safety, rest, nourishment, and belonging. It shapes and defines who we are and who we become. It is a familiar place, a "known" place. What if the hero's home was an unfamiliar place? What if travelling home was really like travelling into the unknown? In trying to define what that would look like, I determined that the hero of the story, Trista, must face an alcoholic mother. As such, Trista's home would become the unfamiliar because she couldn't be certain about what kind of psychological demons or physical trials she would face each time she stepped through her front door. But, if home became the unfamiliar, then to a young adult, school would be the familiar. The routines and predictability of school provide the structure Trista needs in her life. Further, school for her is a place of belonging. She has friends, and the teachers appreciate her studious demeanor. Thus, her hero's journey is to go into the unfamiliar and obtain the concert tickets she accidentally left at home and get them downtown to her friends before the concert begins.

Is there inherent sadness in this? Yes. Alcoholism is a very real disease, and countless families are affected by it⁷. Often the children of an alcoholic parent become casualties. Children often don't have the capacity to deal with an alcoholic parent, so they flub through their school years making excuses for the parent and living a life outside the home. Of course the situation is a sad one, and the eternal note of sadness echoes on a very real level because alcoholism tends to run in families. Children follow the familiar. If mom or dad coped with life by turning to the bottle, the children learn to use alcohol as a coping mechanism. It is like the waves of the ocean as generation after generation follows the same pattern.

Playing in the Band

Keeping consistent with the eternal-note-of-sadness theme, I wanted to title this section as I did because according to Arnold, the eternal note of sadness is linked with human misery. Individuals are often the cause of their own troubles and suffering. Either we speak out of turn and say things that we don't realize may hurt someone else, or we are sensitive to the inconsequential speech of others. I allude to this in "The Broken Poet" with the lines "we never see the pain we inflict on others, / we sense only our own hurt."

It seems that sometimes our relationships with those we love most resound with the most pain. It is one thing for a stranger to use harsh words because we attribute that to a character flaw or a bad day, but when our own loved ones direct harsh words in our

⁷ According to the National Association for Children of Alcoholics, "more than 28 million Americans are children of alcoholics [and] nearly 11 million are under the age of 18." These numbers do not reflect children with parents who abuse other substances.

direction, there is a tendency to turn introspective and wonder what we did wrong. These are the hurts we most remember.

This section is titled "Playing in the Band" because it is often our interactions with others that contribute most significantly to the eternal note of sadness. We are like a band of musicians each playing our own particular instrument, holding onto our own special brands of pain. The resulting cacophony of sound may be what Sophocles heard on the Aegean or Arnold heard at Dover Beach. As such, the poetry in this section examines broken relationships in a variety of ways. This collection of poetry continues the tone set by the short story, "Leaving," which also explores another type of broken relationship.

These poems further examine whether or not we can ever really know one another. Are our loved ones friends or foes? Arnold asked that very question in "Dover Beach" when he admonished his love: "Let us be true / to one another!" He recalled the Battle of Epipolae in the last line with the phrase "where ignorant armies clash by night." In this battle, the Athenians fought an army from Syracuse on a Sicilian island. Because they fought at night, the soldiers would have to draw close to one another in order to determine whether the person was a friend or enemy. That is what the poetry in this section examines. We draw close to others without realizing whether or not they are friend or foe until too late.

Caught

If I could unify this last section of poetry around a common theme it would be that of being "caught." As has been previously stated, the hero-poet is on a quest to apprehend the note of eternal sadness. The poet tries to give voice to that grating sound. Each of the

poems in this section is concerned with this idea of being caught. Each poem concerns itself with a different topic, but in each, I try to catch that object for one fleeting moment and examine it in light of our human condition. Some of the items caught are obvious. For example, in "Raining Jazz," the raindrops are caught in a web of light. Other poems show a different aspect of being caught. In "Ode to My Bedside Clock at 3:59 a.m." the narrator is caught awake between dusk and dawn. The other poems reflect being caught by the police, the city, the loom, and ultimately the universe (in terms of space AND time).

Also in this section is the short story, "Neff Road Pier." I chose to place it with the others in this section because in the story, Jo is "caught" in a space of uncertainty between friendship and loneliness, between childhood and adulthood. This last short story rounds out the collection and fully supports the eternal-note-of-sadness theme in that in the final scene we find the protagonist, Jo, sitting on the wet sand beside Lake Erie. She's staring out into the darkness over the lake and mourning her losses. She is awakened the realization of her own uncertainties about her place in the high school spectrum, but the lake reflects a despair that runs deeper in the darkness. I've had lots of trouble workshopping this particular short story because everyone wanted it to end "on a happy note." But the reality of it is that every story is not a fairy tale. Further, in order to be true to the essence of the piece, it could not end well for Jo. There is an inherent sadness that wants to escape through this story. The lake in this story is a further reflection of Sophocles' Aegean, Arnold's Dover Beach, or Whitman's Paumanok. It is a place where man can hear the note on the wind and understand he is just a tiny voice in the cacophony of sound.

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Smoke Signals. DVD. Directed by Chris Eyre. Miramax Films, 1998.

The Writer's Quest

The Broken Poet

Collective emptiness swallows us in the night.
We never see the pain we inflict on others,
We sense only our own hurt.

The poet gives voice to these thoughts.
I cannot.
My own emptiness tugs at me, weighs me down.

I cannot hear the song on the wind.
I cannot give voice to reason.

Ice Fishing

Arctic wind taunts as
ice scrapes my face.
I shiver, gripping
the pole,
praying for a pull
on the line
submerged
beneath dark waters.

Walking home from babysitting at 1 a.m. in Chaska, Minnesota

moonlight sparks off parked cars
piled snow listens
wait.
now.
at fourteen, I am born of moonglow and darkness.
the prophetess unveiled, etched
in the passenger window of a '78 Nova,
steps from the shadow and disappears
vanishes on a moonbeam.
I stand alone on a snow-covered path: breathless, still,
straining against silence.
did I really see her?
vacant frost-glittered eyes of cars reveal nothing.
my own eyes darken: a shadow obscures the moon.

stepping into the warm, yellow living room,
my mind stretches backward along the street
to her face, now cloaked in darkness
instead, my mother's face smashes against the hard sofa arm,
a tiny bead of drool forms at the corner of her mouth.
soft snores punctuate television re-runs.
I listen
and wait.
the table lamp turns an unsympathetic eye toward her.
I want to tell her about the woman I am right now.
I want her to recognize the woman I am becoming.
instead, I turn to the window.
looking out, I press my forehead against cool glass.

Edyn

She accepts the gardener's
advances, yields in anticipation.

With deft hands he presses
the seed into soft earth.

She nourishes it, blossoms,
brings forth the sprout, green
from dark soil.

Apparently, I am not a Universal Story

my lids fall, heavy and tired,
from staring at the screen,
googling for answers

rubbing my eyes, paisleys
red and black, a universal
connection to primordial goo

my life story should be here
somewhere
in paisleys or on the screen

red and black, hit or miss
trying new keywords
momentarily bending time

fragments of information
transient text
fighting for answers

I cannot reconcile the emptiness
swelling waves of memories
empty shells devoid of seed

manipulating the metronome
the song will end
the paisleys will fade

Ghosts of the Firepit

ghosts dance around the rim,
coaxed from metal and rust
of a well-used backyard firepit

flames, sparks, sweet red wine
illuminate dancing shadows, whispering
thoughts give way to voice—
a communion of memories—
we lean toward the flames
our recollections hot, necessary
as the quest for fire on a rain-soaked night

later,
empty bottle, expended stories
the lonely wind sighs,
rustles leaves
we feel the chill of what remains
what pride refuses
pulling closer, we remain distant
glittering crackle of old embers
still hot beneath ash, still smoldering
like a city seen from an airplane

but late,
after guests leave,
only a collection of ghosts remain,
faint heat fades,
embers
turn to ash, and
I retire
to my own
darkness

Poetry and Prose

Prose speaks to us
in complete sentences.
No fragments allowed.
Clean and crisp, each
line obeys some
ancient grammar rule.

on the other hand, poetry
sparks pop and crackle
drifting on upward currents
into night air, extinguishing
we glimpse our own soul
broken, broken fragments
igniting imagination

The Rejection

Please feel free to recycle the paper on which my poetry—inspired and personal—is written, but please send your form-letter rejection slip in the SASE which I've so kindly included for your convenience. Or, perhaps you think my poetry, too, should be recycled—squashed and mangled at the bottom of your recycle bin. Does your rejection letter imply the words of my poems are no longer useful strung together as they are?

How does that work? How does one recycle poetry? Is it through allusions to the great ones who've gone before? Perhaps it is a repackaging of ideas. After all, Solomon said there is nothing new under the sun, and that was in the 900s BC!

When you send your rejection mimeograph (or email), perhaps I should recycle it and return a form of my own: "I'm sorry, but your rejection letter does not meet the qualifications of form rejections I'm looking for at this time. Please familiarize yourself with the quality and nuances of my poetry by taking time to read my submission before submitting your rejection." Maybe this correspondence will go on for years. My rejection of the journal's rejection can be rejected, and on and on. And we'll keep recycling each other's forms and words. Until...finally...one of us...wears down...and...actually reads...what the other...has written. Until one of us really sees the other.

Ashes and a Photograph

Silently I stepped up the dry creek bed. In the spring it had been filled with snow melt and rains, but today with the heat of the summer solstice only days away, it contained only dust and pebbles. Soon back up on a rock formation, I quickly lept from boulder to boulder, eventually finding rest under a pinion tree growing beside a large flat rock. I studied the formation immediately to my left and considered hiking toward it when I finished resting. Two red spires, called "The Twins," jutted from a base of rock.

I studied the formation and determined the best way to approach it. In a flash, a puff of smoke flew out from between the spires and swept upward on a gust of wind. Just as quickly, the ash dissipated against a blue sky, but some of the particles dusted downward. Ash? A moment later, a young woman with long, brown hair peeked out between the spires. Her hair flew upward with another gust, and she pulled it back and held it against her body. Next, pale man with a bony face peered out from between the spires. He looked out toward where the ash had gone before looking in my direction. Our eyes met.

I knew this was something significant: a person's ashes had just been released on that spot. As I contemplated the significance and worried about intruding on this family's ceremony, a young girl, quite possibly the dark-haired woman's daughter, stepped around the formation. Following her was the pale man with blonde hair and a receding hairline. He stood about six foot tall, and his body moved at angles as he followed the child. He noticed me beneath the shade then turned and stepped after the girl around the other side of the spires.

Soon, two men came out from behind the formation. One looked like he could be a Midwestern farmer with his baseball cap and hunter's camoflaug. The other man was not as stocky and could have been the first man's son. They snapped pictures of the formation as they walked around it at a distance, not getting too close to where the ash fell.

I got up and moved toward a formation just west of the spires. Then, thinking better of it, I turned around and moved toward the group. When I got to the back side of the formation, I discovered a group of about twelve or fifteen, ranging in age from three to about sixty. Two of the women were busy arranging groups of children and elders against the rocks and snapping their pictures.

"Want me to take a group photo?" I asked a middle-aged woman with short blonde hair.

"Could you? That would be so nice." She handed me her camera, and I thought about how vulnerable this little group was in this moment. Moments before they had released someone's ashes in a public space. They were possibly caught off guard by my presence on a nearby rock outcropping, and now I stood before them.

As the women gathered the children and called to the camoflauged men, the pale angular man smiled in a broken way and said, "This is a special event."

"I know."

Understanding passed between us.

I snapped three pictures of the family and gave the camera back to the blonde woman. They thanked me, and I walked away into the brush and up the next rock formation. Just as soon as I had shown up, I was now away out of sight from the group and up on the next rock formation.

As I walked I thought about the story some of the women would carry back from this ceremony. Some might say an angel showed up as the ashes were released and gathered the family together for a portrait. In years to come, stories would be told about those photos. Then I thought about this family's ceremony and the brevity of life. It is like a snapshot. We come together with family and friends for such a short period of time. King Solomon compared our life to a vapor dissipating on the wind.

Nature's Medley

Biking on the Katy Trail

Like a quick comet
Inches above dusty earth
Little green frog leaps

Jones Road at Sunset

late getting home, I stand
at the edge of a dusty country road, my bike

carelessly resting on its side, blackberries
beckon in these brambles, plump

purple pearls under green leaves, plucked
at the heart of ripeness, my tongue

rolls the thick purple berry, so ripe
and full against the roof of my mouth, crushing

it in violet explosion, juice trickles
on my tongue and down my throat, washing

the omnipresent grey dust from my throat, like a bear
I pluck these blackberries, oblivious

bare legs bleeding in the brambles, purple stains
on my hands and face, evidence of my delay

In muddy boots I stand at the edge of a field in early spring

the dark earth rolls away from me
like an ocean in the fog.
each furrow a wave;
the wet, yellow grass: sand.

Late Winter (Newton, Kansas)

Lumbering westward in the night
Diesel engines churn against darkness
A single eye glares against the gloom

Illuminating twin rails, gleaming
Across the Kansas prairie
Now silent with traces of snow.

Fields, hushed now under a winter sky,
Anticipate the gentle fingers of spring
And yearn for the farmer's tender advances.

Conservation

At the edge of town
Landfill Mountain
rises from obscurity
and kisses the sapphire sky
with a belch
settling heavy,
filling the valley
with confusion
and uncertainty.

The children call the hill
their own;
it is all they have ever known,
but the elderly,
lured inside by flickering blue
TV, numb their minds.
Somehow
they must begin
the conversation.

Leaving

Trista put her head against the cool metal of her locker door and closed her eyes. How could she have been so stupid? She had everything she needed in her backpack: wallet, a change of clothes, her RTA pass, and directions to the concert, but she had forgotten the concert tickets. Now she would have to go home. Home. She felt her face tighten into a grimace. Could she just go home and pick up the tickets and rush downtown by five to meet everyone at Tower City for dinner? She knew it was never that easy.

Once downtown, she would give them their concert tickets, the purchase of which had been entrusted to her—a ninth grader! It still upset her that she agreed to purchase the tickets and then pick them up. Everyone else going to the concert was older and already driving; it would have been easier for them to be in charge of tickets. She had never purchased concert tickets, and she didn't like holding everyone's money. But, when Dave placed the roll of bills in her hand and pleaded with her to purchase the tickets for all of them, she couldn't resist. Dave pleaded that he saved all of his spare time for her, couldn't she do this for him? In the end, she stepped up to the plate and found that Dave was right: the easiest way to ensure everyone got a seat together meant one person had to take charge and order the tickets at the same time.

If she cut her last class, she just might have time to run home, pick up the tickets, and get downtown by five. After stacking her books alphabetically in a row on the purple locker shelf at the bottom of her locker, Trista grabbed her backpack and winter coat from

the hook and slammed the locker shut. She stepped into the flow of bodies as they moved like a river through the hallway. If she made her way to the athletic wing of the school, she could exit through the weight room before the coach arrived and started the last hour of P.E.

Just as she put her hand on the exit, a loud voice shot out behind her. "Hey! What are you doing?"

A million excuses flew through her mind as she turned to face the penalty. Instead, she found Joel Kramer smiling at her. She wanted to punch the silly grin right off his face. Instead, she explained that she had to run home and pick up the tickets.

Joel sympathized with her immediately because one of the tickets belonged to him. "Okay, you run. I'll keep the coach in his office for a few more minutes so you can get away." Joel hurried toward the coaches' office, and Trista pushed open the heavy metal door. As the door gave way, a scuttle of brown oak leaves rushed past her feet. By the time the heavy door slammed shut, she was on the sidewalk and walking away from the high school. Her boots slapped against the concrete as the grey, late autumn wind whipped her hair into a fury and sought to taste every exposed inch of her warm flesh. Trista struggled into her winter jacket while trying to maintain control of her swaying backpack looped over her left arm.

When she reached the Onaway RTA station, she'd decided that if the train wasn't there, she would walk to the next station, the Southington stop, westward toward Shaker Square. If the train couldn't be seen by the time she reached that station, she would hurry to the South Woodland stop. Her hair blew across her eyes, so Trista grabbed hold of her long locks, twisted them around her gloved hand, and shoved her hair into the back of her

coat. The hair felt cold against her neck. She peered up and down the transit line. The familiar orange-and-white transit was nowhere in sight. Trista raced across the platform, and jumped down onto the grass below. As she hurried along the side of the tracks and pulled her jacket tighter around her body, she couldn't help but think about one of Aesop's fables—the one about Sun and Wind battling for supremacy. Wind asserted he was the stronger of the two and would prove it by blowing a coat off of a man. Wind blew and blew, but the man held tighter to his coat. When Sun's turn came, Sun gently shined down on the man, and the man willingly removed his coat. Trista forgot the moral of the story, but she remembered the pictures of Sun and Wind from her childhood storybook. She also remembered her mother reading to her every night before bed. But that was in the period Trista called "before." Before the divorce. Before the drinking.

Trista heard the scrape of metal on metal and looked over her shoulder. The train quickly approached the station previous to where Trista had started walking. Caught between two train stations, Trista made a decision to race toward the next train station rather than go back. Tightening her grip on her backpack, Trista ran. She could feel the thud of her heart in her chest.

The train whistle bellowed somewhere close behind.

Trista picked up her pace as the RTA rushed past her in a blur of white and orange.

Closer, closer, Trista timed her pace with this mantra as the train came to a stop at the Southington platform. Trista called to the woman boarding the RTA, "Wait!" The woman looked at her and slowed her step. *God bless you*, thought Trista.

By the time she reached the platform, the woman was already on the train. The warning beeps had just begun to sound, and Trista called, "Wait!" With one last burst of energy, Trista jumped through the back door of the train.

Because thick grey clouds hung heavy in the sky, the lights inside the train reflected off the large windows and created a mirror-like effect. Trista caught sight of herself in one of the large windows and gasped. Her flushed face glowed with a mixture of windburn and sweat. Her hair stood at odd angles. By the time she reached a seat, she understood why so many riders quickly put packages, brief cases, or coats on the seats next to them as she made her way between the seats. They didn't want her to sit next to them. *She wouldn't want someone who looked like her to sit next to her. She was a mess!* She found an empty seat at the front of the train and threw herself down.

In a few short stops, Trista got off at Shaker Square and was assaulted by the smell of onions that emanated from the diner next to the station. The Shaker Square stop was busy all day because it was a transfer point between the Green Line and the Blue Line. Trista pushed her way through the crowd that gathered beside the train and waited for the passengers to disembark.

Shaker Square should have been called "Shaker Circle" because all the shops and restaurants were housed around the center of the "square" in a circular formation. The "square" was divided into four equal parts by the RTA track and a street running perpendicular to the track. These were met by a circular road that ran around the "square" in front of the shops. As Trista walked along the sidewalk toward her house, she wondered why the name "Shaker Square" bothered her. It seemed so pretentious to call a circle a

square. Was someone in the history of the city so powerful that the citizens allowed the meaning of a word to be corrupted?

Within five minutes, Trista stood outside the door to her house. Her mother's car was not in the driveway, but Trista still put her ear to the door and listened for movement inside. As she leaned against the door, Trista noticed the peeling paint on the doorframe. She slowly tried the door handle. It clicked open and she stepped inside. Closing the door softly behind her, she listened to the stillness of the house as she shrugged off her coat and laid it next to the door.

The house was dark, except for the sitting room to the left of the foyer. The ceiling fan in that room whirled around and around, and the light glared against the darkness of the rest of the house. Every other room hung heavy with darkness because the drawn window shades blocked the daylight from creeping into the house. Trista looked around the sitting room to determine why the light may have been left on, but everything appeared to be in place. The two leather loveseats still faced each other, and the magazines were still spread out in a fan-shape across the glass cocktail table.

Reaching for the light switch, Trista's eyes caught sight of blood on the white switch plate cover. About the size of a dime and trailing a tail like a meteor, the mark was a reddish-brown. It may have been there for days or months, but Trista wouldn't have noticed it because she rarely used this room. Her mind flew to the time her mother had too many drinks at one of the mall restaurants at La Place. Her mother leaned against her as she shouldered her weight and lead her out of the mall. In the domestics section in Macy's her mother walked up to one of the displays in the domestic section. "We need a new knife set," her mother purred into her ear as she pulled a large knife from the wooden block.

"Look, I'm a samurai!" Her mother sliced the knife through the air and danced away from Trista in a series of elaborate twirls. She suddenly stopped. Maybe she was aware of everyone in the domestics department watching her, maybe not. But she suddenly put the knife against her throat and threatened to kill herself. It took mall security a good half hour to convince her to give up the knife. Trista knew her mother gave up the knife not due to the sound reason of the security officer but because the drama had grown old. The other security guard herded shoppers away from the scene, and Mom was no longer in the spotlight. Suddenly, Trista had to find her mother. She needed to reassure herself that Mom was okay.

Heedlessly, Trista raced across the living room and into the dining room, giving each room a cursory scan. By this time, Trista fully expected to see her mother in the kitchen, sitting in her favorite chair with a glass of white wine and holding a knife. With all the shades drawn, Trista could barely see across the darkened room. She flipped on a switch, quickly checking it for blood as she did so, and paused next to the stove. "Mom!" She called, placing her hand on the stone-cold granite counter. She listened for movement somewhere in the house; instead, she heard the tick-tick-tick of the creepy cat clock her mother thought amusing. Its eyes rolled back and forth with every swish of its black pendulum tail. Trista glanced at the clock now: 2:30-ish. She had enough time to resolve this crisis and still make it downtown.

"Mom!" Trista yelled as she scrambled up the stairs. "Mom!" Trista's feet sank in the thick carpet of the upstairs hallway as she made her way from room to room. She didn't have time, but she had to check each of the five bedrooms. A chill washed over her body as she opened the door to each room. It was like stepping into a January night

without a coat. Since it was just the two of them in the large house, her mother said they would have to conserve energy. Thus, the vents had been blocked in each of the spare rooms. More than the cold, she dreaded what she might discover in any one of the rooms, and she cringed each time she stepped into a room. But to her relieved dismay, none of the rooms revealed anything out of order.

Her bedroom was the last one on the left. The door stood partially open. Trista usually shut the door before she left for school. But, since she was in such a hurry this morning, she realized she may have forgotten to close it all the way. Unless her mother was in there.

Trista slowly pushed the door open. "Mom," she whispered as her eyes scanned the room.

Although her mother wasn't in the room, Trista carefully inspected the room for signs of disorder. Her window shade was open, and the grey light flooded into her room. The lavender walls didn't shine today like they did on sunny days. Last summer, Trista determined to paint her room. Her mother was against it, but she still gave Trista the money she needed for paint because it was around the first of the month, and there was money in the bank. Trista knew she wanted purple walls, and when the guy at the hardware store showed her the color palette, she liked the way the metallic lavender sparkled under the fluorescent light. Trista carried two gallons of paint home on the bus. She stayed up until dawn as she worked on her room alone. Trista smiled into the empty room, recalling her accomplishment.

The desk in the corner appeared undisturbed. Her pen can sat directly to the right of the desk lamp, and her paper tray was pushed solidly against the wall to the left of the

lamp. Directly at the base of the lamp four items were lined up with precision following the gentle curve of the base: a lucky stone from Lake Erie, a small golden statue of Joseph wearing his coat of many colors, a crystal piano, and a tiny replica of an art easel, including miniature paintbrush and canvas.

Trista made her way to her dresser and ran her hand along the smooth mahogany. She stared for a moment at the dust on her fingertips. She would have to dust. She would do that tonight after the concert. The concert tickets! Trista quickly glanced at three bottles of perfume and two bottles of lotion in careful placement upon a mirrored tray. She also checked her dresser drawers; all were firmly closed. She made her way across the room to her night stand next to her bed. Trista sat on the purple quilt that covered her bed and opened the drawer of her nightstand. The tickets were missing! A new panic seized her. Last night she had carefully placed them on top of her journal next to the pen. The pen was missing!

Sitting upright and clutching her hands, Trista suddenly felt sick. Six concert tickets for premium seats cost quite a bit of money. What would she do? Trista tried to regulate her breathing like the therapist taught her: breathe in to a slow count of five, hold for a slow count of five, and exhale to a slow count of seven. She did this three times before reason returned. She removed the journal from the drawer. The pen sat under the journal, but the concert tickets weren't there. Trista grabbed the wire spiral of the notebook spine and shook the journal toward the floor. A picture of Dave and the scrap of an unfinished love poem fell out. Trista shook harder, but the tickets weren't in the journal. Trista threw these things back in the nightstand and got down on the floor. Maybe the tickets had fallen under the bed or nightstand. Maybe they fell behind the nightstand. The small white

envelope with six tickets was gone. Trista had the distinct feeling that the mystery would be solved once she found her mother.

Trista pulled her backpack off her shoulders. It wouldn't hurt to double-check. Maybe she had put the tickets in the backpack last night but failed to see them when Kristie asked for her ticket that morning at school. If she found the tickets—and she prayed she merely overlooked them—it would be one less battle with her mother. Trista dumped the contents of the backpack on her bed. She opened every zipper on the backpack. She felt her jean's pockets. She had not packed the tickets. Since the clothes she planned to wear tonight were now on the bed, Trista quickly changed. The black sequined sweater was a little much to wear to school, but it looked great with her blue jeans and low black suede boots. She shoved her money and her RTA pass into her back pocket and raced down stairs. She had to find her mother. "Mom! Mom!" she screamed as loudly as her voice would allow.

Trista had checked all the bedrooms except one: the master bedroom at the back of the house. Storming into the room without knocking, she found her mother sprawled facedown across the king-sized bed in a golden evening gown. A pile of CDs lay beneath her. Trista picked up one of the CDs and looked at it: *Mozart: Piano Concertos*. The CDs that weren't under her mother were other classical compositions by Beethoven, Bach, Stravinsky, and Tchaikovsky, among others. Trista looked at the bed. An empty wine glass lay within her mother's reach upon the pillow. Her eyes scanned the bedroom for evidence of a knife or other item her mother may have used as a weapon. Nothing was out of the ordinary. An uncorked half-empty Beringer wine bottle sat on the nightstand. Trista went around the bed. As she did so, she tripped over another Beringer bottle. Empty! She

kicked it deep beneath the bed and picked up the bottle on the nightstand. The glass felt room temperature. It must have been out of the wine refrigerator for awhile.

Getting down beside the bed, Trista called into her mother's ear: "Mom!" Trista stood up and looked around the room. Costumes and evening gowns littered the floor and lay draped across the settee on the other side of the room next to the television and the window. Trista made her way to the small couch and shook out each of the garments, hoping the tickets would miraculously fall from some contrived entanglement. When the small envelope did not appear, Trista started collecting the clothes from off the floor, shaking them, and throwing them onto the settee. With all the clothes now off the floor, Trista started to examine the room with more urgency. She checked the top of the dresser; she quickly opened each drawer and peered inside. "Mom!" Trista yelled and made her way back to the bedside in order to look on top of and inside each of the nightstands.

"Mom!"

"Mmmmm..." came the throaty reply from her mother.

"Mom! Get up now!" Trista screamed.

"But I'm still dancing," her mother purred as she rolled onto her side. With heavy stage make-up plastered across her face, she looked like a child who had gotten into her mother's make-up case. One of the fake eyelashes had come undone at the corner and looked like a spider laying against the amber and gold eye shadow. Her red rouge looked angry against her pale skin, like a slap of defiance for stopping the dance. Only her lips weren't painted. They had lost their color on the rim of the wine glass.

"Mom! Where is the envelope that was in my nightstand drawer?"

Her mother opened her eyes and looked blankly at the CDs splayed across the bed. She reached for one and held it before her face, scrutinizing the cover.

"Mom!"

"I want to dance again, darling." Slow tears started to creep sideways across her mother's face toward the bed. Her mother used to dance for the Cleveland Ballet. In fact, she met Trista's father while he was working on the Nutcracker set one Christmas. He was one of the painters on the set design team. The handsome young painter quickly caught the eye of several dancers, but his eyes only saw Evangeline. The two were married a short time later and became Mr. and Mrs. Louis Gardiner. Her father eventually became set director at the Cleveland Ballet. But, when the ballet hit upon financial crisis and closed its doors, Louis couldn't stand to work a job that didn't showcase his artistic talents. With both of her parents out of work at that time, Trista heard plenty of arguments about money and where to place the blame. Soon, her father ran off to San Francisco with a young artist. His gallery experienced periodic success, and the checks from those months were always large. But her mother never worked again. She had the opportunity to become a dance instructor with a local troupe, but by that time Beringer, Gallo, and Mondavi occupied all her time.

Evangeline pulled herself to a sitting position and reached for a tissue at the side of her bed. She carefully dabbed at the corners of her eyes. The loose eyelash stuck to the tissue and pulled her eyelid outward as she lowered the tissue. The eyelash would not let go of the eyelid, and a small piece of tissue tore and stuck to the eyelash. Her mother batted her eyes and looked up at her. "I want to dance again."

"I know. I heard you, Mom." Trista stood in the middle of the room with her arms across her chest and looked down at her mother. "Where are my concert tickets?"

"I don't think you listen to me, Trista. You are just like your father."

Trista didn't want to go down the just-like-your-father-argument road, so she quickly changed the subject. "Hey, Mom, I saw you were listening to Beethoven. Did you know the high school band was going to perform *Ode to Joy* at the Winter Variety Show? Are you going to go to the show? Mrs. Schmidt asked me to perform a piano solo. I told her I wasn't sure if I could, but she said I have to let her know by next week. Can I perform at the show?"

Evangeline stared blankly at her daughter, the eyelash more than half off and looking more and more like a spider. "Why do they call it 'Winter Variety Show'? It's not like they have an 'Autumn Variety Show' or a 'Spring Variety Show'. Why don't they just call it the 'Variety Show'?"

"Hey, Mom, speaking of shows, I'm trying to find the tickets that were in my nightstand. They were tickets to a show I'm going to with my friends tonight."

Trista's mom stood up. The golden dress that clung in crumpled disarray while she sat on the bed now cascaded down her body until it barely reached the floor. She put her hand to her cheek. "They are not show tickets, Trista. They are concert tickets. Call things by what they are."

Hope pounded in Trista's breast. Her mother had seen the tickets.

Trista followed her mother across the room toward the master bath. *Why didn't she check the master bath for the tickets before waking her mother?* Trista mentally kicked

herself. Trista waited outside the bathroom to allow her mother some privacy. After a few minutes, the toilet flushed. Moments later, a shattering scream flew from the bathroom.

Trista rushed inside, fully expecting to find her mother crumpled on the floor or bleeding. Instead, Evangeline stood in front of the mirror clutching wildly at her hair and flailing her arms. "Look at me! Look at me! Why didn't you tell me my eyelash was falling off?" She leaned in toward the mirror and pulled the eyelash. "Look at it! Now it's all stuck together. This just won't do!" She threw up her arms in despair.

With every movement of her arms, Trista watched the gilt mini-chandelier above the sink. She was certain her mother would snag one of her rings on the chandelier, and it would come crashing down on her head.

"Oh! And look at this! Just look at it, will you!" Evangeline spun around and flattened her hair against her head. She bowed down in front of her daughter. "What do you see, Trista? Tell me what you see!"

"I see hair, Mom! Come on! I need to know what you did with my concert tickets!"

Staring into the mirror with her hands flattening her hair and pressed against her face, Evangeline looked like Munch's *The Scream*. Leaning closer to the mirror, Evangeline whispered, "You see hair, and I see evidence of my own mortality creeping into my hair." She let go of her hair and squinted into the mirror. "And mortality creeps upon us all." She stood erect and turned around "Your concert tickets? Your concert tickets? Is that all you can think of? A silly concert? I am aging, and you want to go to a concert with your silly friends? Damn you, Trista! Damn you!" Her mother huffed past, bumping against Trista.

Trista followed her mother from the bathroom, out of the bedroom, and into the kitchen. "Mom! Come on! My friends gave me their money for these tickets! If I don't

bring them their tickets, we're going to owe them lots of money!" Trista knew her mother was conversant in the language of dollars.

"We are not going to owe them anything, Trista, dear. Again, I must remind you to call things by what they are." Her mother reached for the golden case of cigarettes that she kept on the kitchen counter and snapped it open. "You are going to owe lots of money because *you* don't have the tickets." Her mother fidgeted with the lighter before finally lighting her cigarette. "With whom will you be attending said concert?"

"Kristie, Joel, Dave, and a couple of Dave's friends that I haven't met."

"Dave? As in that Sanders' boy?"

"Yes."

"Oh, you're a real riot, Trista." She held the cigarette to her lips, inhaled, and moved her hand away in a flamboyant dismissive motion. "You think that Sanders's boy is really interested in you, don't you? He could care less about you. The Sanders don't associate with people like you. What do you have to offer a boy like that? Nothing!"

"Mom!" Trista felt the tears roll over her bottom lashes. "Dave cares for me."

"Cares for you? Are you really so stupid as to believe that?" Evangeline put the cigarette to her lips and left it dangling between her lips for a moment as she extended both arms and inspected her red nails from a distance. She pulled the cigarette from her mouth and let a slow curl of smoke escape her lips. "I see I'll have to educate you, my dear. People like the Sanders are not interested in people like us. We are artists, playthings to them. We make them look good. They pay to patronize our profession so they can say they support the arts. Sometimes they even become friendly with us because knowing artists personally

is good conversation at a dinner party. But, to tell you the truth, Dave is not interested in you as a person. You are nothing to him, and don't ever forget that!"

Trista crossed the kitchen and stood next to the window in the breakfast nook. She pushed open the curtains, and grey light flooded into the kitchen. She watched the leaves fall from the trees in the backyard. She looked beyond her backyard to the row of houses on the next block and wondered what demons lurked in those darkened windows. Or was hers the only house on the block with a monster? She turned around and stared at her mother, daring her to make her close the windows.

Taking a long drag on her cigarette, Evangeline stared at her daughter. Her lips pursed before she slowly exhaled the smoke through her nose and mouth.

Trista knew the look. She would have to tread very carefully, or she might not get out of the house. "Mother, you're right. You're right. Dave couldn't possibly be interested in me. I don't know what I was thinking because I certainly don't deserve to be part of his crowd. But, the truth is I don't have the tickets, and I would owe my friends lots of money. But, Mom," Trista looked down and took a deep breath while crossing her fingers behind her back and looking back up at her mother with widened eyes, "I was hoping to use my money to buy you that emerald green silk scarf you saw at Sak's for Christmas. It looked so pretty on you because it really brought out the color in your eyes."

With smoke again creeping out of her nose and the corners of her mouth, Evangeline stared at her daughter and put down her cigarette. The cat clock tick-tick-ticked upon the wall. "You think that green one looked better than the blue one?"

"Yes it did! Your eyes just popped with color in that green scarf." Trista pulled out a chair at the breakfast table and sat down. "I also think you have more things you can wear

with the green scarf than the blue one." Trista folded her hands and looked out the window. She didn't want to look at the clock; that would give her mother the impression that she might be in a hurry. Staring out the window, Trista concentrated on the falling leaves. Most of the leaves had already fallen, but some leaves still clung desperately to the trees, not wanting to be borne away on the wild wind. Trista liked watching the leaves break free. When they finally decided to let go, they were caught up in a flash of swirling wind and danced—yes, they danced—upon the air currents before joining their leaf-friends in a scuttling soiree across the yard.

"You know, that scarf was on sale last week," Evangeline reminded Trista.

Trista stole a look at the cat clock: 3:25. She would have to hurry the tickets out of her mother and get out the door soon. "It might still be on sale this week. If not, I can get a coupon from the paper or the internet. They keep having these fifteen-percent off coupons." Trista looked over at her mother. Her mother had one hand on the granite counter; the other brought her cigarette to her lips. In her golden evening gown and stage make-up, her mother was a formidable dragon in the gathering gloom. Trista looked back out the window before speaking. "But, if I don't bring my friends their tickets, I certainly won't be able to afford the scarf."

Tick-tick-tick. The cat's eyes surveyed the room, back-and-forth, back-and-forth.

"When will you be home?" Evangeline stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray.

Trista continued to stare out the window so as not to betray any emotion. "I'll be home as soon as it's over."

"Trista, I asked for a specific time." The pitch of her mother's voice raised a notch.

"When do you want me home, Mom? I'll be home whenever. If you don't want me to go to the show...concert, I'll just run their tickets downtown and come home. I don't have to stay. I'll do whatever you want." Trista stole another glance at her mother, but when she saw her mother staring hard at her, she turned her eyes back out the window and focused on the leaves.

Evangeline moved across the kitchen and started opening and closing cupboards. "They're in here somewhere. I can't remember. I thought they were an invitation for us to attend a party."

Trista wanted to scream: *You rummaged through my personal space, stole my tickets, and thought they were for you? Then you lost them?* Instead, she said, "I'll help you look. Where do you think you last saw them?" She slowly got up from the table. "Do you want me to put a light on for you?"

Her mother nodded as stared into a cupboard. "I thought I had them in the kitchen. I had just come down the back stairway and into the kitchen..." Her voice trailed off as she closed one cupboard and opened another.

Trista flipped on the light switch. She considered asking her mother about the blood in the sitting room, but that would start another episode, and she really wanted to get to the concert. Trista started opening the cupboards beneath the island. She didn't know why her tickets would be in the cupboard, but it was somewhere to begin looking. A few cleaning supplies were housed beneath the sink. Other than that, the cupboards beneath the island were mostly bare. Her mother had destroyed or given away anything that reminded her of the life she had had with Louis. That was soon after the divorce. With each destroyed item, Trista had lost a connection to her happy past. The cookie plate her

mother and father bought one Christmas for Santa's cookies had been thrown down the basement stairs, crashing against the wall. The New Year's Eve champagne glasses were gone. Each of the twelve glasses had remained in a broken heap on the brick patio for a year before one day disappearing beneath a warm summer sun. Even her Grandma Gardiner's crystal candy dish, an heirloom that had been given to her—"to Trista" read the will—wound up smashed and broken. Trista stared into the empty cupboards and recalled their past glory, remembered their happy contents. She stood up and stared at her mother. Her mother had moved across the room and now stood in front of the refrigerator, looking in.

"Mom?"

"What do you want to do for dinner?" her mother asked.

A silent scream echoed throughout Trista's slight frame. She wanted to open her mouth and howl and rage against her mother. Instead, she calmly replied, "I'm not hungry," and made her way over to the cupboards her mother had just examined. Trista started looking into each one.

"I thought you weren't hungry," a note of accusation hung in her mother's voice.

"I'm not."

"Then what are you looking for in the cupboards?"

Trista turned to look at her mother. "You said the tickets were in the cupboard."

Evangeline closed the refrigerator. "No, they're not in the cupboard." She carried a whole grapefruit over to the breakfast nook. "Would you be a dear and get me a grapefruit spoon, a knife, and a plate?"

Trista, already standing in front of the plate cupboard, opened the door and pulled out a plate. She reached into the silverware tray in the drawer beneath and pulled out a butter knife and a grapefruit spoon. "Do you need the sugar, too?" she asked.

"I can't have sugar!" her mother screeched. "Do you know how many calories are in a teaspoon of sugar? If I'm ever going to dance again, I must maintain my svelte figure!" Her mother picked up the knife and ran her thumb along the cutting edge. "Trista, dear, this isn't sharp enough. This will never cut through my grapefruit. Please bring me a sharper knife."

Trista made her way across the kitchen to the knife block on the counter by the stove. For a moment, Trista stared at the block. One of the slots was empty. Surreptitiously, she moved back to the island and opened the dishwasher. It was empty. She looked in the sink. Two wine glasses plastered with lipstick.

"Trista, dear! I can't cut this apart with my bare hands!"

Trista looked at her mother. She wanted to shout: Actually, dear mother, you can break it apart with your bare hands. Just peel it like an orange! Instead, she said, "Sorry," and moved back to the knife block to get her mother a knife. As she approached the block, she saw the tickets and drew back in horror. The missing knife held the tickets to the wall next to the phone. Trista quickly grabbed a knife for her mother and carried it point downward across the room. "Do you want me to cut this for you, Mother?"

Evangeline nodded and pushed the plate with the grapefruit on it toward Trista.

Trista plunged the knife into the grapefruit. Juices coursed down the sides as she sliced it in half. She laid it open, glistening, on the plate. "Sure you don't want sugar?"

"I don't want sugar." Her mother started to dig into the grapefruit with her grapefruit spoon.

While her mother was distracted with her grapefruit, Trista stole back to the tickets. The knife held the envelope against the wall along the top edge of the envelope. Trista grabbed the knife handle and pulled. The envelope fell to the brown ceramic floor, spilling the tickets. The hole in the wall wasn't large, and only a careful examination of the wall would reveal it amid the small floral print of the wallpaper. Why would her mother use a knife to hang her tickets on the wall? Why did her mother feel it was important to take her tickets in the first place? Trista examined the knife. At first glance, it appeared clean, but on closer inspection, Trista found a small spot of blood on the blade close to the handle. It reminded her of the blood on the switch plate in the sitting room. She was certain there was a connection between the two. Trista looked at the knife, then back at her mother. She wanted to ask her mom if everything was okay or if she had been hurt. Instead, she quietly opened the dishwasher and placed the knife in the silverware holder. Then she loaded the two wine glasses from the sink.

Trista walked back to where the tickets lay on the cold ceramic tile, squatted down, and examined them. They weren't damaged. The knife had only made a hole in the envelope. Trista scooped up the tickets and put them back in the envelope. As she stood to her feet, she shoved the tickets into her back pocket and looked at her mother.

Evangeline sat at the table eating her grapefruit and staring out into the backyard. Trista wondered if her mother saw the leaves wanting to break free and dance upon the wind. Maybe her mother saw the trees clutching at the leaves, desperately trying to hold on. She turned and made her way quietly out of the kitchen, through the darkened living

room, and into the foyer. She reached for the coat she dumped beside the door and wrapped it around her body. Trista stood still for a moment and listened to the quiet house before silently turning the door knob and slipping outside into the windy twilight.

Playing in the Band

me & Laura

at 12 i—even i—realize we do not live in luxury
the marigold refrigerator, worn shag carpeting,
& a broken car in the driveway give it all away

but i watch Laura Ingalls' father
patch up a broken wagon wheel, carry the lumber
that builds the town, mend a broken fence,

dispense wisdom to his reckless daughter:
"ya catch more flies with honey, half pint!"
while listening to my own father

as he argues with my mother in the kitchen
& she insists we turn off the tv and come to the table
& he says there is no reason to eat at the table

i side with my father. i want to see if Laura outwits
nellie olson. i want to learn how she does it
because no one told me how to bear the blows

of the girls at my new school; no one told me
how to face the taunts at the bus stop.
"wimp, why don't you go back where you belong?"

my brother looks to me when angry words fly
big blue eyes staring at their closed bedroom
door, hears his voice: "bitch! you're worthless!"

-it doesn't matter; i've heard it before
so i look to Laura. she has the fortitude
to face bandits, grown-ups, and nellie

maybe it will rub off on me. maybe i can be like her.
i lay on the brown carpet and imagine myself
in the 1800s; i imagine myself running down that

marigold covered hill, an oak tree standing as a sentinel
at the top; i hear crickets and birds
above the wind, and for just a moment i do—i really do—

<continued>

until a plate smashes in the kitchen and my father
corners my mother against the wall—laura would
step in and fight; laura would know what to say;

she would hatch some plot to make it all right, and
the townspeople would laugh at themselves in retrospect.
but i have no plan, no words. so my eyes focus on the tv screen.

Echo-ology

I have it down to a science now:

your footsteps in the hall
(white-canvas hi-tops
bought at the dollar store)
leaving imprints in the dust

that horrible pattern
of wallpaper behind your head
when you told me your boxes
were packed

were packed and leaning against the wall
 brown stripes
 black stripes
 white stripes

the horizontal lines could not sustain us
they plummeted in forty-five degree angles
dropping, dropping again and again
farther down the hall beside the camping gear

I asked about the books—the books
neither of us cared to read anymore—
Kama Sutra, Sonnets from the Portuguese—
you said you didn't know

we stared at each other
eyes reflecting what we had, what we lost
was this the first time I saw you?
was this the first time you saw me?

the gravel in your voice was heavy;
you said you didn't want to leave
but the stones of your words just crumbled,
friable words, empty, alchemized into dust

they still lay there today, motionless
next to your footprint in the hall
next to the camping trip we never took
next to the books we'll never read

echoes of your voice—
 we spoke to each other in kindness, once
 we whispered secrets in bed
echoes of your voice—
 I memorized your parting words, just
 as I memorized our first kiss

Our Urban Legend: A Lawn-Chair Balloon Ride⁸

You are the weather balloons tethered
to the lawn chair, and
I am that man, sitting with a six pack on his lap.

 We plan our marriage all the way from Sacramento to Reno.
Whee! Won't we have some fun!

Last-minute preparations: Knots securely fastened? Check.
Strapped onto chair securely? Check. Beer? Check.

 We walk down the aisle at any chapel:
 Chapel of Love. Chapel of the Bells.
 Chapel of Blessed Harmony.
Willingly, I cut the sandbags.

Lift-off is shaky at best, but it is expected.
 Toilet seat up. Toilet seat down.
 Who paid the electric bill? Are we out of milk, again?
 Squeeze the toothpaste in the middle.
 Can't you help me carry in the groceries?
 I've got a headache.
An easterly catches us and we're up, up, up—

The chair beneath me begins to rock.
At first a gentle swaying just above the tree tops, but
we've got so much ground beneath us now:
children and a mortgage.

We spiral in a strange dance beneath the clouds.

There's really not much keeping me from falling:
a few mesh strips and my own sense of balance.
 Thank God I brought the beer!

There's really not much keeping you connected:
an amateur knot. And the belief
we knew what we were doing when
we inflated the balloons.

⁸ A classic urban legend tells about a man who strapped helium balloons to a lawn chair, seated himself in the chair, and took off. He ascended to 16,000 feet and was eventually rescued after violating LAX airspace. (Snopes confirmed this as a true event. The man's name was Larry Walters, and he made this flight on July 2, 1982.)

An Open Letter to Heathcliff

More like Heathcliff everyday
you descend into madness—
not the 19th century Victorian kind—no,
you fall into madness of your own making.
Like receiving a letter meant for another,
you never understood my message;
light and understanding could not
penetrate your darkness.
Although free, you chose to face the cave wall,
preferring the shadows of the prison house.
What light did get through
distorted those shadows, your demons,
and all your ninja training
could not dilute their darkness.

I loved you once; perhaps I'll love you forever.
But now I know why Cathy left you.
Your love, a mere shadow,
couldn't stand in the light.

I saw you once when you turned
away from the cave wall; we
made promises and declarations
on the stairwell in front of the dusty window.
Beauty lived in your soul,
but we parted and you shut the door—
banished beauty and danced with your demons.
They were not there before;
you spoke them into existence
made love to them—to them!—
and sought your own madness,
calling it sanity, making
it all reasonable. And, now,
you are a shell of your former self
staring back at me like
a criminal in yesterday's newspaper.

I want to reach you, tell you to climb upwards,
toward the light, but I fear your shadows
have your feet anchored with the cement
of your madness. You once said
you'd never unbury the past.
You called it madness, but look at yourself, Heathcliff,
see how far you've fallen into that grave.

Caught

Raining Jazz

Rainfall drips from the eaves
Keeping time with coffeehouse jazz
Streetlights—
 A web of luminescence
 Catching each
 Droplet, a brief universe
 Thrumming to its own symphony.

Each back-lit bead, a note,
Illuminated
Sparkling
For one shining, glorious, ephiphanous moment
Before falling
 Falling
 Falling
Keeping time with coffeehouse jazz.

Ode to My Bedside Clock at 3:59 a.m.

You only care about
numbers. My dreams
don't interest you.
You don't want to hear them.
I lie awake at night,
watching you.
Thinking.
But you don't care.
My thoughts mean nothing
to you. I can't stop
your actions,
your relentless march
forward.

If I'm lucky, I might drift off
when twilight's spinster sister
creeps in from the east.
The ration of sleep
I'm granted is nothing
because your image flashes
in my dreams and your voice
blares.

After-Hours Celebration at the Metropark in Early June

We were young Frankensteins
the night the cops pulled us over.
Some may have called us
Einsteins. I may have called us
fools. For that's what we were
so late in the night, when the air
ran dry, the violet darkness
tasted of wine, and
the Golden Coast loomed large.

Only the burned out taillight
on our '68 Firebird
detained us.

High Tea on the Subway

my feet slap the pavement
late afternoon
August sun plays hide-and-seek between the buildings
caught at a crosswalk, the sun tags me
I'm it
sweat tickles and trickles down my back

GREEN
Go!
we are cattle
stampeding across the street

steak and onions sizzle,
but I only want a bottle of iced tea
dirty money changes hands, and
I long for hand sanitizer
but it is buried
beneath meaninglessness in my purse

Canal Street
Green Line
I am a spelunker
entering the cavern beneath the street

sweat stench of late afternoon passengers
fills the platform
jostling for a position, all considering
the location of the nearest train door
subway breeze transforms the stench
metal grates on metal in the blackness

train six,
Lexington Avenue Local
I am a queen
taking a seat and opening my iced tea

Music: glistening threads in the tapestry of the soul

High above the note hovers, wavers, quivers,
before joining with another. Soon,
a chord resonates, breathes. A net of rhythm
awakens the pulse, catches the note, unites the chord.

The heartbeat, the drum, the heartbeat, the drum.
It gives me life. It pulses within. Raises me up.
Wakens my soul. Ba-dum! Ba-dum! Ba-dum! Ba-dum!
We dance to the beat, the beat of the drum.

The line of demarcation obscures: the song and me, the song
and me. Music weaves through my life, ever shifting:
the shuttle of the loom passes back and forth,
Back and forth. The shuttle of the loom passes back and forth.

Every chord vibrates across the soul, shakes loose
the phlegm of yesterday, the wind sweeps
loose the last leaf in late winter. Caught on the wind.
Strum--guitar strings pulsate hope, pulsate life, pulsate truth.

A vessel at the mic pours words with liquid voice
upon the beat, upon the notes strung like Christmas lights
across the auditorium. Strung like gold across my heart.
My lips mirror the words, invoke their power.

The line of demarcation obscures: the song and me, the song
and me. Music weaves through my life, ever shifting,
the shuttle of the loom passes back and forth,
Back and forth. The shuttle of the loom passes back and forth.

The Chilean Earthquake: A Crack of the Kraken's Thick Tail

waves whisper and tickle shoreline sand
Coppertone permeates, hangs heavy,
I feel it on my tongue, turn it over in my mouth.
on my beach blanket millions of grains of sand,
each a little universe,
stick to my stomach, my breasts, my thighs.
I scoop warm sand and drizzle grains
into my belly button.

I keep hitting my head against something,
a thin layer of membrane that guards the secrets
of the universe, mere whispers
trying to pass; but the thin membrane is too thick;
answers won't come, so I ascribe word pictures
and figurative language the task of penetrating that wall.
something is coming loose with each new text,
each new thought,

the plastic corner peels back revealing the substructure.
but the gription of that plastic holds,
and today my eyeballs hurt.
when my retinas detach my eyes will roll to the floor.

Buddy leads me down the beach to Ravi's Tiki Tacki Uhari Bar,
just like he led the Fates, just like he led Mother Theresa.

with a cold banana peel draped over my hand, I lift my voice
above a firecracker argument—

"Because AlGore said it, it must be so!"
"AlGore's full of pseudo-science!"

—I call my order to Ravi.

Gabriele Veneziano stands on HIS purple bar stool and waves
his right hand around & around & around & around
& around his head like a lasso. "She fricka fricka
fresh, Dawg." he looks around & around & around
at the crowd: Alfred Lord
Tennyson, Bob Dylan, the seven sisters, Sir Gawain,
Carrie Underwood, et al.

<continued>

silence reverberates
echoing against orange walls.
Veneziano changes his tune:
“but I digress...
what I meant to say...”

applause erupts from the floor, reverberates against the ceiling.

Stephen Hawking stands—*stands!*—at the other end of the bar
and calls, “the next round’s on me!”

a hot string of whiskey stings my tongue.

“another!”
jeweled cameras take our pictures,
but I want that camera that will look backward in time.
I want a photograph of that first moment.

“another!”
that damn string theory keeps getting in the way.

“another!”
like yarn coiled up into a ball on the other side of the big bang.

“enough!”
the barkeep tends that coiled ball
keeps it between the pinot noir and Jose Cuervo

strawberry fumes tickle my nose, tricking me.
a margarita looks up at me from the counter and asks
me to consider my place in the universe:
“time did not begin until you were born.”

for the first time in my life I know exactly who I am.

Volo praecessi domus.

the top of Kraken’s head bobs up and down with each wave
while two giant eyes watch...
& wait...
watch...
& wait...
while we make sense of the world at Ravi’s Tiki Tacki Uhari Bar.

Neff Road Pier

On an evening in mid-July, Steve suggested I tell my mother that I planned to sleep at a friend's house. He would tell his mother the same thing. Although we were best friends, we never spent the night at each other's apartment. My mother said it was "improper for a boy and girl to have a sleepover" and it would only happen when I was married. So, after pulling off our great escape from the watchful eyes of my mother, we lay down on the empty bleachers of a local baseball field and gazed at the stars. Our plan was to camp out on the bleachers under the open sky for the entire night. Our science teacher had explained how the stars all appear to rotate around the North Star over the course of the night. We wanted to see it for ourselves.

When the police cruiser entered the far end of the field, we snuck into the dugout and huddled against a corner wall. We waited to hear the crunch of the gravel that would signal the policeman left. Only our breathing and the distant hum from Shaker Boulevard broke the heavy silence. Neither of us had watches and we both left our cell phones at home, so we had no way of knowing how long that police cruiser sat there. It felt like hours. We sat in the dugout and talked in whispers.

"Jo, I'm not sure what to do."

"About what?"

"I mean...I'm really thankful to the Wrights for taking me in, but Ana Adams is my mother. My real mother." Steve had learned about his adoptive mother as soon as our freshman year ended. The Wrights had planned a vacation to Seattle with the intent of

revealing Steve's adoption on that trip. Steve told me he learned he was adopted on the drive to Ana Adam's house.

"Steve, don't you think the Wrights are your family?"

"I'm grateful to them, but I don't know."

"What is family anyway? Look at me. I know my biological mother and father. But Mom is always at work, and all I see of my father is a check once every month. I don't even know what he looks like anymore."

"But, at least you know them." Steve stood up, grasped the chain-link fence, and stared out over the empty field.

I fought to remember something my biology teacher said. "Steve, I think it has something to do with nature and nurture. Like, your physical characteristics are given to you by your real mom and dad. But who you are has to do with what the Wrights gave you." He continued to stare out over the field. "Steve, what the Wrights gave you is good."

After a long moment, he turned to look at me. "Jo, sometimes I don't know where I belong anymore."

"You belong right here," I said, trying to lighten the moment. "Come on and sit by me. I've got a good view of Orion."

We spied the Big Dipper and Orion from the dugout. Our eyes strained to find the Pleiades. For the rest of the night, we watched the stars move across the sky. In the early morning hours, the chill night air snaked onto the baseball diamond and slithered into the dugout. The police cruiser was long gone, but we weren't planning on going anywhere now. My eyes felt heavy. I shivered and leaned my back against Steve's warm body. He put his arms around me, pulled me closer, and leaned his cheek against the top of my head.

"Jo," he whispered into my hair. The cobwebs of sleep quickly cleared from my mind. I'd never realized how solid Steve felt. Was I imagining this? I poked my own left arm with my right index finger. Soft. A definite contrast to Steve's body. Small ripples of excitement began coursing through my body like a stream. What was I thinking? Steve was my friend. What was this sudden attraction I felt? I couldn't place it, and I wondered if Steve felt the same for me.

After that night, I began to see Steve in a new light. When I picked up the phone and heard his voice, a small electric current seemed to plunge into my stomach and send sparkling pulses throughout my body. When I ran into him in the apartment complex's hallway, I stumbled over my words. But it wasn't just me. Steve, who used to have an answer for everything, didn't seem so certain, so glib, anymore. He didn't bound downstairs and bang on my apartment door anymore. I longed to call him, but wouldn't. Instead, I hovered near the phone, awaiting his call. I made up excuses to hang around the lobby, hoping he would pass through the front door and ask me to do something. Once in awhile this plan worked, and we would take a walk to get pizza or visit the cemetery. But, our long walks became infrequent and grew shorter, until they stopped altogether.

My mother and I went on a vacation the first week in August. Every year we went to Cedar Point for a three-day weekend. This year Cedar Point's newest roller coaster held the record for world's tallest. I couldn't wait to get home and tell Steve all about the new coaster. But, when we returned, he was gone.

"Steve will be away for awhile," Mrs. Wright said stiffly as her hand held the door frame as if for support. So many times I'd tried getting close to Steve's mom, but she kept

me at arm's length. Steve said she did the same to him, too, which was why he preferred hanging out in my apartment.

"Where did he go?" I asked standing in the hallway before her door.

"I thought Steve told you everything." She arched her eyebrow at me. I hated when she did that. It always reminded me of some creepy murder mystery.

"No, ma'am, he doesn't. I mean, he didn't tell me he would be gone."

"Steve went to Seattle." She stared at me as if trying to determine how to best formulate what she wanted to say next. Instead she sighed. "Good day, Joline."

The door started to close. "Wait! Mrs. Wright!" She didn't open the door any farther; instead, she merely turned and looked at me. "Steve hasn't been answering his cell phone."

"That's because he's in Seattle. He did not take his cell phone with him."

"But, Mrs. Wright, how can I get a hold of him?"

"I suppose if Steve wants to talk to you, he'll find a way to get in touch. Good day."

The door closed.

Steve was not in school on the first day back from summer vacation. It was strange walking into the large stone entranceway without a friend by my side. For the last several years Steve and I commented on the returning students in a fashion similar to a sportscaster's play-by-play. *"And you'll notice Holly is off the DL. I heard her cast was removed in July." "We'll have to see how the semester goes with Angela's new hair cut. Certainly that's got to cut down on the wind resistance as she navigates the hallways." "Derek is sporting a clean, new pair of Nike's. How long until those are all scuffed up? We'll have to get back with you on that one later in the season..."* Now I walked into my sophomore year

alone and kept a vigilant watch for a friendly face. When did all my classmates change? Suddenly, they all seemed so much older and sure of themselves.

By the third week of class rumors about Steve spread around the school. Other students came up to me and asked about Steve. One day in geometry, Cody Wilson poked me from behind with a pencil. "Hey, Jo, have you heard from Steve yet?"

I shook my head. Mr. Hogue stood before the podium and began shuffling through the collected homework.

Cody poked me again. "Hey, you want to go to a party down at the lake this Friday? A group of us are going down to the Neff Road Pier for some volleyball and a cookout on the beach."

I nodded my consent and whispered over my shoulder, "Sure." Mr. Hogue moved his mouth to call the class to order, but the words never reached my ears. They came out of his mouth, but they seemed to hang high above the fluorescent lights of the classroom. I could only think of Cody Wilson. He was way out of my league, and I knew it. I thought of Cody as a surfer-god type. Not that we were anywhere near the ocean. Lake Erie wasn't exactly a surfer's paradise, but we did have long stretches of beaches, and I knew Cody liked to hang out at the beach with his friends. He even had what I liked to think of as the "beach look." His blond hair reached his shoulders and brushed against the shell necklace that never left his throat. He wore shorts and flip flops even when the temperatures began to plummet.

Because Steve and I were always together, I never developed any close friendships with the other girls in my class. I regretted this now as I really needed a friend to confide in. Even if Steve were here, could I talk to him about Cody? Suddenly, I was mad at Steve.

How dare he leave without a goodbye, without telling me where he was going! Certainly he could have said something? Certainly he could call or write!

But it was more than that. Something passed between us that night in the dugout. It wouldn't let go.

My pencil slid off my desk and fell to the floor. Cody reached a flip flopped foot toward it and rolled it under his desk. I tried to concentrate on Mr. Hogue, but I needed my pencil to take notes. I felt Cody's desk shift against mine, and in a moment, I felt my pencil playing with the hair at my neck. Shivers ran down my spine, but I quickly reached behind me and twisted my pencil from Cody's grasp.

If Steve could forget that night in the dugout so easily, so could I.

I tried calling a few of the girls in my class, but none of the girls I knew were invited to the party at the Neff Road Pier. Further, I hadn't spoken with some of them in a few years. They were no longer the same middle schoolers with which I used to ride to school. Once Steve and I started hanging out, I forgot my other friends. It didn't take them long to forget me.

I didn't know what to wear. And, I was afraid that even if I had the perfect outfit, I would somehow reveal my clumsiness or lack of social graces. My mother, aware of the Wilson's standing in the community, insisted on taking me shopping for a "beach outfit." Although I groaned and protested, I felt relieved.

On the day of the party, I was accosted in the lunchroom by Stephanie, Ashley, and Brandi. They cornered me as I entered the far end of the lunch room.

"Come with us," Stephanie demanded and led me into the restroom which was painted a nauseating Pepto Bismol pink.

"Is it true?" Brandi demanded.

"Is what true?" I wanted to know.

"That you're going to the beach party with Cody?"

I tried to read her almond-shaped amber eyes, but they were so caked with mascara and eye shadow that I kept getting distracted. I looked away as I nodded.

"See?" Brandi shrieked. "He is so over me!" She rushed into one of the stalls and started pulling tissue from the roll.

"See what you did?" Ashley hissed at me before moving toward Brandi.

I felt like I was caught by the three fates. "What did I do?" I muttered, not wanting to offend any of them so I could quickly return to the lunch room and get my lunch before the bell rang.

Ashley spun around to face me. "You have no right going out with him! He belongs to Brandi!"

"I...I didn't know they were dating," I stammered. "Besides, he asked me out."

This must have been news to them because all three turned to look at me.

"Are you sure?" Stephanie asked.

"Yes. He asked me to go with him to the beach party when we were in Mr. Hogue's class the other day." I looked at each of them with the most pleading eyes I could muster. I didn't want to get on their bad side. I'd seen what they did to Melinda Richards last year. She was part of their circle of friends one day, and the next day the fates turned the whole school against her. "Look...I really need to get my lunch and study for my *Antigone* exam."

The three gave each other knowing looks.

"If what you say is true," Ashley began, "then we certainly owe you an apology."

Stephanie nodded her assent while staring at me, but Brandi just dabbed at the corners of her eyes with the tissue.

"Joline, I think we can probably work something out here."

Ashley turned toward Brandi and Stephanie. "Why don't you two go get Joline's lunch while I finish talking to her?"

I didn't really want them to select my lunch, but I started fishing around my pocket for my lunch card anyway. I pulled it out and held it toward Brandi and Stephanie.

Ashley put her hand over mine and pushed the card away from the other girls. "No! It's our treat today." She flipped open her purse and pulled out her own lunch card. "Here. Get something for Joline." She looked at me. "Pizza? Cheeseburger? What do you want?"

"Pizza's good."

As soon as the other girls left the restroom, Ashley spun around to face me. "Now, you need to listen and do as you're told here, or things could get bad." She glanced over her shoulder and looked toward the exit. "Listen...Brandi is really no good for Cody. You know that. Wait...maybe you don't know. Anyways, he asked you out and not her. Maybe he likes you...I don't know...I kinda doubt it...he's a *different* type of guy. He's not like your Steve."

"Steve is gone."

"Yeah, so I heard." She turned toward the mirror and started fiddling with her hair. "Anyway, so you have to go to that party with Cody. And you have to make him like you."

I could feel my eyes get wide. "Make him like me?" It was crazy.

She leaned toward me. "Look. I know you don't have many friends. You were okay with that as long as Steve was here, but tell me, Joline, who's your buddy now?"

A knot clenched in my stomach and tightened.

"You're pretty enough, so you could hang with all sorts of people. With Steve gone, it's time for you to start circulating. This opportunity with Cody is a step in the right direction."

I knew she was right. As far as I knew, I may never see Steve again. If I didn't form new friendships, the next few years of high school threatened to be lonely and boring. And, if I didn't seize this opportunity right away, it may never be offered again. But to get Cody...*Cody Wilson!*...to like me seemed next to impossible. I told Ashley I'd do what I could, and she said she would call me Saturday morning.

Cody called after school and explained that I would need to find a ride to the beach, but he would be able to get me home. He had family plans that he "absolutely could not get out of." I convinced my mother to drop me off at the far end of the parking lot. But, before she drove away, she reminded me how important this invitation could be. "Jo, it could mean the world of difference to you and the rest of your life." Uncertain as to what she meant, I walked across the pavement toward the beach and felt my new flip flops chafe at the delicate skin across the top of my feet. I pulled them off—cheap things!—and tossed them in my new end-of-the-season-and-on-clearance bag. Smoothing my skirt over my hips, I hoped I would fit in.

I stood at the precipice of the beach, that place where millions of grains of sand scatter on the pavement and the solid blacktop shows through in places. I looked past the pier and down the beach. The music from the party competed with the waves rolling onto the beach. A man sat beside the fire spinning some type of meat on a rotisserie. Talking a deep breath of warm mid-September air, I stepped into the sand and felt the strength of the

pavement end. The warm sand melted between my toes as I made my way toward the group. I tried to pick out familiar faces, but couldn't find any. What if I was at the wrong party? What if Cody was playing some cruel trick on me? Maybe people like me were just playthings to people like him. Maybe I was just a plaything to people like Ashley, too. Squishing through the sand, I suddenly didn't know who to believe.

Jevon Drummond pulled away from the crowd and jogged over to greet me. I didn't really know Jevon, but I recognized him and knew he was one of the upperclassmen student council representatives. "Hi, Joline!" He bent over to catch his breath.

"Jo," I said. "Just call me Jo."

"Okay, Jo," he said as he straightened up and started walking toward the party with me. "Cody called me before I left and said he is running a little late. He should be here by eight." With that, Jevon jogged back to the group and started digging around in the cooler.

As I got closer to the campfire raging on the beach, I noticed that the crowd consisted of older people, possibly college students. Most of the women wore bikini tops and shorts or skirts. Some of them had on tee-shirts. Most of the men stood around the volley ball net drinking beer and watching the game. The men who hovered around the fire teased the women. The women batted them away like gnats as they tried to organize the picnic foods. I looked around for someone to talk to, but everyone was engaged in some way. I felt a sudden yearning for Steve's company. Together we would have concocted some type of mischief that would have made the situation more bearable.

Shaking my head, I tried to rid Steve's grin from my mind.

I moved toward the group and sat on the corner of one of the logs that circled the fire, all the while wishing I hadn't accepted Cody's invitation. *Maybe I should just leave, I*

thought. The woman and man at the other end of the log didn't notice my arrival and continued talking.

"You will not!" the woman exclaimed, slapping the man's thigh.

"Sure I will!" he retorted. "In fact, I'll swim out past the pier."

"You'll get caught in some old fisherman's line. And I'll laugh. I swear to you, I'll laugh."

He nudged in closer to her and whispered something in her ear. They erupted in laughter and stood up as one. With his arm still slung casually over her shoulder, they walked toward the water.

The fire felt hot on my face, and I felt tears stinging at the backs of my eyes.

"You look flushed," an older woman observed as she carefully lowered herself onto the log next to mine and leaned her cane against it.

"I'm fine," I replied, grateful to finally be acknowledged.

"I'm Mrs. Wilson," she said and extended her hand to me.

"Nice to meet you," I put on my best meet-the-parents voice. "I'm Joline Evans."

"Oh, so you're the one Cody wants me to drive home later on." She looked at me with greater interest. "I know it must be difficult because Cody isn't here yet. But in the meantime, you should try to enjoy the party. Talk to people. Have a wine cooler or a beer." She looked at me closer. "Wait. Maybe not. You're in Cody's class in school, right?" I nodded my head. "I'm sorry. Sometimes I forget. Most of these kids here are college students. Cody was born long after my other children. Sometimes I even forget his age."

"What's this party for?" I wondered aloud.

"Oh, this. I have an annual beach party for my past and present students at Case."

I always thought that Cody's mother was one of the wealthy women who shopped at La Place' in Beechwood all day. Sometimes when we had a day off from school, Steve and I would catch a bus over to La Place' and watch the chauffeurs walk large, funny-looking poodles while their masters shopped and dined inside. But Mrs. Wilson wasn't one of them at all. She was a professor at Case Western Reserve. I stifled a giggle. When Steve and I would take one of our trips to the university Pizza Haus, we would always laugh at the professors. They were so dowdy, so stuck in a time warp. Mrs. Wilson, on the other hand, seemed to break the mold. She had a hint of 60's time warp in her with her funky skirt and beads, but her graying hair was so perfectly coiffed that even the gentle breeze from the lake could not cause a strand to stray out of place. Her vein-laced hands gripped her cane, and her jewels flashed in the setting sun.

We had already eaten by the time Cody showed up.

"I suppose your father kept you in that stuffy board room all this time?" Mrs. Wilson asked.

Cody scarfed down one of the few remaining hot dogs and nodded.

Mrs. Wilson's lips tightened, revealing her displeasure, but Cody didn't seem to notice. Instead, he grabbed my hand and said, "Come on!"

I didn't know where we were headed, but Cody seemed insistent on getting there, as if to make up for his delay. I looked up at Cody as he pulled me toward the pier. I never really noticed his height before because we sat next to each other in our desks at school. He stood a head taller than me. I was used to looking Steve straight in the eye. I would have to look up to catch Cody's eye.

We walked out onto the pier. Waves lapped at the pier's craggy rocks which met the water at odd angles before plunging into the dark lake. Water sloshed in and out between the huge stones. The surface of the pier was mostly level, but wide gaping fissures separated the large rectangular limestone boulders from each other. The rock felt cool to my bare feet, and I had to watch out for abandoned fishing hooks and fish debris. Cody thought this was funny and laughed at me. An old fisherman with his grandson looked up at us and smiled.

The last time Steve and I came here, we convinced one of the old fishermen to let us borrow one of his poles. Steve and I sat on the other side of the pier and caught one fish after another. The old fisherman moved to our side of the pier. "Fish ain't bitin' over there," he reasoned with us. Steve moved to the spot the fisherman had just abandoned. Suddenly, Steve began catching fish. The fisherman just scratched his head and said we had beginner's luck. I shook my head to get Steve out of my mind. I had to remember that he left me. He left me and didn't care to contact me! I had to forget him completely. I caught Cody's hand and laughed as I pulled him closer. He flashed a smile in my direction.

The sun slipped beneath the horizon just as we reached the end of the pier. Cody found a small pebble on the ground and threw it in. He looked at me. "Come on, now it's your turn."

"What do you mean?"

"You're supposed to find a pebble at the edge of the pier and throw it in. As it hits the water, you're supposed to make a wish." His earnest eyes searched mine.

This was the first I heard about this kind of magic. But, I found a pebble and threw it in. I didn't really wish for anything. I hoped for a perfect evening. I hoped Cody wouldn't

uncover my inadequacies. I hoped I passed the geometry test next Monday. I hoped Steve was happy wherever he was. I hoped his image would disappear from my mind. I hoped Cody wouldn't learn about my agreement with Ashley.

We sat at the edge of the pier and watched as the crescent moon followed the path of the sun and began its descent over the water. I always preferred the glint of moonbeams caught in the water over those of the sun. I said as much to Cody.

"I know what you mean," he said. "The moonbeams seem more determined somehow."

I wasn't sure what he meant and looked for an explanation in his face, but he continued staring out over the water. I didn't know whether to say something more or just stay quiet. The heat trapped in the rocks began to fade, and I felt the chill press against my thighs. The north wind blew a green scent—algae and fish—onto the pier. I shivered and leaned closer to Cody.

Cody took my hand and measured my palm against his. Linking fingers, he said, "Come on, let's head back."

Returning to the beach, we discovered that the party had doubled. Mrs. Wilson, seeing us approach, stood to her feet and leaned on her cane. "Cody, I'm tired and the wind from off the lake is really starting to chill my bones. Let's go home."

"Can I just get a ride from someone else?" Cody wanted to know. "I'm sure Jevon will give me a ride. Or, maybe Sarah. She lives over by Jo's apartment."

Mrs. Wilson acquiesced to her son's request. She left with a few of her students who agreed to help her carry things to the car.

A few of the men had set up an impromptu band with two guitars, a harmonica, and small drum. Cody left me on the same log his mother had just occupied and grabbed another guitar that lay on top of its case beneath the food table.

Cody sat across the fire from me and strummed at the guitar. Occasionally, he would look down at the strings or adjust the tuning as he played. Mostly, he just stared into the fire. Was he thinking about me?

Someone tapped my left arm and handed me a wine cooler. I looked to the right to see if I should pass it to someone, but no one reached for it. The cap was still on the bottle, so I clasped the cap between my forefinger and my thumb and twisted. It didn't budge. I looked down at the cap to see if there were special instructions. Nothing. I tried to twist it again. The man on the log to my right reached over and, with a quick flick of his wrist, had the cap off. He tossed the cap into the fire.

I looked at the label. "Sparkling Apple." Taking a tentative sip, I looked around. The others were either listening to the music or talking quietly. Cody watched me from across the fire. What if he didn't approve of under-age drinking? Was I embarrassing him? I took another sip and watched the firelight dancing in his eyes. He smiled at me.

Clearly he approved. Would Steve approve? We'd talked about drinking but never seriously. I suddenly wondered what kinds of peer pressure Steve faced at his new school. Certainly he was already enrolled in school somewhere. He probably already had a new best friend to replace me. Could I start to move into a new circle of friends, too? I stared across the fire at Cody. His head was bent toward the guitar, and his eyes were closed. Could Cody replace Steve?

I took another long sip from the bottle. No one could replace Steve, and I knew it. Just as I knew that none of Mom's boyfriends could ever replace the father I never saw. Steve had to answer this question in his life; I understood that. What I didn't understand is why he didn't tell me he was leaving. Why he hadn't tried to contact me. He hadn't even logged on to Facebook since mid-July. It was like he disappeared from the planet.

I took another long gulp and held the bottle eye-level. About an inch of sparkling liquid remained. I looked at Cody still bent over his guitar and tilted the bottle against my lips. The scent of green apples filled my nostrils and coated my throat as I let the rest of the liquid slide down my throat.

I wasn't sure what to do with the empty bottle, so I leaned it close against the log so no one would trip over it.

"Want another one?" the woman to my left asked as she reached into the cooler behind her back.

I nodded. *Sparkling Apple, part deux*. I tried again to get the cap to come off in my hands, and this time the edges didn't hurt my hand. But, however much I twisted, the cap would not come off.

"Try using the bottom of your skirt," the woman sitting next to me advised.

I put the bottle next to my feet and used my skirt to twist the cap. It popped off easily. I tossed the cap into the fire.

A few couples started dancing at the perimeter of the campfire. I watched the couple closest to the fire. Their bodies moved in and out of the shadows. One moment the woman was the shadow and the man's face became the light; the next moment, the man was the shadow and the woman was illuminated. His arms, entwined around her waist,

drew her closer with every step. Her arms circled his neck and occasionally pulled him closer for a kiss.

Cody sat down next to me and looked at the couple. "Pete and Marla. They'll be graduating next year." Cody reached for my bottle, half-full. He put the bottle to his lips and chugged the rest of the wine cooler down in one gulp. "Want to take a walk along the shore?"

I gave Cody my hand, and he pulled me to my feet.

We walked along the beach holding hands. My heart raced with each footstep on the cool sand, and I felt acutely aware of the rhythm of my breath. It matched the gentle sweep and retreat of the waves as they reclaimed some of the pebbles, some of the sand. The crescent moon had already dipped beneath the horizon. As we drifted farther and farther from the campfire, the hazy glow of Cleveland reflected off the few passing clouds and became our only light.

Cody stopped and pulled me toward him in the darkness. "I really like you," he whispered into my hair as he held me close. My mind raced back to the dugout and Steve's whisper into my hair. Cody's arms were lean, not thick like Steve's arms, but they conveyed a subtle strength that made me feel protected and secure standing there with my back to the dark that hung out over the lake. Lake Erie lapped at my feet and sometimes caught the bottom of my skirt. He repeated, "I really like you."

I wanted to respond, but I didn't know how. What could I say? Did I like him? Did I really like him? If I was honest with myself and with him, I would not have responded as I did. "I like you, too."

Cody leaned over and kissed me, gently at first, then with growing intensity. His tongue probed my mouth. I pulled away. "No, Cody."

A troubled look shot across his face as his eyebrows knit together and his lips formed the same thin line I saw on his mother earlier in the evening. "I don't understand. I thought you liked me."

"I do, Cody. I do like you, but not like this. Not yet."

"When?"

"When, what?"

"When will you like me like this?"

Did he want me to put my love on some sort of schedule? I saw the hurt look in his eyes and cursed myself. I was stupid. Steve was gone—maybe forever—and I could find no one comparable to this blond god staring at me on the beach. He was so talented, and he had the world at his feet. Maybe I should give in to this, give in to him. But not tonight. Not with my mind swimming in sparkling-apple delusions. Because I was deluded. I felt it in my gut. I knew that earlier this evening as I stood at the edge of the beach and thought he might be toying with me. On the other hand, at times he seemed so simple and sincere. "Come on." His voice invited me to play earlier.

"What did you wish for when we stood at the end of the pier?" I wanted to know.

He laughed incredulously. "What? You know I can't tell you that."

"Tell me."

"No, it will break the magic." He took a step backward.

"I have to know." The flatness in my voice surprised even me. I sounded just like my mother when she meant business.

We stood for a long moment staring at each other. A wave crashed over my feet and the spray caught the hem of my skirt. Steve would have told me his wish; we shared all our secrets. *Except his disappearance.* Again I cursed myself. Why did I compare everything to Steve?

Cody turned away from me and walked back to the party.

I stood there for a moment, watching his back. My legs felt suddenly tired, weary. I let my legs collapse beneath me, and my body hit the moist sand. As the gentle waves lapped at my feet, my legs, my skirt, I stared out into the blackness of the lake and cried.