Waiting Room

Hannah White

Follow this and additional works at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/theses

Recommended Citation
Copyright © 2022 Hannah White

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.
Waiting Room

A Thesis Presented

By

HANNAH WHITE

MAY 2022

Approved as to style and content by:

Signature: ____________________________________________________________  Date

Dr. Bruce Machart, Thesis Committee Member

Signature: ____________________________________________________________  Date

Dr. Matthew Bell, Thesis Committee Member

Signature: ____________________________________________________________  Date

Dr. Sarah Fawn Montgomery, Thesis Advisor
Waiting Room

A Thesis Presented

By

HANNAH WHITE

Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies

Bridgewater State University

Bridgewater, Massachusetts

In partial fulfillment of the requirement for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in English

MAY 2022
PREFACE

Ever let the Fancy roam,

Pleasure never is at home

- John Keats, “Fancy”
DEDICATION

For my father, Mac White.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you Sarah Fawn for your guidance and unwavering support of this project. Thank you Nick for your help and your kindness, and thanks to my readers on my committee, Dr. Machart and Dr. Bell. Thank you Mom, Cass, and Sean for your love and support.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Critical Introduction…..1

Cowbird…..11

Avoiding Anthills…..22

Any Place But Home…..31

Like Something Crawled out of Its Den…..37

Boston, Massachusetts, 2016…..43

to make your father proud…..44

Renovations…..51

Counting…..67

Cup Overflows…..69

An Alphabetically Arranged Essay on Grieving, Geology, and Other Things…..75
Critical Introduction

The short stories and essays in this hybrid creative collection, *Waiting Room*, aim to add to critical conversations in both creative nonfiction and fiction about identity in relation to physical places and the body. In this collection, I particularly explore how notions of “home” shape one’s identity: grief, mental/physical illness, displacement from home, and other topics pertaining to the body and physicality. The essays and short stories in my collection draw on analyses from the works of authors including Flannery O’Connor, Terese Mailhot, Lorrie Moore, Maile Meloy, Carmen Maria Machado, Eudora Welty, Aimee Nezhukunatathil, Ottessa Moshfegh, Lauren Slater, and SJ Sindu. My various speakers and my own personal voice in these pieces add to these critical conversations surrounding home, the body, and identity through reimagining the boundaries of place-based writing and fiction/nonfiction. Extending on existing discourse, my collection adds to the conversation by blurring the lines between truth and fiction both in the content of its pages and its hybrid form. As I write in my essay “Avoiding Anthills”, as a child “still I looked to [...] stories and one’s I knew were pure fiction, finding truths in falsities and half-truths”. In this collection I tell a story that is personal and very much my own, yet some of it is not true in the literal sense (my short stories) to show that reaching the essence of “truth” is not contingent upon the label of nonfiction.

When my father passed away this past May, I struggled to write his obituary, to put who he was into a succinct story. To find the truth of him. He was born in Texas and always yearned to return to that home most of his life, but when he did in the year before he died, in a sort of last effort to get better and recover from his addiction, he wanted to
come back to the north because home didn’t feel like home anymore. Mental illness can wreak havoc on the one true home a person has—the body/mind—making one feel displaced no matter the location, and in this collection I tell the story of my own experiences growing up with a father who struggled with mental illness and being far from home and my own experience with mental illness/being literally and metaphorically displaced, and showcase fiction that freely builds on these themes, demonstrating the complicated nature of truth.

Following in the works of authors like SJ Sindu, Lauren Slater, and Maxine Hong Kingston who blur the lines between fiction and truth in their works, this hybrid collection explores the implications of and themes relating to home and displacement without being tied only to truth. My collection does this blurring because the lines that define home can be unclear, whether the body as a home is disrupted by mental illness, as I explore in my works, or identity is blurred by one’s attachment or distance from the physical place of home. And truth—particularly when it comes to identity—is a very complicated thing, as Slater, quoting Kirkegaard in Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir, tells her readers:

I am asking you to enter the confusion with me, to give up the ground with me, because sometimes that frightening floaty place is really the truest of all. Kierkegaard says, ‘The greatest lie of all is the feeling of firmness beneath our feet. We are most honest when we are lost.’ Enter that lostness with me. Live in the place I am, where the view is murky, where the connecting bridges and orienting maps have been surgically stripped away. (Slater 163)
Sometimes the essence of truth can be portrayed more clearly in fiction, and for this reason my collection blends both fiction and nonfiction in its exploration of home and displacement.

Growing up, I often spent time between East Texas with my grandmother and my home in Massachusetts. Her son—my late father—grew up in Texas but moved to Massachusetts on a temporary job where he met my mother. My parents divorced, but my father stayed in Massachusetts for over 20 years raising my sister and me. He struggled with PTSD, SAD, and alcoholism after returning from deployment in Iraq. He was always between health and sickness and stuck between the ruins of the home he made for himself in the north, his origins in the south, and the trauma from his deployment overseas. Watching him occupy multiple realities in this way has had a strong influence on my life and my writing, particularly when it comes to writing about illness, the body, and identity. I have also struggled with mental illness, with body image and identity, and I include personal narratives detailing some of these experiences of my childhood/young adulthood intertwined with related research throughout many of the nonfiction essays in this collection.

Throughout this collection, I incorporate fiction to freely write on important subjects and reach the essence of truth. Sometimes fiction can read as reality, as SJ Sindu demonstrates in her hybrid collection *I Once Met You but You Were Dead*. In my own collection, I explore various themes relating to home and displacement in both fiction and nonfiction. Some of my stories and themes I explore work better as fiction, as I am not limited to discussing my own personal story or sticking to the facts of any other sort of reality in them, allowing me to freely explore the “truth” or essence of a topic, issue, or
question a character is dealing with. In my fiction, I reimagine the implications of the body as home: religion and sexuality and place and identity, themes often explored in the works of southern writer Flannery O’Connor, who once said, “In yourself right now is all the place you've got”. Expanding on O’Connor’s assertion that the body is the one true home a person has, and drawing from Terese Mailhot’s *Heart Berries*, I explore themes of identity and how identity is linked to home and how trauma is inherited. In my final essay “An Alphabetically Arranged Essay on Grieving, Geology, and Other Things”, I write “A like Atlas, like Dad showing me the distance between his family back home in Texas and our home here in Massachusetts [...] Dad talks about moving back home, says he can’t take Massachusetts winters but says he’d never leave me. A like am I the anchor keeping him here?” But I move beyond the personal even in my essays, incorporating research and reflecting on the larger implications of the themes of displacement and identity. In this piece I continue: “A like amber my teacher shows us, I write it down so I don’t forget, fossilized tree resin, an ant trapped inside forever.”

Like Mailhot, O’Connor, and other authors on my reading list including Elissa Washuta and Slater, I also explore the importance of the physical body as home, but expanding on this idea, I look into what it means when the body faces dysfunction—physically and/or mentally. In *Lying*, Slater writes, “In real time, darkness might last eight hours, but in psychological time, it can go for vast stretches.” Slater deftly remarks on the slipperiness of the mind, particularly when it is faced with illness/dysfunction. As a child, I struggled with anxiety and obsessive tendencies, which often manifested as physical illnesses/symptoms, but doctors/my family struggled to find a reason for them. In “Avoiding Anthills” I reflect on the implications of invisible pain/illness versus visible
illness: “I remember how the fear of the painful burning stuck with me because I knew the pain was not imagined. It wasn’t in my head. It was real and looming all around me.” My father struggled with mental illness for most of my life, and in these stories I show how illness disrupts the body, what is supposed to be one’s one true home. In “Renovations”, which is forthcoming at *Fourth Genre*, I write, “His face is red and swollen. His psoriasis on his hands has flared up, dotting his skin like ominous constellations that you wish could come together and mean something.” I also explore religion and the idea of death as a sort of coming home and the implications of abandoning the physical body (another representation of home) both in death and as a sort of penance (resisting the temptations of the physical body etc.) in both my essays and short stories.

In my nonfiction essays, weaving between personal narrative and interesting historical and scientific facts, drawing from writers like Gary Fincke, and exploring dark internal crises of identity in my short fiction, like many writers of the southern gothic tradition including Flannery O’Connor, I explore the significance of home—my own and home more generally—both literally and metaphorically. I explore the relationship between place and identity—my father was always on the move, between different rehab centers, different homes, between sickness and health, my sister and I following. My father stuck between his Texas roots and the new home he made for himself in the north, his southern accent fading. I explore what it means to leave home—to be displaced/in waiting—to return home, to make a new home for oneself.

Answering place-based writing scholar Kelly Palmer who asks if “a responsibility to place or home ever be met in the genre of autoethnographic fiction”, I question what it
means to belong to a specific place in both my fiction and nonfiction. And in writing a hybrid collection that goes beyond autoethnography—that includes fragmentation, varying narrative modes, and fiction and nonfiction—I show that identity, particularly identity in relation to a physical location, is much more complicated and disjointed than some critics of place-based writing tend to argue. The implications of mental health, place, and identity go beyond my own personal story, and my fiction works alongside my personal narratives to freely explore these themes, coming together to create a collection that seeks to find truth, but that demonstrates an awareness of truth’s complicated nature.

Revealing the essence of truth through conflicts characters face and settings they find themselves in is the aim of my short stories. Character and setting are at the heart of all great works of fiction and nonfiction, and often the two are inextricable from one another—especially in place-based writing (such as the works of southern writers like O’Connor and Maise Meloy). John Gardner, in *The Art of Fiction*, writes:

> The landscape of a tale is of a kind likely to inspire readers’ wonder—lonely moors, sunny meadows, wild mountains, dark forests, desolate seacoasts—and both natural and man made features of the setting are frequently of great age, suggesting a past charged with traditions and values that impose themselves on the will of the characters.

Drawing from Gardner, with a focus on authenticating setting and its implications for character in both my fiction and nonfiction, I examine how setting is imposed on characters/people, how home(s) and the displacement from home (literally being displaced from a place, mental illness on the body, and other implications I’ve previously mentioned) impacts character. In my short story “Any Place But Home” I write, “He had
the sudden urge to run, fast like he did when he was young, fast toward a different future, fast toward any place but home.” In “Counting” and other essays, I write on my struggles with eating and with finding myself in a changing body.

My collection’s title, Waiting Room, is reflective of these topics and themes I’ve mentioned. For much of my life, my father was often living in various transient states—literally displaced from his home in the south and often moving between different rehab centers—and between sickness and health, between using/drinking and being sober. My sister and I followed him, and many of my memories of time spent with him take place in hospital or rehab waiting rooms. In the collection’s opening essay “Cowbird”, I write of these experiences of waiting for my father much of my life, asking my father in a post-mortem second person address: “I waited for you. How am I supposed to stop?” In this collection I explore what it means to be displaced from home or in waiting, but also how illness disrupts the body, one’s true home. “Waiting room” brings up connotations of health, illness, and the body. In many of these essays and stories, I explore what it means to be in waiting, to be stuck in a place that isn’t considered final or stasis both literally and metaphorically. My father died suddenly and unexpectedly when he was staying the night at a friend’s house: in my opening essay I write, “Your overnight bag sits on the floor at the end of my bed, still packed. Proof that you were going somewhere; I cannot put it away. You had to have been going somewhere. You must be somewhere, Dad.”

Christianity is also very interested in transience—specifically awaiting either heaven, hell, or even Catholicism’s purgatory—and many of my essays and short stories explicitly examine biblical tropes or motifs in relation to the idea of waiting or anticipation. I grew up hearing Earth being compared to a waiting room, a transient sort
of place, and heaven home by my family members and religious figures in my life. When my father died “My grandmother [said] he was tired, that God called him home.” In “Cowbird”, I write of the southern cattle egret, a species of bird that I always associated with Texas and my childhood summers spent there, but reflect on the truth of their migration patterns and where a person’s home truly is.

Several of the personal essays in this collection employ fragmentation and other techniques I’ve mentioned, and examine the importance of place, identity, and mental illness. In my personal essay, “Renovations”, I reflect on the many attempts of various owners to renovate my town’s mall before its eventual demolition, and my father’s struggle with alcohol and his identity as a man far from home, paralleled with facts about self-help, Parisian morgue tours, among other research and odd histories, drawing from the style of Gary Fincke’s “After the Three Moon Era”. I expand on this style, employing fragmentation and focusing on the importance of place and identity. Reflecting on the cyclical nature of my father’s recovery and relapses, I write, “Whenever he gets off the phone with your grandmother his southern accent gets thicker, and he talks slower like there’s syrupy sweet molasses in his mouth. But nothing ever sticks.” Throughout this collection I explore the idea of displacement and the ways in which home can haunt or follow a person and the transient nature of health/illness.

Aimee Nezhukumatathil likewise explores displacement in her World of Wonders, in which she writes of how she looked to the creatures of the natural world for guidance as she was transplanted in different places growing up. In my collection’s opening essay, “Cowbird” I write of my childhood summers spent in East Texas, New England winters, my father’s struggle with SAD, and his recent death that brought me back to the south,
along with memories I have from childhood of being fascinated with the southern cattle egret, a type of heron often found in my father’s hometown. In it I write of my experience of my father’s childhood home, “There was no snow and my mother was not there but I could curl under a blanket in my grandmother’s cool, dark living room, shades drawn to keep the heat out, and I could close my eyes and not think about the space between this place and my home thousands of miles north.” Trying to piece together the story of my father’s life and sudden death that left my family and I with a lot of questions, I write, “When I think of you it is too much, but I am so afraid of forgetting. Or of remembering wrong. I am searching for the truth of you everywhere. Writing it down.”

I also wrote several pieces of fiction that explore these themes of home and displacement. In my short story “Any Place but Home” a mailman in New England has an identity crisis in a gas station bathroom about dreams deterred. In this story I explore what it means to be ordinary, and how home can act both as a comfort and a place of stinging mundanity: the speaker articulates this, “He knew he could turn the keys and drive out of the parking lot and turn north and go on far away from home”. In “Like Something Crawled out of Its Den”, Jaycee, a young girl in East Texas, struggles with an unhealthy relationship with sex and a lurking past that ties her to home. Like Maise Meloy explores in her short story “Ranch Girl”, leaving home can be difficult when the values of a place imposes itself on its characters. Expanding on this in my short story, I explore how it can be difficult to leave home when one’s identity is so rooted in place, which I likewise explore in my own personal narrative essays. In a town where “nothing was really too far away to walk”, Jaycee finds herself struggling to speak, to act in a place filled with “hard and loud and familiar” reminders of the past. In “to make your
father proud”, a young boy who has struggled with agency—with being stuck in grief and a state of helplessness—goes on a hunting trip with his father and something within compels him to action. The hot day drips “with ripeness, reminding [him] that it will soon rot as all things are destined to.” As I explore my own relationship with my father in my nonfiction, I explore fatherhood and the inheritance of trauma in this short piece of fiction.

I have demonstrated how my collection examines home, displacement, identity, and illness, extending on existing place-based scholarship and creative work, in a very transient period in world history with the Covid-19 pandemic which has brought many of these topics to attention in both the media and in the arts/literature. It is my hope that this hybrid collection builds on existing place-based scholarship and creative works and highlights the complex nature of truth and reality, particularly in relation to illness, identity, and relationships with home/place. As I’ve been working on this collection, I’ve also written two book reviews on hybrid lyric collections, both of which are published/forthcoming at *Brevity*. I am delighted that “Renovations” has been taken at *Fourth Genre*, one of the top print nonfiction journals in the country.

I hope readers are able “to find the truth of” the stories in this collection, regardless of their genre or whether or not they record actual events that have transpired in my own life. I imagine a space for my readers in which reality and fiction blur to reveal the truths that are at the heart of this collection. I have been extremely dedicated to sending the pieces in this collection out to journals and literary magazines. So far, I have sent these pieces to over 30 magazines/journals, and I will be continuing to send these short stories and essays out for publication both online and in print.
Cowbird

My Texas grandmother calls them cowbirds. In her SUV with hot, black leather seats, driving away from the Houston airport to her home in the country, wide highways turn to narrow roads surrounded by pastures. *Too green this year,* she tells my little sister and I in her buttery accent as we round the corner toward her home in the Pineywoods of East Texas, passing by thick pines and weeping trees that hang over the farm houses like Christmas garland. *We need some sun to dry things up,* she says. The sky above us is huge, like everything else is there, and encompassing like a dark open mouth. Her hair is blonde and straight and perfect in a way I want to be at 13 years old. Her hands on the wheel are large and strong, like my father’s, and manicured in a deep mauve. We pass a field full of cows, horses. And these little white birds that hover around the cows and perch atop them.

They fascinate me, these strange looking birds with legs and beaks like sharp needles. She tells me they’re called cattle egret, that they’re all over East Texas. *They can’t survive in colder weather.* They forage through tall grasses for insects to eat, following large animals like cows who stir up bugs as they graze, even eating ticks and flies directly off them. *The cows don’t mind,* she says.

I was proud of the simplicity and stillness of this place. People there spoke slowly and softly, listened intently. I would spend days jumping over creeks and looking for green lizards with my sister in my grandmother’s backyard where my father grew up. My big, soft-spoken grandfather showed me old arrowheads and tools he found in lake beds and told me how the Native Americans used them. At night we would sit on their back porch sipping cans of sweet lemonade and listen to the crickets chirp. I love my family
and this place where my father came from. There wasn’t a lot else to do there. And it was often so hot that we’d be forced to sit inside most of the day, the AC blasting so cold even my northern skin became prickled with bumps.

But what I loved most about Texas was that when my father was able to come with us, we were a family again, my sister, him, and I. Up north he always said he missed his home in Texas. Here, we slept under the same roof. There was no snow and my mother was not there but I could curl under a blanket in my grandmother’s cool, dark living room, shades drawn to keep the heat out, and I could close my eyes and not think about the space between this place and my home thousands of miles north.

Even when he could not come with us, if he was in rehab detoxing from alcohol or working, I could walk down the tiny hallway, walls covered in shiny wood, full of framed photos of us and my mother when we were kids. Of him in high school, his skin and eyes so clear, not blotchy and reddened from drinking. Him as a child. I wish I could have known him then.

My grandmother tells me that boy could never sit still! In one photo he’s probably 6, in the grass beside the creek in my grandmother’s backyard. He looks over his shoulder at the camera, his arched eyebrows the same, though he’s changed so much. I could walk down the hallway and be engulfed in memory, comforted by evidence that he was healthy once, that he had a home.

**Building Igloos**

When I was a child, I thought my Texas father liked the cold. Outside our tiny cape in Massachusetts we built igloos, while inside my mother made hot chocolate on the
stove top. The memories I have from when they were still together are all like this.

Together, but never close to each other. I remember running my small fingers under warm water when I came inside, feeling coming back slowly, thawing the numbness that he was not able to fully shake. I remember the next winter when he was gone for basic combat training and I cried to my mother because I did not know how to make an igloo myself. I remember my mother’s brother taking me to the father daughter dance in elementary school that year and how everyone said I looked just like my father. This was the start of me missing him.

**Hunting for Turkeys**

As I grew older, I learned quickly that winters were hard on him. I didn’t know what Seasonal Affective Disorder or depression or alcoholism was when I was a girl, but I knew what sickness looked like on him. I knew that when he came back from Iraq when I was in middle school, when I’d stay at his house with my stepmother at the time on the weekends—she was a soldier like him—, I saw that the holidays didn’t make him as happy as they used to. I saw the glass filled with clear liquor and ice in his hand more and more after she left and the house was empty and he would fall asleep on the couch in front of the TV while outside it snowed.

My father used to go bow hunting for turkeys at the start of winter in Massachusetts. He never caught any. I’m not sure he was really trying, just looking to find something that reminded him of home. Searching for that stillness that comes when you’re surrounded by snowfall, the closest thing to southern silence. That stillness before violence that he remembered from when he went hunting with his father as a boy. He was
always looking for something, but I don’t think he even knew what. Once when we were kids he took my sister and I to target practice at an archery range. The bow string snapped my sister’s arm, bruised, she cried all the way home.

Pancakes

A month after my 23rd birthday, in Massachusetts on a sunny Thursday morning in early May, my father accidentally overdosed on fentanyl and alcohol. He had been clean from drugs 7 years. 7 like the day when God rested after creating the world. My grandmother says he was tired, that God called him home.

We were supposed to have breakfast together that morning. About 6 months before this, he moved back to Texas to be with his family and try to recover after many failed rehab stays. My whole life, he had always said he wanted to move back there, but I didn’t think he’d ever do it until he called me one night when I was 22 from somewhere in the Carolinas and told me in a shaking voice that he’s so sorry but he couldn’t say goodbye. I wasn’t mad. I thought going home might be good for him. I thought it might fix him, I hoped it would because nothing else had.

My sister and I drove to the diner we always met at, but 9am came and went. I am usually quite good at waiting, but his phone went to voicemail again and I left an angry one. I would hear my own words to him echoed back a week later when the detective gave me his cell phone and I listened to the last voicemail he received. My mother tells me it’s okay; he never heard them.
We went inside. I ate pancakes and eggs as my father laid still on a table in a
funeral home a few towns over, growing cold and stiff. I thought he overslept.

There were so many other times when I had started preparing for his death. When
he didn’t call for weeks. When he did and his voice was sick with an illness that I could
hear in his hello. One I would see in his shaking hands, covered in bumpy psoriasis that
would flare up when he was drinking. I had tried to make myself ready for this before,
since shortly after he came back from Iraq when I was 10 and I started to see how it
changed him. But I thought this ending would come more slowly. I imagined cirrhosis of
the liver, a slow fading away from me. I thought I would have been able to say goodbye.
In nursing school, my sister learns that most male alcoholics’ lifespan is between 47 and
53 years old. My father was 45 when he died. I was only 23—I am still only 23.

But I always hoped that he would be an exception. I thought of all the old men
that came in the gas station where I worked with beer bellies and wet brain; I thought I
could maybe have an old sick father like this. But my father had no beer belly because he
drank hard liquor.

But we had seen him on Monday, three days before, and he ate all of his food and
talked and smiled and laughed and I don’t think I even looked to see if his hands shook.
He talked about moving back to Massachusetts. He said he missed us too much. He said
home wasn’t what it used to be. I swear I thought he was sleeping.

Waiting

I am used to waiting. I waited for you to come home from Iraq. 13 months I
counted down. We Skyped and you were in a dark tent in a khaki t-shirt. You sent us
little wooden jewelry boxes made by locals, mine with a sun and moon and stars engraved in gold. I remember waiting patiently as you brushed my hair in the morning in front of the tv and braided it down my back before you dropped me off at my mom’s before school. I remember waiting together for our food when you took me out to dinner on the weekends and we laughed about things that weren’t serious, you were rarely serious. When I grew older I waited for you to answer the phone. Waited for you to get your day pass from rehab so we could pick you up and eat somewhere that wasn’t a waiting room next to automatic doors. Dad, I waited for you. How am I supposed to stop?

By the Lake

The morning after he dies is sunny and beautiful, but I am sick to my stomach and sleepless. I walk down to the lake behind my mother’s house with her and my sister and we sit on the ground near the edge of the water and say nothing. I look out at the rising sun over the glassy top of the water while birds chirp around us like they always do. Everything is so green, illuminated in warmth. I look as a great heron leaps from a tree not far from us and flies out toward the bend in the lake. I wonder if these herons migrate. I can’t picture them outside of this lush scenery, flying across an iced-over lake, past the banks and trees covered in snow come winter. We watch, its long legs pointed back toward us, until it turns the bend and is gone in a moment.

Hailstorm

When my mother and father visited his family in Texas when I was just an infant—I do not have any memories of them together there—my grandmother says my
mom was astonished by the golf ball sized hail that came down hard on their tin roof, bounced toward them as they watched from the back porch rocking chairs. I imagine my father, young and with a bit of a southern tan, laughing at my mother as the sky pelts them with balls of ice. Ice that would melt on the hot ground shortly after it landed, never sticking like the snow in Massachusetts.

My grandmother was not angry at my mom for leaving. She loved her. At my father’s funeral she tells her so. It feels wrong having her in Texas. The American flag is draped over his casket and she smooths out a wrinkle. Makes it look neat. He was always too messy for her. He drank a little too much even before he went to Iraq and she was young and thought she would find someone better some day.

Remains

You’ve been reduced to a large gray storage bin from Target. You didn’t make out a will and your death certificate says DIVORCED and I’m your daughter so the funeral home in Massachusetts needs my permission to move your body. Your mother wants you with her down in Texas and says you told her a while back that's what you wanted too, so I believe her and I give them permission to send what remains of you there. Permission like I am your mother. And I sit and I cry because I cannot even have a grave with me here until I choke and can’t breath. My grandmother buys your plane ticket.

I do not let them get rid of your brand new truck you got the month before you died. I use the little I have in savings to pay some of it off. I love my Jeep but sell it
because I can’t let anyone take anymore of you from me. It’s white with Texas plates and it smells just like you, sweet tobacco and clean like men’s soap.

Inside:

- A melted iced coffee only sipped from
- Subway napkins in the glove box
- Bumper stickers for the truck still in the plastic
- The blue paisley pearl snap shirt you wore the last night I saw you, ironed on a hanger
- An old hospital blanket covered in your dog’s hair
- Your overnight bag from the night you died with a vomit soaked towel in it, your clothes folded neatly around it
- Your wallet without the three pills in it the detective told us he disposed of

**Beginnings**

My parents met when my father came to Massachusetts on a temporary job with his brother. He’d stop in my grandfather’s convenience store to buy liquor when my mother was working. I imagine him towering over her 5 foot 1 frame behind the counter. I imagine her overlooking what he’d buy and falling in love with his smile and accent and southern manners. She had me when she was only 19, they got married, and my father stayed.

**Overnight Bag**
When I think of you it is too much, but I am so afraid of forgetting. Or of remembering wrong. I am searching for the truth of you everywhere. Writing it down. In your notebook I find a single poem in your handwriting. My mother tells me you loved to read. I didn’t know.

Your overnight bag sits on the floor at the end of my bed, still packed. Proof that you were going somewhere; I cannot put it away. You had to have been going somewhere. You must be somewhere, Dad.

Hotel Christmas

Do you remember when we spent Christmas in a hotel in my hometown because your apartment was a mess and you wouldn’t let us in it? We opened presents on the queen bed and then left you alone there when we went back home to our mother.

Do you remember when you fell in the rushing stream on Easter when I was a child? You said you felt the herring slapping against your body as they tried to run up stream. To new beginnings. To spawn. Easter and rebirth.

Do you remember calling me and telling me that you were so sorry but you had to go home? About 6 months before you died you packed the little you had into your car, you didn’t even have the truck yet, and you left for home, for Texas. You needed to go before winter came, I know.

But it followed you home. Record lows that winter. No power for days. No water, food shortages. On the phone just months before you die: I tell you Dad, I’m grown. You’re crying because you’re in pain, and crying worse because you’re crying to me, your daughter, on the phone. Crying because Texas could not fix you. I don’t let you
know how much this scares me. I do not want you to feel guilt, not when you are so far away and unsober. I want to blame Iraq, the war. I want to blame Texas conservatism for not giving you the help you need, for wanting you to be a man that suffers in silence. I want to blame my mother for leaving you. But I mostly blame myself. They don’t understand, you say. They don’t understand.

Instead, I ask if you remember when I couldn’t sleep at night when I was a child. When you bought me that toy horse at the mall after I finally slept a whole night without getting up. You tell me of course you couldn’t sleep; you are my daughter.

**In Between**

I used to meet my father in halls with chairs where people pass by, janitors and nurses and other visitors, rehab patients. I remember my father with me in airports. On the way to Texas. Holding my hand, me afraid of flying.

I remember my father at his wake, casket wide like a dark open mouth because his family wanted to see him one last time. I did not. I watch as people pass by. My grandmother hugs me like I’m a child and says to me with tears in her eyes that doesn’t look like your daddy, huh honey? It does not. I am sick and terrified but the pill the doctor gave me dulls it.

I want to tell her that cowbirds aren’t even from Texas. That they just ended up there in search of food. In search of something better. But they look so much like the great herons that glide over the ponds near my home in Massachusetts, their long legs always pointing back to where they came from.
Avoiding Anthills

When I was a girl, I often spent warm afternoons searching for creatures in the backyard of my Massachusetts home. I kept a tiny flip top notepad for recording what I’d find. I hadn’t mastered spelling yet, but I’d draw what I couldn’t: garter snakes, earthworms, the grasses or soil I’d find them in. I didn’t like getting dirty—I wouldn’t touch anything I found or dig through the mud, just admire from above and write, sketch, record.

My mother sometimes let me keep a tiny snake in a tupperware container, holes poked in the top so it could breathe. I’d fill the container with grasses and other things I thought it needed, watch it from outside the clear walls of its cage. But my mother always made me put them back where they came from. She said they had homes of their own to get back to.

On rainy days I’d sit inside my home and look through my notepad and think of the rain’s revealing powers, its ability to unearth worms from deep in their secret homes underground, to force them to surface in a damp and dangerous world. I thought the spring robins pretty, but I remember learning about how birds mimic the vibrations of rain hitting the ground by drumming their feet to get the worms to surface. I couldn’t help but feel sorry for the earthworms, emerging from the cool ground expecting rain, only to be pecked from the earth.

I liked visiting my father’s family in East Texas because it opened up a whole new world of places to explore, creatures to record. I remember slender green lizards crawling up the tin siding of my grandfather’s workshop, and my younger cousin showing me how to catch them. The bodies of armadillos littered the sides of highways,
though I never saw one alive. But I saw the holes they dug up in my grandparents’
backyard, evidence that they did live. These strange creatures excited me, but I learned
quickly that many of the bugs, snakes, and other animals here were more dangerous than
the ones I was used to back home.

One summer in Texas my sister and I were the flower girls at my aunt’s outdoor
wedding one summer in Texas. The day was lush and green and made me thirsty. After
the ceremony, family and close friends lingered to take photos. I stood next to a tree by
my grandmother, looking to the blue sky when suddenly I felt a warm stinging growing
up my legs. I looked down and red ants were crawling up my bare legs; I was standing on
an anthill. I remember crying out and my grandmother grabbing me and swatting them
off with her hands. She brought me to her car and told me hold still while she sprayed
hairspray all over my legs. She told me it would take away the sting, and it did even
though I hated the stickiness. I was surprised and intrigued by how something so tiny
could hurt so bad.

After the fire ant incident, I avoided anthills at all costs. I used to run almost
carefree through my grandmother’s backyard, jumping across creeks and playing in the
grass, but after that I’d navigate any grassy areas with caution, avoiding stepping on their
distinctive mounds. I was always a cautious child, and I was used to adults not taking my
fears seriously. Most fears I had—of sharks, hurricanes, of the dark, of being alone—
were all in my head, they said.

But this tiny one they took seriously. They saw the red welts that trailed up my pale,
fragile looking legs, the evidence. I remember how the fear of the painful burning stuck
with me because I knew the pain was not imagined. It wasn’t in my head. It was real and looming all around me.

~

My mother taught me not to lie. I remember thinking lying was the worst thing I could ever do. If I did something that I knew I wasn’t supposed to, I couldn’t keep it in. Once I was left alone in my playroom and I had the uncontrollable urge to draw on the walls. This desire was so real and strong it was as if I had no choice. I felt exhilarated as I took the crayon to the wall, scribbling whatever it was inside me that needed out, but the guilt when I finished was overwhelming. I sat on the blue carpet of my playroom, ashamed, then slowly walked into the kitchen and told my mother what I’d done. She followed me and wasn’t exactly angry, more confused, but told me she was happy that I told her the truth.

I learned quickly that my mother loved this part of me—my sincerity, but she also loved my “goodness”. I made it a point to never lie, but it was difficult to be honest when I knew my feelings weren’t good ones, and often times they weren’t. Despite this drawing on the wall incident, I rarely got into trouble. I was a quiet and timid girl. I didn’t like to get dirty; I obsessively washed my hands. I spent a lot of time alone drawing or reading books about things that scared me like sharks, dinosaurs, and hurricanes, reading in awe from the safety of my home. My mother tells me that I was an easy child in this way—obedient, tidy, keeping the things that scared me safe and silent inside.

My mother was adamant about things being separated into good or bad. I was a good, good girl. Quiet like the rest of the house, like the soft hum of the dryer on Sunday
mornings, like the quiet creaking of the heat when it turned on the winter my father left for the Army. Quiet like my mother. I learned I could make other people love me for the way I listened, was true, was quiet. But sometimes I got angry. I remember fighting with a friend at school and coming home and writing down expletives about her on a piece of construction paper then flipping it over. I felt powerful. It felt good. But my mother found it. Hate was bad, she told me. God wants us to love our neighbor. But I didn’t know how to be all truth and all goodness at the same time.

Before my parents officially separated and my father moved out and joined the military, they worked opposite shifts so someone was always around to watch my sister and I. My mother worked nights at the hospital; my father would come home from driving a delivery truck all day. I remember he would cook for us and sometimes take us out to the gas station down the street for treats like chocolate chip cookie ice cream sandwiches or peanut butter bars, then we’d come back home and watch TV together on the couch while he had a few drinks. He’d let me fall asleep on the couch in front of the TV next to him. Looking back, I think he didn’t like being alone either. I remember he’d wrap me up in a heavy throw blanket covered in stars and moons strung together with thick yarn and the glow of the story playing on the screen would put me to sleep. I felt safe next to him, never afraid of him getting up and leaving me in the night. I felt protected, like nothing bad could happen to me with him by my side. My mother still blames him for starting my sleeping problems.

When he left for basic training, my mother wanted me to sleep in my own room, alone. I used to beg her to let me stay up later, to finish one more show, for her to tell me one more story, for her to not leave me alone. I was too old to be acting like this, I wasn’t
a baby. But I was so afraid, even though I could never quite put a name to whatever it was that terrified me about being alone in the night. When it started to get dark outside our home and she told me it was time for bed, I’d beg her to let me stay up longer, to not leave me in the darkness. I remember her exhaustion and frustration with me and how my little sister would sleep soundly next to me while I lay awake wondering what was wrong with me, why I couldn’t be normal like her.

Sometimes my mother would read me stories before bed; I’d always choose the longest one—in my book of Aesop’s fables, it was “The Lion and the Mouse”. I would lay beside her while she read to us and for a moment I’d forget about bedtime and instead I’d worry for the mouse when he woke the angry lion and begged him to spare his life and then the lion when he became trapped in the hunter’s net before the mouse gnawed him free. I’d think for a moment that maybe a mouse could be useful, that maybe it was okay to be small and fragile, but then the story was over and I’d be back in my bed, timid and helpless, begging my mother to read just one more, to not leave me alone.

~

When my father moved out into an apartment when he was back from basic training and started a new warehouse job, I’d stay with him every other weekend and some weeknights. I remember one day I lost a tooth when I was staying at his house. I was getting older, maybe 7 or 8, but I still half-believed in the tooth fairy, or at least wanted to keep playing pretend as long as my parents kept it going, so I went to sleep that night and woke in the morning before everyone else, excited. I reached under my pillow, but all I found was my tooth still there in the Ziploc bag. I laid in bed and fell half asleep and heard my father come in my room and put his hand under my pillow as he told me
good mornin’ like he always did when he woke me up. I pretended I didn’t feel him put it there and feigned excitement and surprise at the dollar under my head. I didn’t let him know he ruined the magic.

My father knew I didn’t like being alone in the darkness. He let my sister and I have a tiny TV in our room—something my mother never allowed; she said bedrooms were for sleeping—with my favorite movies on VHS tapes. I remember lying in bed in scratchy pajamas that were way too hot that he made us wear because he was afraid we would be too cold in the night, he worried about things like that, and my sister would fall asleep while I stayed up, comforted by the glow of the TV in our tiny room that was meant for storage, for safekeeping, and listened to him watching TV in the living room through the wall beside me. I remember feeling the pit in my stomach crawling up my throat when the credits started rolling and I was still awake, and I could hear his snoring in the other room. I knew I was safe, closed up in our room meant for storage, that everything was okay. But I felt so alone and so afraid of the day’s ending, of being alone with my fear so real only to me, but a fear of what I didn’t really know.

But I’d get up and go over to my little TV and listen to the player whirr as I rewound the tape. I felt comforted by the fact that I could at least control this. Nothing had to be real in that tiny room, where I could press rewind and play and start everything again new.

~

I felt split. Between my mother and father, between what was real and what wasn’t. My mother told me I had nothing to be afraid of, but I saw anthills everywhere I
looked. She told me when you trust God there is no room for fear. My father didn’t really talk about my fears, but he’d pray with me before bed.

My mother brought us up in the Catholic tradition. We really only went to church on holidays, but she talked to me about God and Jesus, often told me he’d watch over me at night so that I wouldn’t be scared, and she made my sister and I attend classes to prepare us for communion. I remember my teacher, when teaching us of the angel Gabriel’s annunciation of the birth of Jesus to the Virgin Mary, she would always point me out because my middle name is the feminine version, Gabrielle. She said it means *God is my strength*.

Sometimes at night I would pray to God for strength. I’d beg him to let me feel okay and safe and unworried. I prayed for my parents to never die, for everyone I loved. But then I’d start all over because I forgot to mention acquaintances, and what about strangers, they need to be safe too. I prayed that no goodness would ever end. I wanted everything to last forever, but I didn’t understand forever. My teacher told me God is forever, heaven is forever. I remember in class when she taught us about Genesis, I asked her *but who was God’s dad?* and she laughed at me. I couldn’t make the pieces of this story fit together with what I knew about reality, and I hated myself for questioning how the integrity of God’s origins held up.

We moved and started going to a non-denominational Christian church every Sunday, and I’d go to youth group on Friday nights. I listened in church and wanted it all to be real, some of the stories were so beautiful and magical and I could believe it in the dark at night when I was afraid or on a plane before takeoff, but sometimes in the light they only felt half-true. I thought of the dinosaur books that I marveled at when I was a
young girl, and asked my mom what she thought about their compatibility with Genesis. She told me maybe God himself put dinosaur bones deep in the ground for us to unearth, to test our faith. I told her that sounded like a cruel lie, but even with my faith fading, still I looked to these stories and one’s I knew were pure fiction, finding truths in falsities and half-truths.

~

My father moved back into the apartment we all lived in when I was a baby, but this time he was alone. Since my stepmother left I watched him fall asleep on the couch earlier and earlier, glass in hand. This apartment had two bedrooms, but one remained empty the short time he lived there. He never got around to putting beds in it so when we’d stay over he let my sister and I sleep in his bedroom and he’d fall asleep on the couch in the bare living room that had just a lamp in the corner from Walmart and a TV propped up on a side table. This lack of beginning for us marked the beginning to his end.

I remember I’d lie awake in his bed while he slept on the couch and I looked out at the streetlights and the glowing of the gas station sign across the street. I remember lying awake writing and rewriting stories in my head with different endings hoping that I could will them to come true. When I stopped being able to come up with happy endings, I’d lay in bed and read books about anything unlike the apartment. I wanted to rewind my life, go back to when he was healthy, but I knew I couldn’t, so I’d read about other people instead. This was my hometown, and my mother lived just down the street. This was the closest he lived to us since I was a girl, but I hated it there. The lights from the gas station sign always reflected on my side of his bed. I remember no matter how I
angled the blinds, the light always got in, refusing to let me forget where I was, reality always illuminated.

~

My mother taught me not to lie, but I learned lying to myself didn’t count. I tried to smile in mirrors—they say it activates the muscles and is supposed to make you actually happy if you do it enough. I tried writing down positive things about myself in a little pink notebook, like the therapist my mother made me go to told me to do. At night I’d listen to ocean sounds in a portable DVD player my mother bought me after the therapist suggested it, and I’d try to imagine I was safe floating in warm tropical waters, but I’d just keep thinking of sharks. I saw anthills at every turn, looming so real and so imagined at the same time.
Any Place But Home

On his way home from his mail route on a muggy Friday evening in summer, Arthur stopped for some scratch offs and a pack of cigarettes—this he was not proud of—but he remembered they were out of city bags at home and grabbed a pack. This made him feel better.

Arthur thought himself a decent man. He made his bed every morning. Took out the trash when his wife asked him to. Held doors for strangers. Kept his mail truck stocked with little milk bones for the dogs on his route. When his wife had complained earlier on the phone as he sweat between mailboxes, “I shouldn’t have to ask you to take the trash out, you should just see that it’s full and do it yourself” he did not call her ungrateful or a bitch or anything of the sort.

The cool of the gas station air was a relief from the New England summer heat, his truck that lacked an air conditioner, and it felt good to be surrounded by people, even strangers better than stacks of envelopes and radio personalities telling bad jokes.

It was Arthur’s birthday, he almost forgot. 55 years old. He wondered when he would stop hoping for his life to be different, to be the life he had always imagined he’d live. But when he came to think of it, he wasn’t completely sure if he ever had a real picture in his head of what that life would be. He just knew it wasn’t this.

At the front counter, a little boy in a baseball uniform begged his father for a cap gun, his father telling him no as the pretty cashier rang up their sunflower seeds and big league chew. His wife always wanted a little boy. He wasn’t sure he wanted children at all, but it didn’t matter anyways. Doctors told them years ago she could not bear a child. Instead she got a cat that made his nose itch.
Most of his friends from high school were either married with kids--some even with grandkids--or dead. Even Larry Miller, the kid with acne that used to sit alone at lunch, found himself a pretty wife at the community college right outside of town and ended up becoming a screenwriter for some mildly popular television series, moved him and his pretty wife out to L.A. and people in town say he’s living the high life. He’d seen a picture of them on Facebook and Larry’s skin was all cleared up. It made him mad.

Arthur walked by the boy and his father to the cooler and grabbed a cold gatorade, took a large swig from it before he made his way back to the counter. The sugary red flavor mixed with the salt of the sweat seeping from his upper lip reminded him of when he was young, when he’d stop by gas stations like this one after playing basketball with his friends at the community gym in town. He was good. Better than most at the gym good, but not D1 good. It made him think of when he rode his bike everywhere, when activities like this didn’t yet make his knees ache for days after.

The light haired gas station girl knew him by face, not name, and rang up his pack of light hundreds without him asking. It smelled like stale coffee coming from behind the counter where she pours $1 cups for old men in the morning. He thought of how she probably thought him one of those old men.

“And a number seven, sweetheart” he said. She tore the ticket off and it sounded like an unzipping. Walked back over, and her perfume, sickly sweet. She took his money. He thought of how he could easily be her father but imagined the pale of her thighs under her jeans anyways. He remembered when he thought of his wife like this.

At home he knew she was making dinner. And after that he knew they’d clean up together and then watch their favorite true crime series until he fell asleep on the couch
and then was woken and brought to their bed. He knew she would kiss him goodnight or they’d maybe even make love. He knew he would mean it when he said I love you before falling asleep again. And he knew that tomorrow with his day off he’d probably go fishing at the lake with Tom, his friend since grade school who lived down the road, and they’d have plenty of beer and laugh about the trouble they used to get into. But he did not want to go home.

Underneath the old coffee smell, faint traces of urine covered up with bleach seemed to seep from the bathroom around the corner of the counter. He heard a toilet flush followed by an automatic hand dryer. He needed to piss. “Honey, can I use your restroom?” In the bathroom he turned the sink on with a squeak, splashed water on his face, and rubbed it up his forearms, trying to cool off. Next to his reflection in the dirty mirror, names of couples, curse words, written in pen or sharpie. He looked at himself in the mirror. The wrinkles on the sides of his eyes, lines drawing the corners of his mouth down. His shirt tight around his stomach and sides. Little hairs sprouting out of his nose, this was something new.

Looking in the mirror, he thought of how he no longer recognized himself. The boy was still in him, he knew that. The boy his wife fell in love with. The boy that wasn’t so worried about who he was, just sitting in the hope of who he’d one day be. But standing there in the public restroom he could not stop thinking of his mail truck parked outside. Of the trash bags waiting for him at the counter. Of the little boy on his way to the baseball game with his father. Of the gas station girl serving old men coffee. The gatorade started to give him heartburn and he thought he might be sick right there.
Then someone knocked on the door. “Just a second” as he pulled himself together. It was the gas station girl, her voice through the door. “Are you alright in there? Other people need to use the restroom”.

“Sorry” as he walked out past her and a short line, embarrassed, hurrying toward the counter. Just at that moment he saw through the glass door a man outside taking one last puff on his cigarette and realized it was Tom as he threw the butt on the ground and pulled open the door.

Tom spotted Arthur right away and greeted him with a smile and his missing front tooth. “Happy birthday old man”, he joked as he walked toward the cooler, patting him rough on the shoulder as he passed. Acid creeping up his throat, Arthur coughed out a forced laugh, walked back toward the cooler after him. Tom stunk of sweat and cigarettes and the familiar smell made Arthur feel even worse. Like something was creeping up inside of him. He had the sudden urge to run, fast like he did when he was young, fast toward a different future, fast toward any place but home. “You got any special plans with the old woman tonight?” he flashed a wink then struggled to bend down and grab a 6 pack of beer from the bottom shelf of the cooler.

“No plans. Just another day.” He fidgeted. 6 pack in hand, Tom looked him up and down, brow furrowed, “You look awful, what the hell’s the matter with you?” Arthur told him he had to go and started walking toward the door. Tom yelled behind him, “We still on for tomorrow?”, but the door was already shutting and Arthur walked on, picked up his pace, the damp heat instantly holding him in a claustrophobic embrace. He felt like a wild animal. Like something else deep inside had a hold of him. He tried to come to his senses.
He knew he could turn the keys and drive out of the parking lot and turn north and go on far away from home. He knew his wife would be angry and hurt and shocked. But she was resilient and still beautiful and could find a new life for herself, he knew it. She did not have his children or anything holding her to him. And he knew he would miss her and Saturdays at the lake with Tom. And what would he do? Where would he go? All of these possibilities swirled in his head and then he saw on the seat beside him the trash bags and suddenly knew he could not do it, so he started the truck and turned on the radio alone and pulled out of the parking lot and headed south toward home.
Like Something Crawled out of Its Den

When it’s a Sunday morning in East Texas June before church and your momma asks you “where have you been all night?” when you show up on your doorstep, shameful morning after, you know better than to tell her the truth. You’ve been seeing the boy across town, the pastor’s nephew with the funny laugh and yellow teeth. Not really seeing, mostly feeling in the dark of the back of his pickup while the crickets chirp in the fields surrounding the dirt roads he parks on.

You’ve got your overnight bag slung over your shoulder, filled only with a blanket, some makeup, and a bottle of cheap wine you didn’t even end up drinking. Last night his father was away on a men’s retreat and he brought you to his house for the first time. His room was in the basement of their raised ranch, his bed was scratchy and damp. Usually if you fell asleep after in the truck, the morning sun would wake you before him and you’d walk home without saying goodbye. Nothing was really too far away to walk in this town. And you didn’t like to see his smile in daylight.

Your momma has always told her friends Jaycee is always with the boys because she doesn’t like all that girl drama and gossip but you know she says it to cover for you, an extension of herself. You tell her you stayed over Jessica’s after Bible study. You avoid moving too quickly in fear of the glass clinking against something in your bag. She looks at you in a way that makes you want to cover up, to fix yourself. But you don’t need her to make you feel dirty. Her hair is graying around her temples, bags pulling down her blue eyes, but she still draws on lipstick every morning before she even has coffee.
“Jaycee...” she says, then pauses, inhales. “When I was a year older than you I had a husband, two babies, and a house. When is this going to end?” She says it to you like a plea, like some sort of proposition is coming.

“You don’t want to go off to school. Don’t even want to take night classes at AC. If you’re not going to do anything with the brain God gave you then you need to settle down.” You look down at your dirty white tennis shoes. You wish she’d yell, get angry like she sometimes does. Tell you you’re a whore like she did one time. The softness hurts you worse. It makes you feel like a little girl. “Jaycee, please.”

You had gotten a full ride to a private school out in California that your guidance counselor forced you to apply to, but when time came to make a decision, to do things like fill out papers and register for classes, something in you couldn’t do it. You told your mother you’d apply again next year when you really knew what you wanted. Plenty of people take gap years, go to Europe to travel, or work full time to save up money. You told her you’d do the latter, but application deadlines the next year came and went and you were still working at the hardware store in town.

It’s almost the middle of summer in East Texas and you can smell your sweat as the breeze blows past. Traces of floral deodorant, but under it an earthy dampness. Like an animal, like something that just crawled out of its den.

You’ve never been good at explaining yourself, so one day you decided you’d stop trying. You remember it.

One night last summer you were at a fire by the lake with friends from school. An older graduated boy you liked was there and you wore a frilly white dress that showed off your tan, your bikini underneath. You remember sitting around the fire forcing down beer
that you hated. But you remember how it made you feel--warm and tingly and like
nothing could hurt you, not even a boy left alone with a pretty girl. You remember Jessica
leaving and you telling her you would walk home later. How she looked at you hesitantly
before she left. And the way the light of the fire made him look different.

You remember how he kissed you, all tongue and beer breath and nothing like
how you wanted it to be, but the words you needed to make it stop wouldn’t come.

“I’m going to take a shower” you tell your mother as you push past her and your
bag clanks against the doorway. You want to wash away last night. Wash away last
summer. Your mother shakes her head and walks in behind you, the screen door slams
shut. “We’ll be leaving in 20 minutes” she yells out.

In the tiny church house you sit beside your mother. An old dairy farmer and his wife fill
in the seat beside you where your father used to sit—and your sister before she went
away to school on the East coast.

You can see the pastor’s nephew’s teeth now under the artificial light of the small
stage where he stands with his acoustic guitar. His hands adjust the mic on the stand. You
want to yell out to him, to anyone. You want to tell him something, say something
important that would make him really look you in the eyes, but you’re not quite sure
what.

The ceiling fans give you goosebumps even in the white sweater your mother
gave you for over your sundress. The printed bulletin in your hands reads Women’s
Brunch Saturday at 11am. It would make her happy if you went with her. But you
didn’t like the way the church women looked at you. Like you were something in need of saving. Something to pity.

Your daddy would’ve told you to go, to make your mother happy. He used to let you draw on these bulletins when you were younger, sometimes he’d even play tic-tac-toe with you if your mother wasn’t looking. He was an alcoholic, your father, but not the mean kind. He never hurt any of you, rarely even raised his voice. He was the kind that would sit on the couch as soon as he got home from working at the butcher shop, stinking of blood, and pour himself a glass of something clear and drink it real quiet. By the time it was dinner he’d be repeating himself. When you were young you thought he was just silly. Or tired. Thought that this was how daddies were. But as you got older he got worse. He started scaring you.

First he stopped coming to church when you were a freshman in high school. Then he started getting sick before your mother even put the food on the table. Doctors said he had cirrhosis of the liver. That he’d die if he didn’t stop. And they were right. You had his funeral in this room a few months before you graduated high school. Before he died he asked you to speak at his services, but when he died you had nothing to say.

You’re standing now as the music starts. There’s a large screen above the pastor’s head with the lyrics of *How Great Thou Art* accompanying him and his nephew’s voices. These words you know, and you sing along with them, with your mother and the farmer and his wife, their clothes stained. Their voices ugly and true.

You used to play piano when you were a girl. Before you got busy working at the hardware store in town. Before your daddy died. Before you started caring about boys.
You remember your instructor said you had the fingers for the thing. Long and slender. They had cameras in the private lesson room but no one watched them.

Your mother’s hand is raised in praise. Large, like yours, and slender fingers, like yours. But wrinkled and with unchipped nails. You sometimes wish you could hold them still. The song ends and the pastor tells you to sit and your mother does but you do not want to be still. The microphone screeches over the sounds of people adjusting into their seats, like an alarm waking you from a dream, like your mother calling you in the morning. Telling you, “Jaycee, get up!” You want to go somewhere. Need to leave, but you came in your mother’s car and you’re not even sure where you’d go anyways. And you’re so tired of walking.

In the car on the ride home, windows down because the air conditioner is broken, your mother asks you about the sermon. “Did you hear what Pastor John said?” You can see a wall of rain on the horizon, where the highway ends and narrows into back roads that lead to your house. But where you are, still sunshine.

“He has plans for you, to prosper you, not to harm you. Plans to give you hope. Jaycee, did you hear him?” You tell her yes momma you did, as she drives on. “Jaycee, you know I love you.” You do know this, it’s true. You let yourself put your hand over hers on the stick shift. It’s not as soft as you thought it would be, and it does not make you feel better.

But she smiles and looks over at you. “You know that sweater fit me once” she says. “I used to be young and thin like you, you know.” You’d seen pictures, you knew...
this. And you knew one day it probably wouldn’t fit you either. You’d grow and change, and maybe have a daughter who would look like you.

You want to tell her everything, and you feel your mouth starting to open, the breath before voice warming your lips, but the rain starts to hit pavement in front of you—hard and loud and familiar—and you crank the windows shut.
Boston, Massachusetts, 2016

It is only a week into my first year at college in the city, and already I want to go back home. I’ve only been able to stomach peanut butter crackers and dining hall coffee, not even my favorite cookies my Texas grandmother sends in a gift package full of everything else a college student might need.

I’m sitting in some sort of survey to art history class with an empty stomach and baggy jeans and the professor is talking about aestheticism, “art for art’s sake”. She tells us that aesthetes believed art and morality were not connected. That the only thing art owed us was beauty. Many, like Oscar Wilde, incorporated ideals of beauty into their everyday life, acting, dressing, and living in line with aesthetic values. In a cartoon drawn by George du Maurier for *Punch Magazine*, a man sits and feasts his senses on a lily, rather than food or drink from the restaurant he is in.

Outside the window, geese cross the courtyard, pecking at grass as they head back toward the river across the busy street. The professor begins wrapping up class, telling us about an assignment that is due next week. I write this down to at least play the part. I gather my things and walk back toward my dorm to take a nap, tired and empty and wishing I was hungry like I used to be. I fall asleep thinking of lilies.
to make your father proud

The day’s stillness is shaken by the violent pierce of your shot. You rejoice as you watch the bird come tumbling down, a dark comet streaking the milky blue sky. Your pointer Maisie eagerly runs to retrieve it, appearing moments later, crashing through the dry thicket with the feathered mess in her mouth. She drops it at your feet and you give her head a quick approving scratch. The duck’s eyes stare up blankly, both at the sky and nothing at all. That look used to bother you. You remember once Mama tried to comfort you when you wanted to excuse yourself from the roast duck and cornbread she had prepared for dinner. You felt sick thinking about what had become of that day’s kills, seeing it steaming in a plate in front of you filled you with disgust. Mama told you not to worry, that the duck was in heaven and that you should be thankful for its sacrifice. But then you learned in Sunday school that only things with souls go to heaven. It doesn’t make you sick anymore. You hear your father’s heavy boots trudging through the brown brush behind you and you turn to face him, duck in hand.

He already reeks of booze, and sweat, and your guess is it probably isn’t even 2 o’clock but his abnormally content demeanor tells you he’s still in that in-between, that peak that usually happens around dinner time when he shows more interest in you than usual. That state that precedes, on good days, the passing out on his worn out La-Z-Boy while your mother cleans up or, on bad days, a wrath that makes you have to explain to your teacher the next day that you got a baseball to the eye during practice. His face is red and blotchy with broken vessels, exacerbated by this dry heat, and his blue eyes, eyes much like your brother’s, pierce against the flesh. He lights a nonfilter, this time offering you one, and you accept hesitantly.
For a second you forget about the black eye and you think you love your father, and that he wasn’t always this bad, and you think you want to forgive him. You think he could be better because you remember when he once was. But the blue of his eyes seem to distinguish any glimmer of hope every single time you feel it well up in you. Your throat already burns from breathing in this hot air all day but you take a drag of the cigarette and pretend to savor it as you stifle a cough. The fire in your lungs mixed with the dry heat nauseates you. You wish your brother was here.

Your cell phone buzzes in your pocket and it’s a text from Momma. She asks when you’ll be home even though you give the same answer each time: it’s up to him. She knows better than to call your father while he’s out hunting, he hates being disrupted, women getting involved in things they know nothing about and have no business in. She used to give him hell when things first got bad, but she quickly succumbed to this new way of living. You text her *heading out within the hour* to give her something, anything to hold on to. Your love for her is mostly pity, but you love her nonetheless, and maybe even more for it.

There are more birds further down, your father tells you, where this river widens around the bend and flows stronger. You want to go home, where a cold glass of sweet tea will be waiting for you, where you can take off your boots and escape to your bedroom before he starts griping about how you need to practice your pitching more, or lets loose on you a torrent of *f* words once he’s drunk more than his fill. Back to those four walls where you’re mostly invisible—like a piece of furniture—where the Bible is always in the same exact place in your bedside drawer and the covers are always folded just so. Where you listen through the wall to your brother’s room and swear you hear his
snoring. But you know better than to voice this, so you tell him yes sir you’ll call up Momma and let her know you’ll be home late, and that you’ll collect your gear and meet him around the bend. You watch him as he makes his way down the river, his back dark-stained and hunched, and you tell Maisie to go along with him. Their figures fade into the horizon as they get further toward the bend, Maisie’s brown fur and your father’s camo mixing with the tall brush until they disappear and all you see is the beautiful sky over this river, the piney woods to its left, and the endless fields beyond its right. The hot wind carries with it the stench of manure and decaying hay, the farmers have all left their rolled bails out to dry. The sky is so fucking blue.

***

You don’t call Momma. Instead, you make your way down to the river bed. You sit down on the dry bank and watch as the water rushes south. You pull out an old arrowhead from your pocket and scrape the dirt out from under your nails. You always hated getting dirty. You bend over and let the rushing water wash over it, rubbing the artifact with your thumb until it's clean. You used to go searching in creek beds with your father for arrowheads like this one, or petrified wood, solidified into rock by years of wear. You remember your father’s booming laugh when you questioned why the wood was scared. You remember how he slightly favored your brother for his superior athletic build and strong resemblance to himself. He was bigger than you from a young age even though a few years your junior. But you never felt jealous. If you were his daddy you’d love him more too. He got into more trouble than you—fighting with other boys, mouthing off at school, crashing the four wheeler at the hunting lease—but somehow
managed to rack up significantly less consequences. He had a gap-toothed smile you couldn’t be mad at.

You look back at the rushing water and you’re reminded more of him, of the many summers you spent playing in rivers and creeks like this one. Ones not quite deep enough to make you fear for gators or gar, but cool enough that you could escape from the torturous heat and be out of the house for the day. And you think of last weekend, when you’d met a boy down at this very spot after you told Momma you were going to an overnight retreat with the youth group. You left your clothes at the bank and swam down to the deep mouth of the river, where your father is now, safe under the cover of twilight. Those southern stars glistening off of your skin, off of his skin. The moon illuminating his tight-lipped smile and ambivalently furrowed brows, pulling you further and further from home.

A tangle of snakes lay sunning on a rock sticking out of the greenish water right across from you. You toss a pebble at them and watch as they slither quickly into hiding under the murky, slightly-sulfuric smelling water. Even though they were cursed by God they seem to get around just fine on their bellies, and you are certain they eat more than just dust. In fact you’ve actually seen one eating another before, you wondered why they would do such a thing and figured they must have been desperate and starving. You remember you and your brother sneaking the remote off of your father’s lap as he snored, NASCAR blaring on the TV. You carefully switched the channel to a Nat Geo documentary on polar bears. The narrator explained how male polar bears sometimes eat their own cubs when food is scarce, during the season when seals are less plentiful. It’s
over ninety degrees but you realize your hands are shaking and you put down the arrowhead.

You stand up, legs sore from walking all day, and stare down the river, watching the current whoosh through rocks that jut up sharply from the bed below, admiring the dragon flies that weave through the cat-o'-nine-tails along the water’s edge. You wonder what it would be like to wade in and swim south until it’s over your head. To swim further than you ever did with your brother, further than you did with that boy last weekend, until the river overtakes you. To let yourself be swallowed under and to suck in with all your force. Or to just scream until you have no more air left in your lungs and your face would turn purple with resistance and then you would yield into a pale water-logged stillness. But you know this isn’t the way. This wouldn’t get you to the place where you hope your brother is. Still, you walk down into the water, your gun still slung over your shoulder, your heavy boots still on, and you wade in until it’s deep enough and you swim and swim and swim but the current doesn’t let you get far.

As you paddle and kick and struggle, tasting the murky water, you can’t stop thinking about him. His empty room your mother won’t let anyone touch and how you heard your father cry for the first time ever in the bathroom that night after the cops brought you home. How you didn’t feel an ounce of pity because you knew there was an opened bottle of whiskey under his driver’s side seat even if his uniformed friends didn’t see it. He wasn’t even wearing a seatbelt. And you paddle and paddle for what feels like an hour. You make your way out of the river exhausted, a little further down than where you started, and the heaviness of your drenched clothes and water logged boots anchor you to the earth as you make your way down to the bend, to your father.
The cicadas and long day of shooting now make your ears ring as you step faster and faster, struggling with the new weight of your wet clothes. The crunching of brush underfoot does not remind you of home now but sounds like bones breaking. And you think of your father and how you wish you could still call him daddy but how you’ve been calling him sir for years now. And you suck in the hot air as you move faster and the water soaking your clothes grows hot from the sun. Your cellphone buzzes in your wet pocket and you know it’s Momma but you ignore it. It smells like end of summer. The air full of life, this day dripping with ripeness, reminding you that it will soon rot as all things are destined to. And you love your father, after all. He isn't a perfect man but he's your father. And he taught you to fear him, as man should fear God. But he taught you how to hunt too.

You can see the bend now where you know he will be wondering where you are and you pick up into a run, feeling like an animal suddenly recovered from being tranquilized, your hot clothes sticking to you, your boots sucking up muck and slopping back down with each hard step as the dry brush fades to wetlands. Home no longer sounds like sweet tea. Home is an empty room where your kid brother used to sleep, it's those four walls that cage you in like a waiting hog in a trap. It’s where you always know that fucking book is in that bedside drawer, where your mother’s tears flow like holy water and the whiskey never runs dry and that squeaking of your father’s La-Z-Boy recliner drives you mad.

You turn the corner and Maisie is there to greet you and you spot your father right away. He turns at the sound of your labored breath and you think for a second you see the river-boy’s tight-lipped smile and furrowed brows but you realize it's rage, not relief,
displayed on his reddened face as he looks you up and down. *Where the hell have you been, boy? Why’re your clothes soppin’ wet?* And when you look at him you can see the red and blue glare of the police lights from that night reflecting off his drunk face. When his gaze meets your eyes now all you see are your brother’s, looking up at the sky and nothing at all, his crumpled body next to yours in the backseat of your father’s pickup. On the side you would trade your life to be on any day. And you remember calling Momma and her screaming, your silence. Your phone is still buzzing, and your heart is thumping out of your chest, and the cicadas are all screaming your brother’s name, and for a moment you imagine a world in which words are more powerful, one where fathers don’t kill sons, but thought is supplanted with action and before your brain tells you to do it you grab your shotgun and your finger is on the trigger.
Renovations

“...the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” 2 Corinthians 5:17
“See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.” Isaiah 65:17

1

You remember the seemingly endless choices, walking across the shining white tiles, guided by your father’s hand. A mixture of French fries, orange chicken, and burnt coffee filled the air. Other children playing, adults chattering, the mini merry go round repeating a song. You and your sister would share a combo meal of lo mein and chicken, and he would cut everything into the smallest pieces before you ate, always afraid you might choke.

In the mornings when you spent the weekend at his house, he’d wake you up early and you’d eat breakfast while he did pushups in the living room. Instant oatmeal, you’d spoon the watery, maple-flavored bits into your mouth and try to make out what SpongeBob and Patrick were saying between his harsh inhales and exhales. He took advantage of time then, not wasting any in-betweens. The army seemed good for him. It gave him a sense of routine and something to fight for. He always did better when he was not idle. After breakfast he’d brush your hair and put it into two crooked braids. You’d put on the socks that you heard him and your mother fighting over on the phone. The things you wore a pastiche of your mother and father’s ownership. She wanted everything she sent with you returned.
At the mall after lunch, you would get Dairy Queen for dessert and he’d clean your sticky hands after with a napkin and some of his ice water. Sometimes you would see a movie, not the princess movie you wanted to see but something like *Pirates of the Caribbean* or *Transformers* but whatever it was was always better than nothing. This is what weekends looked like for quite some time. This is how you like to remember him, in a time where time was always well spent, and “what next?” punctuated silences.

There is something comforting about the sound of laundry being done, my mother says to me as she looks at a photo of herself as a child, sitting in her tiny bed with my aunt, her little sister. She tells me she remembers waking up to this sound on Saturday mornings, cleaning days.

“In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.” *Genesis* 3:19

I’ve been reading a lot about death. *Memento mori*—a Latin term for “remember you must die”. In the 18th century it was common practice to save a lock of a dead person’s hair or a tooth and keep it in a ring or brooch. These objects had a dual purpose: they were a way to remember loved ones, but they also served as reminders to the wearers that they too would also one day die. When the life expectancy was around 40 years old and over 12% of children died before their first birthday, death was much more present in everyday life. People were also more religious. Thinking of death was
supposed to humble oneself in preparation for eternal salvation, reminding one of their status as universe dust.

But this fascination with death extended beyond piety. In France in 1868, a morgue opened to the public for tours. Behind glass, dead bodies, often naked, were displayed on marble tables for Parisians and tourists alike to marvel at. Unsolved murder victims were displayed in hopes that someone might come forward with information on the crime, though very few visitors went there with justice in mind. People gathered in masses, families with young children, businessmen on lunch breaks, to see bodies that had often exposed for several days. It became the biggest tourist attraction in the city. They wanted to see what would become of them. Fogging up cold glass with their warm breath, they peered through, gazing at their brothers and sisters who could not look back.

In England and elsewhere, death photos—family portraits taken with the body of a dead loved one, often propped up and posed to look as if still alive—were quite popular. Because of the long exposure times of photography, many times the only way you can make out who was not living in these photos is because their faces stand out clearly in contrast to the faces of the living, who were blurred by movement. Two little girls not yet 10 years old, their silhouettes slightly fuzzy, sit on their dead mother’s lap. Her clear face looks out toward nothing while her daughters face the camera. They wanted to remember their loved ones, or perhaps they feared forgetting. These things are supposed to help with grieving. Photos don’t change like people do. They stay still.
When you’re in middle school and he comes back from Iraq with a new wife, he does not seem to have changed at first. They met in basic training. You love this pretty young blonde girl who you and he call by her last name. She was like the pretty teacher everyone wanted in first grade. Her voice was bright and sing songy and you thought she made your father happy. She loves the beach, and she brings you there on the weekends you spend at their house. You get Dunkin’ Coolattas and then come home at night and play board games when your father gets out of work. She fills glass bowls with little chocolates wrapped in gold, so much better than the rice cakes and low-fat yogurt at your mom’s.

One Sunday when you get back from a weekend at bible camp and you’re giddy with kiddish religious fervor, she asks you “how can you know which is right?” She talks about reincarnation and Buddha and “what about those who have never even heard of Jesus” and at first you think you have answers but then you feel the silence settling. Your father is a southern Baptist, and you remember how he used to say prayers with you at night when he first moved out of your mother’s home and you’d stay the weekends. He’d always end his prayers with in Jesus’ name amen. You wonder if he prays still at night, to himself.

She leaves him, and you with him. He tells you this as you sit on the couch, him in a chair across from you, with the coffee table between you, the tiny bowl with gold chocolates on it. Your sister is too young, but you question him over and over through tears and don’t think about how he feels. Only about yourself.
You got your first period in this house. You used her maxi pads after frantically searching through every drawer in the bathroom closet. You want to blame her for what has happened to him. The chocolates run out a few weeks later and your father has a chilled glass in his hand more and more each weekend you stay. He sells the house, she takes the dog.

When you’re settled in college, he tells you he wants to move back to Texas, to the home he had before you. To the place you spent summers growing up. With his mother and sweet tea and her famous pink frosted sugar cookies. He’s said this since you were young, but he’d always finish it with a sigh and “I’d never leave you girls, y'all are all I have.” But he does it when you and your sister are grown and he’s run out of options, exhausted the same rehab programs multiple times. His friends are tired, sick of helping him and seeing him fail. Your mother says his problems will follow him. His mother is tired and telling him to come home, son.

He always calls your grandmother Mom when he’s talking about her to you. You hate it. It’s like talking to a brother. Or a son. Your mother says alcoholics think everything is about them.

When I’m hungry I think of my mother. She fills me with foods she tries to not eat herself. She is always watching her figure. My mother doesn’t like to watch movies. When she stays up too late, she gets hungry and ruins the progress she made in restricting
during the day. She goes to bed early. She doesn’t watch movies, but she loves reading gossip about the celebrities that are in them.

My mother wants to be smaller. She has beautiful, muscular arms and thighs on a 5’1” frame. She loves food but hates to eat. Instead, she fills herself with the word of God. My mother has been married three times. Around the same time my stepmother leaves my mother gets baptized. She is born again. She says my father needs Jesus.

He moves home the summer before you start grad school, and he doesn’t tell you at first. After about a week of silence, one night you’re out eating ice cream in your car with your boyfriend and your father calls you from a hotel in the Carolinas and he says he’s so sorry and you feel sick to your stomach. His voice is shaking, and you know he’s been drinking. He says he couldn’t say goodbye, he just had to go. And you tell him it’s okay. He keeps apologizing and you soothe him like a child. He says he will come back soon. You tell him what flavor you’re having because what else can you say.

You call your grandmother right after and she sighs because she knows already. She says this is a fresh start, but it sounds more like a last chance.

In high school and college, before he left, while he was still bouncing around between dark, bare apartments and rehab stays, you’d sometimes meet your father at a local diner on Sunday mornings with your sister.
You all order omelets, and a giant pancake to share. He chews on the ice from his water while you sip coffee and do your weekly examination. His face is red and swollen. His psoriasis on his hands has flared up, dotting his skin like ominous constellations that you wish could come together and mean something.

You know he’s been drinking. He brings ice water to his lips, reminding you of water he once used to clean your hands, now held by his own that are shaking. He sits with his back to the mirrored wall behind him, his eyes on the door like always. The waitress brings your food, and he takes a bite then excuses himself to the bathroom. You and your sister sit together in silence, the space he leaves behind lets you see yourself in the mirror. You can only find traces of him in your face, like the smell of coffee that sticks to your hair after you leave. He comes back smelling like hand soap and his eyes are red and watery from throwing up and the food has all gone cold.

9

You call the VA to see if you can get your father’s free college bill because he’s labeled a disabled veteran because of his PTSD. He never used it himself and he thinks its transferrable to you. You told him he should, still tell him he should go back to school and become a nurse. You know he could’ve been good at it. He was a medic in the army. His dog your stepmother took was named after a young woman that died in his E.R. in Iraq.

The VA tells you he’s not considered permanently disabled so you cannot get any of the benefits. They think this is temporary. Your mother thinks he’s dramatic. You’re not sure what you think.
10

Rumors: The mall is going to be closed and made into luxury condos. They’re going to knock it down and turn it into a casino. They’re going to put a ____ or a ______ in there, a big one like they have near the city. They’re going to remodel the entire movie theater.

They’re going to keep it open and add even more stores and it will be like it once was.

11

In high school he calls you from rehab and tells you he’s so sorry and you believe him. He sounds even more sober than the father you remember from before. When you and your sister visit him at rehab, he’s wearing a large cross around his neck and he’s talking about forgiveness. You call his mother back home in Texas when you leave, and she sounds happy, but you can tell she’s tired. After years and years of paying for programs and sending grocery store gift cards she sounds defeated. She says she can’t enable him anymore. She stops sending money. He tells you you are all he has.

Sometimes he calls you like this and his voice is young and fresh and clear and you can exhale but it’s almost worse when this happens. You know what comes next. You hate the cold but at least in the dead of winter it feels like things can only get better. The end of summer is so overripe it’s like hope is on the brink of rot. Your mother says all you can do is hope and pray. She makes it sound like an equation. She thinks nothing is ever as big of a deal as you think it is.
Right after the end of your first semester of grad school, when he’s been back in Texas for not even half a year, you come home from a weekend at your boyfriends to your mother wiping down the kitchen countertops with a strongly scented purple cleaner. The kitchen looks spotless, but she keeps scrubbing away at nothing. She asks you how your weekend was. She’s half listening while you talk and moves to scouring the stovetop and then when you’re finished, she stops and looks at you and shifts her weight to one foot, leaning over the counter, spray bottle still in hand and says to you “your father had an accident.”

When my boyfriend and I get more serious my mother shows me her thick wedding band that my father gave her years ago. It reminds me of the tribal band tattoo around my father’s arm that every man that grew up in the 90s has. I’m a very sentimental person, but that thing is ugly. I tell my friend about this and she asks, “isn’t that like bad luck anyways?”

Throughout high school and undergrad, before he left, sometimes you go back to the mall. He needs dress shoes and ties for one of his new jobs, and that one department store that somehow has not closed yet has such things. He goes through fazes. When you were young, he wore Texas college football t-shirts and camo hats. When he works that desk job in Boston, he wears colorful patterned socks and dress shoes and always wants to go
into Macy’s. When he gets out of a longer rehab stay, he’s pierced his tongue and his eyebrow. Whenever he gets off the phone with your grandmother his southern accent gets thicker, and he talks slower like there’s syrupy sweet molasses in his mouth. But nothing ever sticks.

Sometimes you see a movie or get ice cream at the Dairy Queen that is one of the few spots in the food court that has stood the test of time. Sometimes you shop for clothes with your sister while he browses a store that carries collector’s swords and knives to add to his own collection that you do not approve of. Sometimes you pick him up from rehab when he can get a day pass and you take him to buy toiletries and mouth wash that is free of alcohol and safe for inspection. Sometimes he doesn’t answer your calls and you do nothing for weeks. Sometimes you hate yourself when you feel relieved when he cancels last minute, and you have more time to work on your final paper or to get the laundry done you’ve been meaning to get to. Your grandmother says she wants nothing more than for you to be happy. She says you have a life too.

Your sister starts nursing school and reads you statistics about alcoholics and life expectancies and you tell her you don’t want to hear it.

15

“You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves: I am the Lord.” Leviticus 19:28

Your father has a tattoo of your name in the crook of his arm where he used to hold you.
When I would fly to visit my grandmother in the summers as a child, I’d try to find Jesus in the clouds. I thought Heaven was only about 35,000 feet above us.

Someone in Sunday school asks the youth pastor “how can we know what heaven is like?” It’s 9am but I’m eating a Cosmic Brownie between sips of Mountain Dew that they gave us. This balding man wearing a Jesus Saves t-shirt starts to open the Bible and someone else asks “will my dog go there?” He looks at them and says only those with souls can get to Heaven, humans. He says the Bible does say there are animals in heaven, as there were in Eden, but your dog Max probably won’t be there. He starts to get into the technicalities of this argument that I really can’t remember, flipping through pages, giving answers that don’t seem to add up.

The next time I flew south I was scared we’d fall through the clouds.

In my biopsychology class I’m learning about the brain and memory. My professor tells us that the stress a mother endures during childbirth is a risk factor for the child’s development of schizophrenia later in life. If a mother doesn’t properly soothe her baby when it cries, the child can experience adverse effects as adults even though they have no recollection of these memories. The body has a way of remembering.

In 1953, surgeons removed part of a man’s brain who was suffering from severe seizures. The surgery was partially successful in controlling his epilepsy, but he was left unable to form new memories for the rest of his life. Researchers and doctors had to reintroduce themselves each time they visited him. This man’s favorite pastime was
crossword puzzles. He always kept them by his bedside table, finding the right words in between meeting and re-meeting strangers until he died. Everything was always new.

18

“Your dad shot himself in the face”. Your mother tells you this in the kitchen with the bottle of purple cleaner in her hand, when you’re back at your mother’s home from spending the weekend at your boyfriend’s. It’s five days before Christmas and the snow is falling outside the kitchen window.

She tells you he is okay, he’s at the hospital in Houston. You think of the scars on his arms, but your mother tells you it was not an attempt, she says he called her and promised her it wasn’t, and you really believe her. You never really noticed the scars when you were younger because he covered them with tattoos, but you look for them after your grandmother fills you in on things you didn’t know were happening when you were a child. What you know is that your father went to bed on the same night you were laughing with your boyfriend’s family at his house almost two thousand miles away. You know he was drinking because your grandmother said she smelled it on him the day before. When you talk to him days later, he mutters over the phone through the corner of his mouth that wasn’t shattered by the bullet, he tells you he had taken a sleeping pill and was cleaning his gun collection and then he woke up to a blast and his ears ringing.

He tells you God gave him a second chance.

19

“All ready you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.” John 15:3
Back in my dorm, I drunkenly scrub my face in front of the bathroom mirror after a night out with my roommates. I never forget to do this. My grandmother once said to me when I was young that if I wanted to lighten my freckles I could rub lemon juice all over my face. For Christmas she buys me an expensive tooth whitening kit and I use it.

I’m bloated from drinking but hungry and I think of my mother. I like to eat when I’m drunk. It makes me feel like an endless space exists inside me. If she were here, she would tell me to go to sleep. That I could eat in the morning. I fall asleep thinking of morning.

20

Your therapist is trying to get you to cry. You can tell she wants you to.

You tell her about the accident, and she says to you, “this is your worst nightmare almost come true.” She tells you you can’t take on this burden, that you must live your life. Your grandmother tells you the same, words meant to comfort you, but they feel more like poison when they come from her lips. She keeps saying you can’t be the one to take his problems on, she says these words to you. You ask her “if I don’t worry who will?”

21

You used to be afraid to sleep at night. Your father one time promised you that if you slept through the entire night without getting up and waking him, he’d buy you any toy you wanted from the mall the next day. You sat in bed awake most of the night re-watching the same Disney movie until the sun illuminated your room. The same movie
that you loved at 7pm was like an omen at 3am. You’d dread the end, knowing that was just another indicator that you were still awake and not sleeping like you should be.
You’d eject the VHS tape and put it back in and get back in bed while your father snored in the other room. You hated being the only one awake. Like you were the only one watching. He prays with you before bed. You try to imagine Jesus watching you, but you want your father. He never got angry when you woke him up like your mother did.

You were exhausted the next morning, but he was proud and brought you to the mall for the giant plastic horse that reminded you of the ones in Texas.

You no longer fear sleep, only waking to a call.

22

My uncle owns the apartment that I was born in. It sits above the liquor store he owns, the one my grandfather opened when he moved to the U.S. in the 70s. This is the apartment I lived in with my mother and father, the same one my mother lived in as a child with her parents. My boyfriend and I have been looking for a place, and my uncle calls to tell me this one has opened. I barely remember it, but I step onto the back stairs leading up to it and the smell is the same, like a damp basement. I was so young, but I imagine my father carrying me up them. I imagine them fighting. I think of the picture of my father sitting in this apartment with a Budweiser in his hands, smiling a young and full smile.

I walk up the stairs and enter the apartment and it looks the same. Dark wood around the windows, linoleum tiles. I can’t tell if my memories are of photos of it or the real thing. My uncle tells me don’t worry we are going to renovate.
I’m mindlessly scrolling through YouTube. A controversial Canadian psychologist who sounds like Kermit the frog tells me the key to happiness is making your bed every day. He says your room is the small piece of the cosmos that you can come to grips with.

Today I make my bed and then some. I reorganize my closet and donate my old clothes, water my plants, order a desk organizer, light a candle, and I start to think this guy is onto something but then it just starts to feel like I’ve simply made more empty spaces to fill.

I stop in the gas station and one of the overpriced local newspapers that almost no one reads anymore tells me:

The Mall is Dead

An older woman in line sees me looking at the headline and asks, “can you believe it?”

Your boyfriend lets you make all the decisions about the apartment. You tell him you want everything white, the walls, the trim, the comforter. Your mother says white gets dirty easily.

You call your father and tell him about the apartment, say he’ll have to visit when he comes up next. He agrees. He’s in Texas, but he says he misses home. He says the plastic surgeon thinks he can make his smile like it used to be.
You ask him if he remembers when you couldn’t sleep. When he bought you the toy horse. He says of course you couldn’t sleep you were my child.

26

You lay in bed cradled by universe dust, in the room that used to be your mother and fathers, streetlights reflecting off dark wood painted over with white, you lay, and you think about endings and you think about your father and of the different men he’s tried to be, and you imagine how difficult it must be to fail at reinvention over and over. You’re exhausted and your boyfriend asks you what’s wrong. And just before the soft humming of the dryer lulls you to sleep, you tell him you’re trying to imagine heaven.
Counting

1. In the months after you die I gain ___ pounds so I go to my doctor’s office and blame the SSRIs she gave me, but she tells me my cholesterol went up too so it’s probably just my diet. She asks for my parents’ medical histories and I give her mom’s exercise habits and speak of your story in past tense. She tells me this particular anxiety blocking medicine rarely causes weight gain. I should try intermittent fasting. She says she’ll have labs done now just in case and asks if I’ve eaten today yet and I say no because I know at least that is true.

2. I binge on queso and chips, drive through tacos, margaritas, bake my grandmother’s chocolate cake and eat it until I feel sick, and think of you and how she made it for your birthday every year and I think of how you’d order coffee sickly sweet with splenda and pick from skinny menus at chain restaurants but then have lava cake for dessert and drop me off at my moms and go home and drink yourself sick, drink yourself so full that for days after you couldn’t keep down food.

3. The detective says he found three tiny pills in your wallet but the autopsy report will tell the whole truth of what happened to you.

4. I was looking forward to pancakes and you that morning you didn’t show at the diner, but when you didn’t come I figured you were on a binge and overslept so I went in and ate without you. I don’t know how many drinks you had that night
but your friend who I don’t know tells my uncle who tells me when he goes to his house to pick up your truck—because I cannot bring myself to call this friend—that you went out for drinks and sushi and he found you slumped over, unresponsive at five in the morning when we were supposed to have breakfast at nine.

5. I tell myself calories don’t count if I’m grieving. After you die people bring plates of macaroni and cheese and Pyrex dish casseroles and their pity and their kindness and I eat and eat, my stomach like a deep cavern, like a dark open hole.

6. I count the days you’ve been gone like I count calories. I try tracking everything I put in my body in an app and only eat between twelve and seven and try skinny margaritas and I go to bed hungry and sometimes half drunk and proud of myself. Hungry like I used to in undergrad when my body could barely bring itself to eat.

7. I only half-know what happened to you: what it sounds like to other people, people who have seen the marks you made on your arms or the gunshot wound to the corner of your lip, sewn shut just months before you died, that you swear was accidental—that I believe was accidental—and what the autopsy report says: accidental overdose, acute fentanyl and ethanol. They tell me over the phone—I don’t want it in writing.
Cup Overflows

The woman sat hunched in her upholstered chair in the corner of what used to be his office, now her reading room. She didn’t keep much of his things when he died. The grandfather clock that obnoxiously rang out at each hour was the first to go. She never could stand to hear it, the way it had to bring special attention to time passing as if she didn’t see it in the mirror as she rubbed on cold cream at the end of the day or feel it every morning when she slowly rose from her side of the bed.

The woman kept most of the books on his shelves but donated the ones by political figures she didn’t care to learn more about. She had essentially listened to the audiobook versions through his daily reiterations while he hovered around the kitchen when she cooked dinner each night. She let their sons take whatever else of his clothes and junk they wanted and had them take care of getting rid of the rest. They seemed almost hurt at how easily she parted with these things, but did as she said, and for that she was grateful.

She brought her binoculars and her Backyard Birdwatcher’s Bible and put it on the coffee table covered in ring stains from mugs of tea she brought him that he never put on coasters no matter how many times she asked. It wasn’t that he was purposefully spiting her, she just thought him ignorant. She never hated him, only resented. Beside her chair, a basket of yarn and half finished knitting projects; she grabbed at a blanket she had started and began mindlessly adding to it, pulling the strings tighter as she went. **knit, purl, knit, purl.**

She swore she didn’t choose this life. Half the time she hated being a grandmother, how even this space of her own was invaded by a twin sized pullout bed
against one wall for when her granddaughter stayed the night. Just like when she was younger half the time she hated being a mother. Her whole pregnancy with her first son she felt like the life was slowly being drained from her. Her feet grew almost two sizes and never went back. She looked down now and examined the varicose veins that traced up her legs until they became swallowed, hidden by the flowing fabric of her sundress that stopped mid calf. She remembers how she couldn’t wait for her 9 months to be up not because she was as ecstatic to meet her baby as her husband was, but because she didn’t know how much longer she could stand seeing herself so swollen and so invaded, something she had never even met growing inside her stealing her energy and making her look this way. A stranger in her body making itself right at home.

But he had a way of convincing her that what he wanted and what she wanted were one in the same. So she listened and believed him when he transplanted her to a bigger house in the suburbs from the studio they shared in the city with just enough room for them both. She believed him when he said she would be happier staying home with the children—it's not like her 3 semesters in college before they met gave her very many opportunities, she thought. He said he would take care of her, and he did. He always did. And a lot of the time she did believe that they had wants, together. That wanting did not have to be this singular sort of thing. He told her their cups would be overflowing soon enough, just you wait. And she waited, like she always did. She felt like a dog on a leash, going wherever the line was pulled.

She could have left at any time. She knew she could go back to school, and she had savings to fall back on. All her life she thought that somebody else was in control,
but she realized everything she has become that she despises was a direct result of her own inaction.

Her own mother had always told her a good man is hard to find. When you find somebody good, you stick with them. So she listened. She had made the mistake of thinking what she needed was a home with kids with rooms filled up to the brim. He had done that to her. He was greedy in that way, always hungry for more than what they had. But sometimes, like right then, she started to feel guilty about thinking this way. Sometimes she felt guilty for moments when she felt grateful for finally having some space of her own, like a piece of herself had been restored finally in this old age. No, she didn’t have to feel guilty.

Now she had all the room in the world, almost. Her granddaughter came on Friday nights when her son insisted on the importance of alone time and getting out of the house with his wife. When her husband was alive, they had little of this sort of time after their first was born. His wife who once noticed the bruises on her legs from a fall in the shower she tried to hide out of fear of this last piece of herself, this home, being taken away from her. Her sent away somewhere safer or taken in by them. She insisted that she bruised easier than a banana but she could tell she was worried. All she wanted was to be left alone until she died.

She thought about what it might feel like to be dead. She didn’t necessarily have a death wish. She wasn’t withering away from loneliness of a broken heart. But she did have somewhat of a curiosity and a morbid hope that whatever came next would be better than this. A distant ping rang out from her iPad her son’s wife got her a few months after her husband died. She got up slowly, the noise that involuntary came out from
somewhere deep in her chest whenever she exerted any sort of energy never ceased to
surprise her, and she shuffled to the far side of the room trying to locate the origin of the
noise. She noticed a faint glow coming from the top of the bookshelf and extended her
heavy arm and pulled it down. She moved her glasses from the top of her head to her
eyes. A message from her son: *we will be there after dinner. we remembered her
toothbrush this time*

She shuffled back to her chair, iPad clung to her chest, and sat down. She
remembered she had seen death before. When she was a girl she watched on scared as her
father cut a chicken’s head off with a large knife she hoped was sharp enough to finish it
quick. But after one blow the headless body rose like lazarus and ran around as she
looked on in horror with tears in her eyes while her daddy was hunched over laughing at
it.

She unlocked her ipad and her recent google images search illuminated her face.
Lately with too much time on her hands she’s been googling death. She tried to imagine
what it would feel like to dissolve into the earth, to become worm food. To become
empty space.

*how long does it take a body to decompose search images.*

Scrolling through pictures of mummified human skeletons, piles of bones,
animals in various stages of decay, she wondered what made the chicken want to run. It
certainly didn’t think, just acted. And what did it see? Was it just running around in
darkness. She thought of how hard it was for her to get out of a chair like the one she sat
in now. If her head was to get cut off right then she wouldn’t be able to run even if she wanted to. Her head would just thud to the floor, her body slump over only to be found by her son after dinner.

*do we need our heads to feel pain* search

Death she wasn’t afraid of. But pain she didn’t like. She hated the way her body felt now and missed when she was young and could swim in the ocean all day and still have enough energy to go out at night with her friends. She read that the brain itself doesn’t have any nociceptors—the receptors that feel pain—the brain is what feels all our pain. She remembered when she was a girl hearing about a Russian scientist who transplanted dog heads onto different dogs’ bodies, making two headed monsters. She can’t imagine being the host dog who suddenly found itself with an extra head leeching off a body it had no right to.

She thought she was going to be sick right there. She put the tablet down on her side table, lifted her glasses back to her head, and rubbed her eyes. She looked around the room and it somehow felt like a stranger’s at that moment. She looked at his old mahogany desk in the corner, the desk he’d read at, that she’d bring tea to, and she swore she saw the back of his head peeking out from the top of his old leather chair. Her stomach felt like someone else was wringing it out like clothes before they’re strung out to dry. Antacid, she needed a couple tablets. She tried to get up but it was as if her legs weren’t her own.
She felt her hands numbing and looked down at them. Her fingers had grown, swelled, but the ring on her left hand always stayed the same size, cutting off that one finger’s circulation. She swore the nail never grew as fast as her others. She swore she could still hear the kettle screaming, the grandfather clock telling her another hour had passed. She looked down now at these strange shaking hands and tried to imagine a life different from her own but it was as if invisible strings sprouted from her head and all her limbs, pulling her in so many places she ended up going nowhere at all, but whoever held them taught was too far away for her to see.
An Alphabetically Arranged Essay on Grieving, Geology, and Other Things

At·las

A like Atlas, like Dad showing me the distance between his family back home in Texas and our home here in Massachusetts. Like the first letter in the alphabet, like my report card when I come home from school, and Dad’s joined the Army and it's just Mom, little sister, and me. A, Army green when he comes back from Iraq and my name is tattooed up his arm and things are the same at first but then they’re different and he’s drinking more and starts going to AA but he doesn’t ever get better. Dad talks about moving back home, says he can’t take Massachusetts winters but says he’d never leave me. A like am I the anchor keeping him here?

Texas Grandfather shows me rocks he found from traveling as a welder, some emerged from Texas creeks. He says you have to look where water rushes, washes away silt. A like sharp-tipped arrowheads left behind by Native Americans. He teaches me what they were used for, what they’re made out of. Black obsidian, I tell my teacher, when she asks us about igneous rocks. It happens when lava cools too quick. It’s brittle, amorphous, fractures easy, with sharp, black edges, perfect for piercing, cutting, severing.

A like autopsy report. Like waiting to hear what happened to Dad when he didn’t show up for breakfast one morning. Like alcoholic. A like accidental overdose. It was an accident.

A like amber my teacher shows us, I write it down so I don’t forget, fossilized tree resin, an ant trapped inside forever.
Bot·a·ny

The scientific study of plants. When Dad dies we bury him back home in Texas and sister and I go back to visit in winter. The mound of red dirt above him has flattened but still no grass grows. Grandfather drives us deep through rolling hills to the cemetery. Along the trees and thicket grow red, sweet looking berries; they look like red currants. Mom makes jelly with back in Massachusetts. But he says they’re holly berry, like Christmas time, like home.

Ce·ram·ic

In rehab, Dad takes up ceramics. Uses his shaking hands, molds my sister and I jewelry dishes, cups. He makes me a purple dinosaur because I loved them when I was a girl, when he knew things about me like this. Purple like amethyst, my sister’s birthstone, hung around her neck. It’s purple like February, purple like a bruise, but the hurt I feel invisible.

C like cattle egret—my family calls them cowbirds—the strange birds in East Texas with long legs and beaks like needles that migrated there in search of food, in search of something better.

Dig

D like Dad digging holes in the backyard for a fence so the dog can’t get out. Like me digging for information from him when I get older, when he’s half drunk at breakfast, his shaking hands evidence enough, but sometimes I keep asking Dad why why why?
At nature camp we go out on the lake and science teacher tells us about phytoplankton and what lives in the depths of the water. He takes something that looks like a fishing pole that scoops mud from the bottom of the lake, and pulls it back up. He rubs the mud all over his face making us laugh, telling us it's better than the stuff they use at day spas.

When we aren’t with Dad on the weekends sister and I go to the beach with Mom, dig for crabs and seashells. Mom makes me take one last swim to wash off the sand before we walk back to her car, so we don’t leave a trace behind.

**Ex·ca·vate**

Like digging, like bringing things to the surface. My teacher tells us about Lucy, the 3-million-year-old bones of a female hominin found in Africa. She’s named after The Beatles song that was playing in the expedition camp all night after the team’s first day working on the recovery. She tells us this find is a big deal because the way Lucy’s bones fit together proves that she walked upright like a human, yet her skull is small and resembles that of non-hominid apes, meaning that we know bipedalism came before increase in brain size in our evolution. I ask, but no one knows how Lucy died.

E like Eden, like God’s promise of forever.

**Flood**

F like the Flood, like they teach me in Bible school, like how only the best are left behind, like the world is wiped clean. F like fentanyl, like father, like how he was forty-
five years old, like how Mom says he wouldn’t have lived much longer with how he was taking care of himself even if he didn’t overdose.

F like Dad putting up the fence so the dog can't dig out and escape. Fence like cage, like stuck. F like how I write things down because I’m so afraid of forgetting.

**Gold**

Texas had a short-lived gold rush four years after people flocked to California in hopes of becoming rich. Grandfather tells me gold is heavier than silt and most other debris. It sinks to the bottom of the pan when you’re searching for it.

Gold, like searching for something. G, like gunshot wound to the face just a year before Dad died. Dad said it was an accident, he was cleaning out a gun after he’d taken sleeping pills and he says he woke to a blast, his ears ringing, and pain, sharp like an arrowhead.

G for God, like how Dad said God gave him a second chance. He was scared his smile would never be the same again, but they sewed it up and it looked almost the same as I remembered, only slightly smaller on one side when he smiled real big, and most of the scarring covered by the beginning of a beard.

Grandfather says sin can be washed away like dirt in water. He says God makes us clean, golden like the days in Eden. What I don’t know is why Dad left Texas in the first place.

**Hy•poth•e•sis**

Like how people say they saw it coming.
Ig·ne·ous

I like Igneous, from the Latin *ignis*, meaning "of fire". Magma cooled and solidified into rock. Dad shows me a smoothed pebbled pulled out from his pocket. He turns it over between his thumb and pointer finger and tells me Roman soldiers used to carry them into battle to help soothe their nerves, to protect them. He doesn’t tell me who he’s fighting.

Jade

*Crassula ovata*, a type of succulent, the plant in Dad’s apartment that he’s so proud of keeping alive for so long. He keeps it in a corner under a grow light, in a large pot filled with dirt and stone. I don’t tell him they’re nearly impossible to kill.

Ka·lei·do·scope

K like kaleidoscope. Looking into a beautiful world of color and patterns repeated over and over again. In my playroom when I’m just a girl I lay on the floor with it pointed toward the ceiling, peering in and gazing at stars and circles in constant motion. Mirrors inside reflecting patterns again and again until Mom calls my name for dinner and the magic is gone.

At dinner one day with Dad and sister when I’m older, Dad shows me an app on his phone that identifies constellations. He points his phone up to the daytime sky and on his screen appear stars twinkling on a night sky with names like Orion and faint images of animals and Gods outlined by the stars. Dad says the stars up North don’t ever shine as
bright as they do in the Piney Woods back home, but this lets you see them. Mom tells me God created the Heavens and the sky and the universe and everything we can see. Dad gives me his phone and tells me to try it, to look for myself.

**Lab·y·rinth**

Like is there something at the end of all this?

**Mi·cro·scope**

Like looking too deep into things. Mom tells me Dad’s fine and he will figure things out like he always has and I have to live my own life. M like like Mother.

Like Migration, like maybe going back to Texas will fix him. M like Mac, Dad’s name. M like Dad I know it was a mistake.

**North·ern Lights**

*Aurora borealis.* Grandfather tells me he was driving his truck at night somewhere in one of the Dakotas when he was young and away on a welding job, and he’d maybe had one too many beers—*now I know you wouldn’t be doing none of that girl you ain’t nothing like your daddy or me*—and he says he saw the lights out on the horizon dancing in the sky. He tells me he thought it was the end, like in Revelations, like Jesus coming to take them home. He says he had his windows rolled down and the night was cool and beautiful and perfect and he *aint never heard of no Northern lights in school.* I ask him if he was scared. Grandfather says he just kept on driving.
O·pal

Grandmother tells me buying opal for yourself is bad luck—it can only be gifted. I’ve always thought it the prettiest stone, how flecks of fire dance within it when it's hit by light. I don’t tell her I’m so sick of loving things I can’t keep.

Pet·ri·fied

P like petrified wood, like ossified, stuck in place. Like scared, like me. Grandfather holds a piece of it in his hand, palm facing up to the sky. He gives it to me. Frozen in time.

P like the deep pit in my stomach when Dad wouldn’t answer the phone or not show up for plans all those times but not worrying so much that one morning that mattered. P like eating pancakes without him at the diner not knowing he was dead.

Quar·ter

Like how the school year is split into 4. Like how we learn clocks and slices in a pie chart and fractions and money. Like the quarter for parking Dad gave me to put in the meter outside the restaurant the last time I saw him. Like the final quarter in the game, like how time is always running out.

Res·ur·rec·tion

R like Resurrection, like second chance, like how teacher tells me death isn’t permanent. Like rehab, like get better. R like riverbed, Grandfather searching for stones, arrowheads, pieces of the past, for anything to grab onto.
**Sedimentary**

Teacher tells me these rocks are formed from sediment deposited by water or air, accumulating, building up.

Grandfather tells me he goes to the cemetery every morning to clear out leaves, trim trees, and cut the grass around Dad’s grave. He brings home coins and military mementos people leave behind, has Grandmother send me photos. When I go back to visit Dad’s grave, I help him load twigs and bags of leaves into the bed of his truck. The cemetery is just off a quiet road, next to a large pasture full of horses and across from a tiny Baptist church that we ate at after we buried Dad. Grandmother gets out of the car to show me some of her ancestors—our ancestors—all names I’ve never heard of, and plot after empty plot labeled with our last name to the left of Dad, for the rest of us.

S like sedimentary, like what’s left over, all coming together.

**Tornado**

T like tornado. Dad tells me when he was a kid, they would hide in the innermost room in the house because they didn’t have a basement. He says what he remembers most is the sound, loud and violent like a train. I listen to him tell me this story that I’ve heard so many times but never gets old. I picture Dad, Aunt, Uncle, Grandparents all in their tiny bathroom. I always picture the kids crammed in the bathtub, the adults sitting on the floor, safe in this tiny space while the tornado tears through their neighborhood. I imagine the winds breaking their windows, pictures falling off the wall in their hallway, but the bathroom with them in it still and untouched, preserved.
**Ul·tra·vi·o·let**

The Latin prefix ultra means "beyond", in this case the wavelength is shorter than the violet end of the spectrum of visible light. Ultraviolet rays are the dangerous part of sunlight that can cause sunburn, damage. When I’m just starting high school and Dad’s sold the house we would visit him at, and moved into a new apartment after rehab, he tells me the place was haunted. I’m upset that he didn’t tell me sooner, but he says he didn’t want me to be afraid. I ask him if he’s afraid of anything; he says dying.

U like Unconscious, like how Dad was found. U like unfinished, ultra: beyond.

**Ver·i·si·mil·i·tude**

Like how teacher tells me a story must feel true.

**Wild·flow·er**

Wild, growing without human intervention or aid. But I’ve seen the seeds at Walmart, you can plant them yourself. I buy a packet and plant them by my windowsill. W like waiting for them to grow but they never seem to, like how Grandmother says you need to wait, to give them time.

W like Wellbutrin, like doctor says maybe that will help. W like winter, like war movies playing over and over again on Dad’s TV and I ask him don’t you want to watch something different?

W like how I forget to water the plants one weekend when I’m away and I come home, and they’re withered beyond fixing.
Xen·o·lith

X like xenolith, teacher tells us: a rock trapped within another type of rock, stuck inside. *But how did it get in there in the first place?* When magma moves or erupts it can engulf different sorts of rocks before the outer layer forms into igneous rock, teacher tells us. Depending on place, temperature, and pressure conditions, xenoliths can come in many shapes and forms.

X like x-ray on Dad’s face after the bullet to his face, but doctor says he’s so lucky the bullet missed the bone by not even a hair. Dad says this is his second chance, his new beginning.

X like xenolith, like trapped inside forever.

Yes·ter·day

Y like Yesterday, like the song by the Beatles. Like *all my trouble seemed so far away*. Like singing in Dad’s car when I’m a little girl and I get to sit in the front because I’m the big sister, like the windows rolled down and Dad’s smiling his big old, untouched smile and it’s always summer. Like when I ask Dad if we can go to the mall and get ice cream and he always says yes.

Zy·go·mor·phic

Z like zygomorphic, when a flower has perfectly equal halves, when it can be split, divided neatly into two. Like Dad hates how his smile isn’t symmetrical.
Z like zodiac, like how I tell Mom I’m an Aries, a fire sign but she says none of that is real, it’s of the devil not God. They say that each zodiac sign learns the lessons absorbed by its preceding signs, but because Aries comes first, they inherit nothing.

Z like zodiac, like searching for something, like pretending. Z like last, like final, like nothing else left. Z like zygomorphic, like pulled apart, like split. Gone.
REFERENCES


Palmer, Kelly. “How to Write Home: (Un)Mapping the Politics of Place and Authorial


“Reading for the Body: The Recalcitrant Materiality of Southern Fiction” 1893-1985 (The New Southern Studies Ser.) by Jay Watson


