

Spring 5-16-2014

# I am not a tree

Ashley Coulter

Western Kentucky University, ashley.coulter174@topper.wku.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/stu\\_hon\\_theses](http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/stu_hon_theses)



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Coulter, Ashley, "I am not a tree" (2014). *Honors College Capstone Experience/Thesis Projects*. Paper 457.  
[http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/stu\\_hon\\_theses/457](http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/stu_hon_theses/457)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors College Capstone Experience/Thesis Projects by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.

I AM NOT A TREE

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

The Degree Bachelor of Arts with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

Ashley M. Coulter

\*\*\*\*\*

Western Kentucky University  
2014

CE/T Committee:

Dr. Dale Rigby

Dr. Kelly Reames

Dr. Sara Northerner

Approved by

---

Advisor  
Department of English

Copyright by  
Ashley M. Coulter  
2014

## ABSTRACT

I am not going to gut my thesis like a fish. To give you an “abstract” is to give you the “big picture” of this intricate, complex work. I don’t know “love” or “hope” or “humanity” or “loss.” I know a wooden rocking horse, the touch of bare feet on a cold tile floor, the bond I feel when driving for hours on the interstate behind the same car, the sudden hint of despair that comes over me when the car begins to veer toward the exit, as if I’m losing my travel companion. To give you the “big picture” is to write philosophically, transcendently, to paint one broad stroke. I am not a theoretical writer. This is not a theoretical memoir. I think only slightly less forthright than the stink of wheat germ. To read creative nonfiction is to be both consoled and appalled, to feel like you just became smaller in this really big world, but also, to feel more a part of it than you ever have before. This is a deliberate, poignant memoir. It’s not abstract. It cannot be put in one broad stroke. It’s a Van Gogh. It’s “Starry Night.” It asks big questions. And it offers no easy answers.

Keywords: creative nonfiction, memoir, brevity, diabetes, disordered eating, gender

To my mother

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dale, thanks for the yellow peppers and the orange peppers and the red peppers and for letting me do my thing.

Dr. Reames, thanks for Eliot and Lorde and Rich and Allison. They are with me always, as are you.

A heartfelt thank you goes out to Dr. Judith Szerdahelyi for first telling me –“You are a writer, Ashley. You are a writer.”

I'd like to thank Dr. Grace Hunt for listening and sharing and crying and correcting and pushing and consoling and living and for teaching me more in the past ten months than she could ever possibly know.

All my love to Anna. And many thanks for her head rubs and distractions –without which I could have submitted this three days earlier.

Thank you to Rachel Hoge, Becky Thieman, Sara Volpi, and Maggie Woodward for workshops, wine, and friendship.

Thank you to Jennifer Markin for her guidance and support and for generally just being Jennifer Markin.

To Lauren Cunningham –French Fry loves you. Thank you for seeing the Little Giant in me.

To my family –I couldn't have done this without your love and support.

## VITA

November 21, 1991 .....Born – Louisville, Kentucky

Favorite Starburst .....The Pink Ones

## PUBLICATIONS

Coulter, Ashley. "The Wanderer and the Fixed Foot: A Look at Adrienne Rich's

Response to John Donne's 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning.'" *The Ashen*

*Egg*. 1.1 (2013): 3-7. Print.

## FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field 1: English

Major Field 2: Philosophy

Minor Field: Gender and Women's Studies

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
Abstract .....	ii
Dedication.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Vita.....	vi
Chapters:	
1. (Anti) Introduction .....	1
2. 16 Shells From a Thirty-Ought Sex.....	8
3. Free Faller.....	11
4. What Death Does To A Daughter (I).....	15
5. Baggie.....	19
6. Quiet.....	22
7. Portrait of A Lady .....	27
8. What Death Does To A Daughter (II).....	30
9. How I Learned To Like My Face.....	33
10. Sonnet I.....	36
11. Terrain.....	37
12. Normalcy: A Logical Proof.....	39
13. Quarantine.....	41
14. Interlude.....	43
15. Delay.....	45
16. What Death Does To A Daughter (III).....	49
17. Walking After Midnight.....	52

18. Sonnet II .....	55
19. Jessie's Girl .....	56
20. I am not a tree .....	59
21. What Death Does To A Daughter (IV) .....	62
22. Of Warmth .....	67
23. Sonnet III .....	69
24. Power .....	70
25. Weight Watchers .....	74
26. Plane Differences .....	78
27. What Numbers Feel Like .....	84
28. What Death Does To A Daughter (V) .....	87
29. Innards.....	89
30. Too Late For Fruit, Too Soon For Flowers .....	92
31. Sonnet IV .....	101
32. JIF .....	102
33. What Death Does To A Daughter (VI) .....	105
34. Reflection .....	108
35. Sonnet V .....	110
36. Interlude.....	111
37. Tank .....	113
38. Water and Glass.....	116
39. What Death Does To A Daughter (VII) .....	118
40. Shrinking.....	120

“The best writing teaches us something about the mystery of now,  
of being alive, being wounded, in the breathing world.  
I must be brave to remember, even braver to write.”

Richard Rodriguez

“The fact that we are here and that I speak now these words  
is an attempt to break that silence and bridge some  
of those differences between us, for it is not difference  
which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many  
silences to be broken.”

–Audre Lorde, “The Cancer Journals”

## (ANTI) INTRODUCTION

I'm thinking about introductions. How I don't understand them. How, from what I've been told, an introduction is supposed to separate itself from the creative work, allowing a space for reflection and prefacing. How I hate prefacing. Here's how I see it: I don't buy concert tickets so that, before each song is played, the musician can passively say "Okay, so I know the strum pattern and the melody may seem off, but when I was writing it, I was thinking about the disconnect between the mind and body, and blah blah blah." If I were to write a letter to every musician, it would say: To whom it may concern, I don't want you to explain to me that your new single is about your ex-boyfriend, because when I listen to it, it's about death and disease and I prefer you not rob me of my own little nook in your art. I don't want your introduction.

But, there *are* some higher ups who want mine. So here's what I'm going to do: I'm *not* going to write an introduction as you think of it. I'm going to write this essay in a very un-introduction-like way and I'm going to aptly title it "Introduction." Or perhaps I'll title it something else by the end, but you should know, that right here in the second paragraph, my intentions were to title this thing – "Introduction." I'm not going to feed you themes or intentions or strategies or outcomes. I want you to read it how I wrote it –that's why I wrote it the way I did. But, let me make a few things clear while I have your attention.

This thesis started as a collection of brevities. So, all of the pieces were going to be brief snapshots of my life. It didn't work. It turns out that creativity comes how and when it wants to. Some pieces, many of them, are in fact brevities (mission accomplished!). Some are not (mission *still* accomplished!). Some are long analogies. Some are lyrical essays. Some poems. Some lists. I'm a writer. My job is to show up, to sit down with an open heart and a stack of paper, and to be there when words begin to emerge. How they come out, the form they take, the shape or the rhythm, isn't much of my concern. It's yours. My job is to show up, to be ready to write. And I did that.

If you haven't picked up on this already, I have little interest in appeasing you. I mean, I have an interest so long as the appeasement is a necessary hoop I must jump through to get a degree or certificate or credit (hello, higher ups). But beyond that, I'm pretty uninterested. As you'll read, I spent enough of my life trying to appease people. So perhaps, instead of an introduction, I'll write for you a few preemptive warnings:

WARNING: I'm not going to always use correct grammar. I'll use incomplete sentences and dangling modifiers and I'm a big fan of dashes and commas being used in ways they are not supposed to be. Kill me.

WARNING: The structure of this thesis may not make sense to you. It will probably seem out of order (dare I say, random!) or spastic. That's because it is.

WARNING: Not everything is clear. And I don't tie things up with a neat little bow. In fact, I hate bows. They just make shit look pretty when it actually looks like shit.

WARNING: This is not a research paper. Don't read it like one. But if you must, let's play a little game of 'Go And Find The Thesis In Ashley's Thesis' and when you find it, you can email me at [ashley.coulter174@topper.wku.edu](mailto:ashley.coulter174@topper.wku.edu) and see if you're correct.

WARNING: You're not correct.

Maybe all the Honors College looks for when reviewing these things is a lengthy introduction. Maybe I'll just fill up this space with nonsense. Maybe instead of an introduction, I'll write a little story. Once upon a time, there was a big, boring ivory tower. And in it, there was this huge push to "*contribute to the conversation.*" There were hundreds of old white men dressed in green and blue knickers and cobbler shoes, running around the tower yelling, "Contribute to the conversation!" And there was a prince (insert me -I don't like dresses) who was stuck in the top of the tower, working to fulfill this contribution. I think this is fine. But what they don't tell you outright is that contributing is not enough. "You must contribute something original, you must contribute in a way no one else has ever contributed!" they say. Students are encouraged to pursue something untouched, to interpret and analyze things in new and creative ways. Make no mistake, to that worthy pursuit, I say, huzzah! But I quickly learned that the novelistic stuff is all anyone cared about, it was the only *real* contribution to the conversation. But they are wrong. The more written on a particular topic, the more breadth it begins to accrue, the wider the understanding, the deeper the analysis, the more precise the execution. Funny how

that works. You want to write another collection of poems about the patriarchy?  
Great! No one will do it like you will!

But no, that's been done already, time and time again, and so they will ask you "Yes, but how will *your* work be different?" To which I urge you to say, "Well, I've never *personally* written a collection of poems about patriarchy." But they won't like this answer.

When I set out to write a creative nonfiction thesis, I was bombarded with pokes and prods of "originality": How is your work going to be any different than the others that already exist in the field of creative writing? How will your memoir stand out from the hundreds of other memoirs? *I don't know*, I would think, *different author*? If writing a creative nonfiction thesis was akin to signing up for a muffin baking class, I would show up with blueberries and flour and they would make strange eyes at me for not wanting to push the limits of the blueberry making societal norms.

"But don't push the limits too much," they say, "because your work must fit into the existing conversation." It must be relatable, understandable, a new way of telling an old thing. It must have structure and basic grammar and you can't go too far out in left field because then no one will connect with your writing. In this case, if writing a creative nonfiction thesis was akin to signing up for a muffin baking class, I would show up with beef and onions and say, "I want to make motherfucking meatloaf muffins!" and they would shake their heads in disapproval, chanting "meatloaf cannot be muffins."

"What will the title of your work be?" they asked me, time and time again.

“I don’t know,” I’d say, “I haven’t written it yet.”

“What will be the theme that holds it all together,” they’d ask. “What will be the central idea in the work?”

“I don’t know,” I’d say. “I haven’t written it yet.”

Eventually, I caved to the pressure and made some shit up. I did know that I wanted to write about eating, about diabetes, about my relationship to my body, about the mind/body connection. If I were to write about my life and experiences, those things were inevitable. So I began to search for memoirs by people with both type 1 diabetes and anorexia. I found none. To this day, I still have yet to find any work that really delves into the twinning of those two diseases. So there, it seemed, was my contribution.

I started reading. I read books on eating disorders and diabetes and depression. I read books on life after eating disorders, on gender theory, on body image. I read self-help books, mindfulness books, philosophy of mind, and creative nonfiction collections. I read poems. I read blogs. I read “Appetites” by Caroline Knapp, “Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia” by Marya Hornbacher, “An Apple a Day: A Memoir of Love and Recovery from Anorexia” by Emma Woolf, “Gaining” by Aimee Liu. I read all wonderfully brave works on eating disorders and the stories of sufferers. There was only one problem –none of them even sounded like my story.

Everything I read seemed to echo the notion of anorexia’s “cure.” I like the cure story just about as much as I like tying shit up with pretty bows. There were other things that bothered me too. All of them seemed to reflect some bullshit image of a severely underweight woman standing in front of a mirror, her reflection that of

an obese woman. We've all seen this, right? Yeah. Not my story. I never once looked in a mirror and thought I was fat. I respect that each journey is different. But the more I read, the more frustrated I became that I couldn't find even an inkling of my own story. It's impossible for me to talk about my eating disorder without talking about my diabetes. But it's also impossible for me to talk about the issues surrounding those things without mentioning my family, my childhood, my personality type, my insecurities, the time I fell and busted my head open during Red Rover in the third grade.

What I'm trying to say is this: I didn't do what I said I was going to do. Big whoop. I did what I had to do. I did what I needed to do. And I did it in the only way I knew how –I just wrote. About half of the pieces I wrote are in the thesis. The other half are still swimming around in my brain or are on my hard drive saved under "Shit that don't fit." There's a lot about disordered eating in here. There's a lot in here about my relationship to my body. There's also a lot about grief, sex, power, gender and what kind of Ziploc bags I prefer. But to read them as disconnected pieces would be a mistake. All of them are connected. All of them speak to each other in very deliberate ways.

Then, they ask me to write a stupid introduction. They ask me to introduce my work, as if this sentence isn't also my work, as if I am going to use this space any differently than I used the rest. They asked me to write a chapter on strategies, a chapter on methods, a chapter on characters, problems and solutions, as if this is a research paper. Really? Solutions? It's a memoir.

So when I refuse, they ask me to write an introduction with all of my strategies and themes and methods included. No. I'm not hand feeding you shit. I'm not writing you an introduction as if it is some distant, far-off thing that can be separated from the body of my thesis. As if my mind can be separated from my body, as if I'm not writing about the vast influence the mind has on the body, as if this living, breathing work of art is any different.

## 16 SHELLS FROM A THIRTY-UGHT SEX

*This is the female form,  
A divine nimbus exhales from it from head to foot*

—Walt Whitman, from “I Sing the Body Electric”

1. This is the female form: wrapped in only lace, a warm body that never seems to shiver or shake. A bonnet blue sash softened against bare legs, in the midst of winter. A snow angel beneath blistering heat.
2. A high school boy borrows his father’s Audi RS7 to take to prom. He arrives alone, exits the vehicle, and gaits heavily across the dance floor to find the lissome, blonde Prom Queen. He kisses her. She likes it. This –“Bravery: It’s What Defines Us” –is the female form.
3. This is the female form: an arching back or a hunching forward. To protrude or to contract. To inhale or ex-breathe. Push ‘em out, squeeze ‘em in, lift ‘em up.
4. The cursive beach apparel, an all-white decadence flowing like tidal waves, the pearl at her center. This is the female form –bare feet, arms an open V, she dances

and twirls, effortless cartwheels across the wetted white sand at the find of a tolerable low-fat yogurt.

5. A [This] cavalcade [is] of [the] ass [female] and [form] breasts.

6. This is the female form: Carrie Mathison on Showtime's "Homeland." A successful CIA agent, on the verge of emotional breakdown, getting her clit licked for job performance, all while forgetting to eat.

7. Slim-Fast reminds us with two wedding cake toppers. The groom is on his knees, reaching deep into the icing to retrieve his bride. Her body sunk, invisible, into the top layer of the cake. To replace two meals with a powdered liquid is to forgive us of this, the descending, extending female form.

8. Suck, Thrust, Scissor, Spot, Knob, Fold, Lick, Sack, Leak, Slam, Jelly, Ram, Rub, Pump, Pierce, Pulse, Peak, Fuck, Finger, Flower, the female form.

9. A leg. A collarbone. A muscleless midriff. A part to stand in for the whole –Ah, this is the female form!

10. BIC, the pen company, now makes "BIC For Her." This 'sleek new design' is the female form.

11. Ralphie slides his fingers toward a lampshade that sits squarely atop a high-heeled fishnet highway. It's only sign of life, a light bulb illuminating the female form.

12. The name of the pre-owned car lot is barely visible beneath the sprawled naked woman with oversized lips. The female form: "You know you're not her first: But do you really care?"

13. A wild herd of dark-haired beauties are running savagely through forests and scale frantically down mountainsides toward the scent. Hundreds of bodies, no one any different from the others, are becoming an ocean of beach bouncing bosoms in army-green string bikinis chasing the AXE man. Spray More, Get More Female Form.

14. She once woke up with a green pea in her mouth. She once slept in an eagle's nest. She only ate coffee beans for two weeks. The governments are following her – all the governments! He's glad he "dodged a bullet" by breaking it off with Beth. The crazy ex: this is the female form.

15. A boat named Anne Marie; A soft-tail Harley named Fat Amy; An '88 LX named Nikki: the female form. "Sometimes my ride is a bitch, that's a girl's name, right?"

16. This is the female form: There's only one female Muppet and she's an obnoxious, fat pig.

## FREE FALLER

In the midst of spring-cleaning, I found a journal I kept when I was eleven years old.

In it, were the following sentences:

1. "I know something bad will happen to me before I grow up."
2. "God did not make me to be a grown up because I already am one."
3. "People at school like Shawn said they hate me because I do not get any wrong answers."

At eleven years old, it was not whether or not I was going to die soon, it was how it was going to happen. I felt it. Every bone in my body believed that I was not made to live very long. I had too much potential. Not enough faults. I wasn't sure if I'd be the angel on a St. Jude commercial or if my family would start the next child abduction campaign. But I did know that I was too good to live past twelve, else the world would have to call me Jesus or develop a new species of superhuman.

I won the state championship, regional title, and won two consecutive gold medals in the Junior Olympics in taekwondo. I was a second-degree black belt and instructor by the time I was eleven years old. I was a gifted baseball player and gymnast. I awed adults with my conversational skills. I never received anything below Excellent on report cards. I was good at drawing and most creative things. I scored in the highest percentile on state testing. I wrote a forty-eight page book in the second grade. I once entered a dance competition in the fifth grade without any

experience and won the whole thing with a Men in Black dance I made up in my bedroom. Later in life, I started singing and taught myself instruments. And I wasn't aware until I hit eleven years old that not every kid could do whatever they wanted and be the best at it.

The BBC reported in 2003 that a person's preferred sleeping position correlates with their personality. According to the study, most people fall under the "Fetus" category, those tired souls who curl up, knees to their chest, into a fragile pinkish ball of skin. The Fetus sleepers make up almost 50% of those among us and are said to have a strong sense of external strength, but a deep sensitivity hidden from those around them. Much less common are the Starfish (my brother), the Yearner (my friend Anna), and the log (all those over 47 years of age). I'm a Free Faller, which accounts for less than 7% of the population. We are stomach sleepers, hands-above-the-head, face-buried-in-the-pillow kind of people that often elicit a "How can you sleep like that?" or a question about our estimated time of death. Despite a gregarious and brash personality, Free Fallers are said to feel out of control and spastic.

But I can remember a time when I wasn't a free faller. In fact, as a seven or eight year old, I remember being a member of the Fetus clan. I know because I slept with a one-eyed black taekwondo teddy bear tucked into the creases between my elbows. Soon, there was a transition period, where the bear sat in the corner of the bed as my Fetus sleeping slipped away quietly, my top shoulder slumping toward the bed sheet. Eventually, there was no stuffed bear around the bed. And by the time

I was eleven years old, the Free Faller in me had fully emerged. But mostly because of the nightmares.

Before the bad dreams, it was cancer. Because that's usually what I heard people say about kids with cancer –that they were “perfect angels.” I once overheard a friend of the family say “all those kids on the St. Jude commercial are just too good for this world.” But then, in 2002, Elizabeth Smart was abducted from her Salt Lake City bedroom and the flashing images of a blonde, intelligent, perfect fourteen year old on CNN reminded me that my perfection could be crushed in ways other than cancer. I imagined her house –large, elegant, and square, as if it were a dollhouse and Elizabeth Smart, the perfect little doll with the perfect little name. So in the nightmares, the house was cut in half, the back of it exposed like my own handmade dollhouse, small rugs and all. I watched my doll self being taken from my bed by men who entered my bedroom window. Sometimes we would run from room to room and they would tie me up and put me in a trash bag. Sometimes they just shot me without pause. But most of the time, they threw me on their shoulders and carried me out of the window from which they came.

So when it finally hit me, when an onslaught of adults and classmates called me “genius” and “prodigy” and “freak of nature,” the nightmares got worse. I knew what happened to people like me. I began to sleep on my stomach so that my hands could hold a butter-knife under my pillow. I prayed to a God that I only half believed in, promising I would stop raising my hand in class if he would keep the kidnappers away. And one night, when the presence of death in the room was stronger than it had ever been, and I was sure I wouldn't make it to morning, I hung a small piece of

notebook paper on the inside of my window, that read "STOP! SHE ALREADY HAS  
CANCER," before falling on my stomach and crying myself to sleep.

## WHAT DEATH DOES TO A DAUGHTER

### I.

I used to do this thing with my mouth. It only happened at certain times. If I was answering a yes or no question, nothing happened. If I was reading aloud or repeating someone or singing song lyrics, nothing happened. But if I had to tell someone what I thought, what I felt, what I needed or wanted, if I used words to express myself in any way, my mouth did a funny thing. If I ever asked a question, or had to finagle a selection of my vocabulary to somehow put out into the world what was sitting at the back of my throat, I had to say it twice, not counting the ten or more times I said it in my mind first. Before I spoke, I spent minutes sorting and aligning and rearranging words to find the best, most normal-sounding way to say something. I wasn't sure why I couldn't speak. Teachers and coaches coaxed each thought out of me, slowly, painfully, often with tears. When I finally said something aloud, after minutes, sometimes hours, of wrestling with myself, I'd immediately mouth the entire thing again silently. All expressions were followed by a repeating of the sentence without sound. A quick movement of the lips. It was as if I became instantly self-conscious, too aware of how the words might affect other people, that it may burden them, annoy them, not be what they were looking for, and for a moment, I had to judge the statement I made by making it again, silently repeating it to myself, as if to perceive it as other people did, as if the words meant something

different in my head. But the compulsion never kept me from regretting everything I said, from wanting each time to throw a lasso around my own words, to rope them back down my throat.

My mother told me that the mouthing was an inherited thing, that I got it from my dad's dad. "He used to do the exact same thing," she said to me once. I never remembered seeing Papaw mouth anything. But I assumed Mom told me that to make me feel better. Then again, he could have done it before I was even born. My mom had known him longer than I had. She used to be terrified of him. I once asked her how she and dad told their parents that they were expecting a baby. "Separately," she told me. She was too afraid of Papaw to face him with the news of such a big mistake. He seemed cold, closed-off, distant. And although he was never mean to my mother, he wasn't ever warm and welcoming, either. She told her parents by herself. And my father told his.

I was always close to my dad's dad growing up so it was hard for me to picture Papaw like this. He was never cold or distant or anything close to it. He was loving and caring and thoughtful. I spent much of my childhood with him, on the yellow seat of his John Deere tractor. We spent hours on that tractor when I was a baby, my blue bucket hat blocking out the sun. When I was older, he let me get a Papaw-accredited John Deere license. I'd steer the wheel and lift the lever up toward the bunny, circling the trees and stones on a different training course he'd set each day. He was always there. He never missed a birthday or a competition or an awards ceremony. But although he was committed and supportive, for as long as I can remember, Papaw was fragile. I always sensed it. At a very young age, I was aware of

the role I played in his life. I was his granddaughter, his first grandchild, and his chance to make things right, to be a better grandfather than he was a father. Perhaps I was exceptionally perceptive as a kid, or perhaps he wore his regret on his sleeve. Or, maybe I was wrong altogether. But what mattered is that from early on, the love I felt from him was so pure, so redemptive, that it instilled within me a great responsibility. In a way, I knew I held his happiness in my hands. I felt the weight of that.

Papaw has always been a voracious reader. He reads four or five books at once and can hardly stand to finish one without starting another. His favorite book is "Time and Again" by Jack Finney. Growing up, it was mine too, on questionnaires, in first conversations with new friends, that's what I told people. But I actually hated that book. Time travel was never my thing. I don't think I ever finished the book. Just raved to Papaw about the ability of Finney to take me to another world, like I'd heard him say so many times himself. After Mom and Dad divorced, Papaw would invite me and Austin and Dad over for dinner every week or so. He fixed his favorite dish. Large, square chunks of beefsteak and buttery egg noodles smothered in spicy brown gravy. No words can describe how disgusting "Beef Tips and Noodles" tasted to me. I hated beef and I hated gravy. Still do. But each time, I ate it. I choked it down on principle. I smiled and acted like it was good. My desire to please was mistaken for my desire to eat Beef Tips and Noodles, so of course, each time Papaw fixed dinner, he fixed my favorite. Somehow, I believed that even the most insignificant disappointment would break him. That he wouldn't look at me like he did all these

years if I didn't share his preference for time travel or brown gravy. I thought the same of my father, as if fragility could be inherited.

## BAGGIE

There were two kinds of kids with lunch money: the chargers and the changers. I watched them, in a line, gaunt ADHD bodies sucked tight to the colorful concrete walls. The chargers stood with their hands in their pockets, discreetly readjusting themselves. Everyone wore blue uniform pants, but the charger kids wore the smoky tinted navy, worn to whiten the seams, the washed-out fading so present on the knees and belt loops. Their skinny frames made their pant cuffs look less like high waters and more like the effect of grasshopper legs. Bug eyes. Pink Kool-Aid stains. All “outtie” belly buttons. Flat chests with mountainous rib cages.

The changers kept their hands busy. They were yappity and as sturdy as the wall they leaned upon. Chubby kids dressed in pleats on their heavily saturated navy knickers, cuffs placed gently, with lots of leftover lag, right between the Nike sole and the tile in the cafeteria. Beads of sweat found their way through their cotton polos as they fondled rolls of quarters, sliding them in and out of brown paper sleeves with orange writing.

I sat at the table with a head full of bumblebees. My lunch came in a grocery bag. At my table, the kids had three tier Nickelodeon dime pieces, insulated with white or scratchy silver, complete with an ice pack, nestled behind a mesh pocket in the upper-most zipper compartment. Floral napkins were a pretty positive staple in

the lunchbox. It showed effort, care. Napkins with notes were even better. *Mom loves you. Have a great day!* Smiley faces. Hearts. The occasional doodled balloon. One boy who sat at the corner seat was often given presents in his lunchbox. I pull out a Ding Dong and he pulls out a Matchbox car. What?

The chargers, I thought, never even had to have money for lunch. They just walked past the register and said a number. I always thought it was some secret code word that I should really get in on. But, the chargers always walked right past the snack cart too. The code word must not have worked for the good shit. That was changer's territory. Little Debbie Swiss Rolls and Rice Krispy Treats. Chips Ahoy and Chewy granola bars. Sweating, they'd skip the applesauce and fruit medley and grovel their way to the snack cart. Two chocolate milks, a side of ranch dressing, and a pound of processed foods caused them all to clink a pile of quarters next to the register, sliding out of the sleeve and onto the counter.

It was hard to tell which was better in elementary school, the charger or the changer. It seemed to me that neither of them really had a lot to look forward to other than eating. But for the rest of us who brought lunch, the determining factor of a good lunch was a clear one: the sandwich bag. Above the napkins and the love notes, the brown paper bag or the insulated Angry Beavers, was the plastic baggie test. I was a slave to the Ziploc. Those who had an acceptable status in school brought this kind of plastic baggie. Double-sealed, crisp and secure. Their sandwich tucked away in another world, a safer world, a world with protection and love like Sunday afternoon crock-pot stew. And that was enough to earn my jealousy, to cause my embarrassment, as I slid stale saltine crackers out of a fold-over plastic

baggie. A fold-over. Just the name sounds like an attempt and a falling short. My baggie wasn't zipped or pressed or sealed; it was folded, limply, the baggie that took little to no extra time to assemble. A fold over inside a grocery bag. One boy called me "bag lady" and in short, I was ashamed. I wanted to be a charger or a changer or a kid with a lunch box not advertising that my family shopped at Save-a-Lot. I'd try with one hand to extract the contents of the fold-over baggie while keeping my arm inside the grocery bag so that not everyone could witness my lack of protection, the gaping openness that was my baggie and my life.

## QUIET

When I am ten years old, I will live in the biggest bedroom upstairs. The house will be an orange brick rental, nestled in a quaint cul-de-sac off Marse Place. My new stepdad will bring home a large brown paper sack of fast food for supper. He will reach his bodybuilder arms down into the bag, each time pulling out another Styrofoam container and setting it on the kitchen table. KFC tubs of fried chicken and mashed potatoes, macaroni and cheese, and a long rectangle box of biscuits. We will lock Cody in his kennel and eat like we usually do, loud and quick. I am talkative and attention-seeking by nature, but on this night I will feel quiet. I'll reach to get my second biscuit, crumbling it in pieces without thinking, my hands a tight-grip mind of their own, eyes dazed toward the plate in front of me. I'll be barely present. Faint sounds of chatter from the far end of the table: *Barry's parents in Virginia called; His brother is still crazy; Mom's boss is a balding asshole.*

There will suddenly be an incredible distance between me and the loud sounds reverberating off the floral kitchen wallpaper. I'll feel myself shrinking. Mom will get up from the table to open the refrigerator, asking me what's wrong. I'll shake my head and spit the word 'nothing' like I usually do, loud and quick. She will say nothing to my 'nothing' and will pull the tall paper bag out of the fridge, setting it on the counter, reaching both arms to the bottom and pulling out a cake. It'll be the double chocolate chip bunt cake that KFC advertises –my younger brother and I will

have been yelping at the TV in pleases all the prior week. "It was Barry's idea," she will say. *He's trying too hard* I will think. But before she can cut a slice for me, I'll be in the bathroom, gasping and glaring at my face in the mirror.

Sometime during dinner, I will begin to hear every noise around me. Each one will be lurid and distinct and each one will slowly emerge, sending echoes through my small head. I won't be able to ignore them. Every nuance will infiltrate the space behind my eyeballs. I will hear laughing and talking and barking, the voices of Seinfeld and the laughter of his audience, the buzz of the florescent light and the scratch of Cody's paws on the plastic kennel floor, the distant shouts of neighborhood kids and the screeches and squawks of their bicycle tires. I will hear everything at once but no one thing at all. My breathing will quicken and I'll feel uncomfortable in the feeling of having hands and a heartbeat. My clothing heavy on my shoulders, my soccer shorts like bags of sand on my waist. And I'll feel trapped. In my body. For the first time.

In the bathroom, I'll begin to talk to myself. Nothing unusual, just the self-to-self pep talk. The inner calm down button. *What is happening.....I don't want to cry.....I want a piece of cake.....you have to lay down and scream.....* But, at this age, I won't recognize this internal voice as my own consciousness. I will begin to think I am the only one who can do this, who can talk to themselves, who has a voice inside their head.

*Why am I breathing funny.....I want to slam my head on this sink.....What if I pretended to-----,.....*

I will lean forward and catch my own eyes in the mirror. Feel a shifting in my brain. *Hello? Who are you? What is this?* In an instant, I'll go from interactive to cut-off. I will be conscious of my own consciousness. Aware that I am aware. The more I will stand in front of the bathroom mirror, a ten-year old in soccer shorts and an Old Navy butterfly t-shirt, the more I will spiral further and further into a deep cave of paranoia and anxiety.

When I am ten years old, I'll convince myself that it isn't normal to say things in your head. Other people don't have the ability to talk to themselves is what I'll hear myself saying in my head. Other people don't feel like there is Plexiglas between themselves and the world. Normal people don't feel abnormal. As I spiral further, I will be convinced that this "inner voice" is a sure sign that I am different from everyone else. Within minutes, I will believe that I am the only person who can do these things in the whole world. I will flush the empty toilet and feel a dark hole begin to close in around me. And I will walk out of the bathroom and back into the kitchen, pretending to be normal.

That night, I will curl up on the couch with my family, a ball of wonder and dread and nerve. I will test myself every few seconds, checking to see if my newly found ability was still intact. *Are you still there? I am speaking to myself. I can still do it. What is going to happen now? I should tell Mom. I can't tell Mom because she won't get it. But I could be in trouble if I don't tell. She will have to take me to the doctor and I won't have to go to school tomorrow.*

The hour before bedtime on that particular night will be a self-created hell. I'll decide to tell my mother about my special ability when she tucks me into bed.

And the countdown will begin. I will go upstairs to wait for bedtime. Sob in my baby blue bean bag. Pace from my closet to my bed, from my closet to my bed, closet to my bed, closet to bed, closet to bed, to bed, to closet, back to bean bag. I will sit with my hands folded, my fingers interlaced, my eyes glazed over, talking to myself, practicing what I will say. I will worry what my mother will say back, how she will react to having a child that has freak-like abilities and if the newspapers will want to interview her. I will wonder if I am sick. If I will have to have brain surgery. I will itch. And rock back and forth. Until it's time.

When she walks into my room, I will peel back the covers and climb between the sheets. As she lifts the comforter up to my chin, I will try to open my mouth, but I'll be stuck inside. My speech will come out only in the voice in my head. I'll criticize myself, call myself stupid for not talking out loud, for being so different, and will panic as she kisses me on the forehead and turns to walk away. Another dark hole. I'm dying. A flood of terror. I'll clench my teeth hard. She will swing the door closed, but before turning out the light, I'll scream out, loud and quick, "Mom!!" She'll turn the light off, and back on again. "What?" she'll say.

Big breath. "I can do something weird," I will say, "But not like normal people." I'll sit up in my bed.

"Huh? Ashley, what is it?" haste and exhaustion in her voice.

"I can talk to myself, Mom. Like, I can say things in my head, that only I can hear" I will say, and quickly cover my head with shame.

I'll hear, "*Yeah!*" –drawn out, the upward inflection on the "e," a tone of impression, as if I had shown her a picture I painted at school that day. I'll lift the

blanket off my head, peek over to look her in the eye. Instead, I'll see black, the lights turned out, the door, closed, with a click.

That night, I will dig my nails into the inside of my forearms. I will thrash and kick and bite my pillow, the layers of skin on the inside of my cheeks. I will slam my chin hard against my chest. Tense every muscle and push my knuckles into the top of my head. I will cry and whip my body back and forth, my blankets tossed across the room. I will lash violently, quiet and quick, for what will seem like an hour until I'll be so physically exhausted that I will fall asleep on my knees, curled into a ball on the carpet next to my bed.

## PORTRAIT OF A LADY

His fingers looked good sitting on the arm rest. I was thinking his fingers looked good sitting on the arm rest. They were fatty in the skin folds of the knuckle and I tasted the brine of my teeth grinding. I hated myself more that day –the day his fingers looked so good on the arm rest. My baby brother, and I thought his fingers looked good.

### **104**

My gaunt prepubescent frame blossomed into the rounded lines and slopes of a healthy woman. I didn't ask for this. I'm enraged at the prospect of three numbers taking up the entire space of the scale's digital reader. Disgusted, I throw myself on the bathroom floor in the middle of the summer heat. After making a decision, I pick myself up and unlock the stench of the storage den, rummaging through cardboard boxes to find Mom's old Tae-Bo tapes.

### **91**

I sing the 2007 CalorieKing Nutritional Handbook to the inside of my brain as an imprint, a reminder, that knowledge is power. After six days of rigorous study, I can recite the nutritional information to every food known to man, all 277 pages worth. I trade Wildberry Poptarts for celery sticks, blonde afternoons for walking shoes. I hide the sleeves of the VHS tapes behind the VCR just in case Mom starts noticing. I

open the frozen lunches she buys me and microwave them, quickly rinsing the food down the disposal and leaving the package on top of the trash.

**86**

Things aren't moving quickly enough. I still feel a bulging in my cheeks and inner thighs. I decide to eat only green beans. Three cans a day –breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Mom is furious. I no longer care. I buy new walking shoes. Twelve miles I trek, the neighborhood sleeping, before sneaking back into my room to pretend I was sleeping. My feet bleed but my uterus doesn't.

**74**

When the cold comes, I hold fingers and toes against a cherry-red metal space heater, the smell of melted skin lingering like a collar clung to the back of my neck, not for warmth, but to remember the feeling of heat. My lips are chapped and blued, coated in chalky white powder. I have always slept on my stomach, but I can only lie on my back because there's no meat to cushion the space between my lungs and the ground. I gasp for air in the night. I drink Diet Mountain Dew and as I eat bowls of dry rub seasoning, it brines my esophagus on the way down.

**71**

I am burned and balding, a taut piece of angular machinery. My hip bones jutting out to each side like the handles of a teacup. Anger is a quiet room with mirrors. I am the oppressor; I am the oppressed.

**67**

I feel my body become less than human the moment I look at my brother's fingers. They look tasty, fatty, like I would enjoy their flavor. There's a pressure on my chest

that tells me to grab them, to rip them off his hands with my incisors. But he is my baby brother. And I refuse to let this hurt anyone but me. It's December. And for the first time since July, I walk to the kitchen, opening a package of baby carrots.

## WHAT DEATH DOES TO A DAUGHTER

### II.

While I was tiptoeing, stepping over the cracks in Papaw's facade, I was doing the same around his son. Dad wasn't a mean man. For as long as I've known him, he's been soft, huge-hearted, a man with a towering sense of care and protection. But, like his father, he was broken. Like I sensed Papaw's fragility, it always seemed to me that Dad had a depth of darkness boiling just below the surface. I sensed it in the way he looked at customer service representatives, in the way he whipped me as a child, in the way he clenched his jaw in traffic. To remedy the tension, I became close to my father. I said things I knew he found funny, I stayed out of his way, and I did everything in my power to keep him unbothered, his jaw unclenched.

In an attempt to keep his darkness at bay, I became his friend. Once I hit nine or ten, he started treating me more like a kind of dartboard for venting –he'd share his thoughts openly and I'd nod my head and smile, agreeing with anything he said. He began telling me things and inviting me to do things with him that made me feel special. We'd talk about his girlfriends and his love life. I'd shave his back before he went on dates. He'd ask me what I thought of each girl he brought around. I'd give good ratings no matter what. I listened to him express the absolute hatred he had for one of his serious girlfriend's daughters, both of us on his bed, musing whether the girlfriend was worth dealing with her snot of a daughter. One woman, Mary, was

an alcoholic. She had a seventeen-year-old son who played football for Bardstown High School and I thought he was the cutest boy I'd ever seen. Mary had newborn twins. I remember her always weighed down by two carriers, one in each hand, and that she always had a glass of wine with dinner. Dad told me she was addicted, but that everything else about her was great. And at ten years old, I talked to my dad about overlooking that one negative quality, about my apathy pertaining to the fact that she was an alcoholic mother of three –*He just wants my blessing* I thought. Dad was engaged twice after the divorce. First, to an older woman named Amelia. She was perfect, beautiful, funny, successful, except my dad expressed to me that she was a “bit too old.” After rumors flew around the family that my dad was being a little too flirtatious with Amelia’s twenty-year old daughter, the engagement was called off. The second was a woman named Michelle. I hated her. Mostly because she was just like my dad. She was lazy, she smoked, and just about everything she said was negative or insulting. She played video games with him, both of them tucked away in the bedroom by themselves.

“I’m thirsty” is every nine-year-old’s excuse to get out of bed. One night, I asked Dad if I could get a glass of water, and instead of telling me to hurry and get back to bed, he asked if I wanted to stay up with him. I sat on the couch next to my dad, watching the movie he was watching. I sat with my knees to my chest, the glass of water squeezed tightly between them. Over the brim of the cup, I saw blood and guns and naked bodies. I saw breasts and flashing lights, heard screams and loud music, and soon I could feel my heartbeat in my palms. I was terrified, was seeing things that I knew kids shouldn’t see, that I knew I would usually be in trouble for

watching. But I wanted to be as mature as Dad wanted me to be, needed me to be, so I sat silently, concentrating on my breathing, sipping the glass of water. My act only lasted a few minutes. I cracked, bursted into tears, my lips quivering, ashamed I couldn't be older and nonchalant about all of this. My shaking hands spilled the water. Dad's anger was brimming as he asked me why I was crying. I climbed back into my shell. He ordered me to go back to bed with words that sounded to me like *it's so frustrating that you have to be a child all the time.*

## HOW I LEARNED TO LIKE MY FACE

*Papaw told me that he used to call her Vickie Jean the Sex Machine. And I like to picture the tremble of those shrugged shoulders as she threw back her head in an uproar of laughter. She'd probably sock him one if she knew he told me, he said. And I like to picture her doing that.*

I started asking about you the same year I started to hate my face. Middle school was hard on a girl with an oversized forehead, puffy bags beneath her eyes, and a gaze that had me convinced I was adopted. But when I spoke your name at family gatherings, everyone told me you couldn't stand to be photographed – “She never would let us take any damn pictures,” they'd say. So when I looked for you, in albums and on bookshelves, I saw only the freckles of your forearm, your sun-tanned ankles, or your easy mahogany hair. Dozens of photos taken with your bony shoulders tensely shrugged to your earlobes, your hands frantically blocking the camera's view of your face. I started sneaking in the basement on school nights to dust off withering photo albums, collecting the random parts of you in my hands. I cut out your russet crossed ankles and your narrow knee caps, and one picture of the right side of your face, as you escaped the camera's capture with a quick jolt of your neck. I cut out the back of your head, the outline of your small frame, and glued

it around a disproportionate snapshot of the back of your delicate neckline, piecing you together –always without a face.

*They said she never let Daddy grow up. He was eighteen and his momma still woke him up in the morning. And after he showered, she blew dry his long mahogany hair. She probably called him Michael. I like to think she called him Michael.*

It seems silly now, considering the observant child that I was, that I didn't put the two things together. The picture that sat way up high, atop the television, the figure of a woman holding something in her hands, was you. The picture that had become so much a part of the home décor that I never actually looked at it. After years of searching in basement boxes, your face was always there –but how was I to recognize something I had never seen? Besides, I was always afraid to get near it as a kid. I remember seeing the blur of you only from down below, as if your face was a fading memory I had never had. By the time I sat on the fringes of womanhood, old enough to realize that I had been searching for something that had been there all along, it was too late. Dad had already left us, and he took your face with him.

*She gave me the alphabet, the colors of the rainbow, and the itsy-bitsy spider. And while Mommy and Daddy were fighting and working and yelling and cheating, she taught me to wave bye-bye and potty trained me at a record-breaking fourteen months. She probably reveled in the gibberish of my babble and the high squeal of her own bright-eyed baby talk. I like to think she was proud of me –even then.*

When dad came back with a new wife and baby, your face was the only thing on my Christmas list. When I peeled away the deep green tissue paper, you finally lit up in a black and pewter, 5x7 frame. It took me twenty years to really see you. Your body softened into the curve of your spine, swallowed by the oversized white t-shirt and the width of a large, brown tweed loveseat. Your dark, glossy hair resting at the nape of your neck as you look down, with the most love any human face could possibly possess. It's concentration, but not strain. There's all the hurt and confusion of adoration, but not a single trace of tension. My body is a blanket. And you hold me on bent knees, your hands clasping the bundle before you, staring into the face of your granddaughter.

*When the prognosis was six weeks, she let me go. I was too attached and she'd be gone soon. So, she thought, to make her death easier on a one year old, she stopped spending time with me altogether. They tell me that it might have killed the last part of her the cancer hadn't reached yet.*

They also told me there's no way you knew the picture was being taken –otherwise, you'd have shrugged your shoulders and scurried to hide your face with the pillow. But I no longer like to think that. I look in this frame often, and the reflection of the protective glass has taught me of our thin upper lips, the dark circles around our eyes, and the most love any human face can possibly possess.

I.

I look at all the damage done to you  
each night standing before a floor-length  
mirror, behind this bunker of bomb threats.

watch me twist and ape, nipples gleaming full  
above fields of milk sausage that fester  
between months of stubborn sourdough bread.

I gaze at everything except eyes. Say: "sad."

I am muscle and meat and nerve,  
bone and ligament, a tender fillet,  
alive, bold and bleeding, rush of hard pulse.

premise: I am not made of metaphors.

conclusion: how will I hide when you die?

## TERRAIN

I'm not a very hairy person. I used to be accused of shaving my forearms, but I don't. In fact, in good light, you can see bits of baby blonde hairs sympathetically sprouting every inch or so. My knees are pretty hairy though. The back of my thighs don't get shaven, except before drives to Lexington, for a late night wrestling match with a man I should no longer see but do. Still, my knuckles and toes and belly and chin are without hair.

As is my head, my long blonde curls shaved tight against my skin, making it easy to see that my neck is scrawny, my ears rather small for my skull, placed level on both sides of my head with lobes like medium sized rain drops.. I do have a dark freckle in the middle of my left lobe that has been mistaken my entire life for an ear piercing. It's not. But it doesn't distract anyone enough to overlook my forehead, its hairline sitting too far back on my skull, tracing a starting mark that waivers crooked edges like the top of the Kentucky state line.

My mother has the chest of a nine year old boy, but I somehow have breasts like pomegranates. My left is quite a bit bigger than my right, but both are plump and round and enough to fill any person's hand. My nipples are nice. Neither a cheap ten cents nor a slice of salami. Just south, a landscape strewn in red needle scratches and patches of bruise colored ringlets from infected injection sites. The battlegrounds of hospital stays and insulin regimens. It *feels* worse than it looks. If

you grab me by the hips you will feel humps of hardened scar tissue beneath my otherwise buttery skin.

The rest of me is easily forgotten. The equilateral triangle of moles directly between my shoulder blades. My inner thighs, their curved lines careening toward each other like two swollen half-moons. The permanent red dot on the top of my left wrist that seems to be the burst of a blood vessel. The triangular pinky toe, the innie, and the lightly colored birth mark on the surface of my left eyeball –a mark I share with both my father and his mother. The horizontal lines just above my clitoris, two scars from double hernia surgery that make my labia look like the mouth of a Chinese man or a sign of sacrifice.

## NORMALCY: A LOGICAL PROOF

Premise: If I am normal, then I am common.

Premise: If I am common, then I am regular.

Premise: If I am regular, then I am plain.

Premise: If I am plain, then I am boring.

Premise: If I am boring, then I am average.

Premise: If I am average, then I am understood.

Premise: If I am understood, then I am accepted.

Premise: If I am accepted, then I belong.

Premise: If I belong, then I am deserving of love.

Premise: If I am deserving of love, then I feel validated.

Premise: If I feel validated, then I can be myself.

Premise: If I can be myself, then I am empowered.

Premise: If I am empowered, then I have an identity.

Premise: If I have an identity, then I feel special.

Premise: If I feel special, then I am distinct.

Premise: If I am distinct, then I am exceptional.

Premise: If I am exceptional, then I am superior.

Premise: If I am superior, then I am an outlier.

Premise: If I am an outlier, then I am eccentric.

Premise: If I am eccentric, then I am unusual.

Premise: If I am unusual, then I am irregular.

Premise: If I am irregular, then I am different.

Premise: If I am different, then I am misunderstood.

Premise: If I am misunderstood, then I am not accepted.

Premise: If I am not accepted, then I am not free to be myself.

Premise: If I am not free to be myself, then I am disempowered.

Premise: If I am disempowered, then I am silent.

Premise: If I am silent, then I am strange.

Premise: If I am strange, then I am a deviant.

Premise: If I am a deviant, then I do not feel understood.

Premise: If I do not feel understood, then I do not feel sane.

Premise: If I do not feel sane, then I am wrong.

Premise: If I am wrong, then I want to be right.

Conclusion: I cannot be.

## QUARANTINE

It was Chicken Patty Tuesday and I had chosen a measly scoop of applesauce as my side. I counted the carbohydrates in my head and on the way to sit down had decided exactly the amount of insulin I would take. I looked around the lunchroom, feeling uneasy at the largeness of this new school. I sat alone, at a roundtable made for eight. As I retrieved the syringe from my backpack, I hid the vile of medication as I drew back the needle. I acted as if I was looking for something as I quickly lifted my shirt to inject myself in a pinch of belly fat. I did this often, this busying of my eyes, the quick turning of my head, to distract possible witnesses. And it was at that moment that the football players walked past my table. At the sight of a needle, one of them screamed. With the command of the entire lunchroom, he announced that I had a contagious disease and that no one should get near me. And repeat. And repeat. He started laughing. His friends began screaming that I was going to get them sick. As I stood up, they all scattered, afraid I would touch them. Everyone laughed. "Guess you ain't gonna eat this?" one of them said as he grabbed my chicken patty sandwich and shoved it down his throat. The others followed in eating the rest of my food. My shoes sounded like thunder as they clapped against the tile floor. In the bathroom stall, I slid the lock quietly and sat down on the seat to catch my breath. Some sniffing. Wiping of tears. And then I waited. Eventually, the tremors began, as my legs went numb and

my blood sugar plummeted. Fast heart rate, the sweat, convulsions. I had taken the medication for the chicken patty, but hadn't eaten it. I left my glucose tablets in my locker and wasn't sure if I allowed to be in the hallway before lunch let out. I cried through low blood sugars until the bell rang, too afraid to tell anyone what had happened. At home, I stood at the pantry door shoveling in fistfuls of fruit snacks. "So how was the first day as a big high schooler?" Mom asked. "Fine," I said.

## INTERLUDE

When I was born, my grandmother bought me a book of personalized nursery rhymes, each one about a little girl who shared my name. I read that book a lot as a kid, staring at the picture of my mamaw taped to the inside cover. Almost twenty years later, I still remember my favorite one:

*What are little boys made of? Snakes and snails and puppy dog tails. That's what little boys are made of!*

*What is little Ashley made of? Sugar and spice and everything nice, that's what little Ashley is made of!*

I called bullshit on that rhyme from an early age. I remember how upset I was at the insinuation of snakes and snails not being nice. *They have feelings too*, I once thought, and still do. I'm so critical of that nursery rhyme, its sexism and misandry, that I often overlook the fact that maybe it was right about me.

After all, it seems like I am mostly made of sugar and spice (nix the "nice" part, albeit nice). I am a body. I am made of energy. I am a collection of organs and muscles and systems that needs fuel to function. In a sense, then, I am made of food. It is food that keeps me alive. If I stopped eating, I'd stop being.

If I eat a piece of lettuce, there must be a point when the lettuce *becomes* me. I wouldn't look at a salad on the table and say "that's me." But, I also wouldn't point to myself after lunch and say "I'm part lettuce, guys." Does the lettuce become me after I chew it? After I swallow it? Does it become me in some very particular area of my stomach, where magical acids turns pizza to personhood? Or, is the lettuce just a part of me? Maybe I am not my muscles or organs or systems, but maybe I am some soul behind it all. But what's a soul if not a brain? And what's a brain without a body?

## DELAY

I.

Papaw left me and Austin at the house. Said he needed to run an errand, something about Home Depot and taking the truck. I was old enough to watch over my little brother. To fix a peanut butter sandwich if he got hungry. Austin was seven and I wore eleven years around my body like a weight. I peered out the front window, watching the white truck drive down the driveway and ran back to Papaw's bedroom when it was out of sight. A king sized mattress, the four-poster bed stood taller than any I'd ever slept on. There was a lot of stuff on the bed, sheets and quilts and embroidered roll cushions. An empty valley between two mountain ranges of throw pillows, I threw them on the floor and called Austin from the living room. "We can play on the bed while they're gone!" I shouted, but he was more interested in the TV.

I began touching myself at an early age. Started rubbing my crotch on the corner of my closet doorframe after getting home from daycare. The "s-word" was s-e-x because I'd never heard my parents say that word. I'd whisper the word "sexy" in my pillow at night just to give myself an explanation for the blistering ball of guilt I'd had in my stomach for as long as I could remember. But I didn't know what sex meant apart from it happening in a bed with a boy. Here's what I did know: it was bad, it was something you don't talk about, you should never talk about, but that it

still happened all the time. The very notion of shame stitched into the fabric of my early instincts. I could feel the half-bottled tension in the room when Ross and Rachel started becoming more than Friends on the TV screen. Mom would cough and change the channel. Not a word or a nervous giggle.

I invited my seven year old brother onto Papaw's goose-feather mattress that day. Telling him to wrestle with me, instructing him to stay under the covers. We tumbled around, our heads near the end of the mattress, sheets pulled apart from the comforter, our bodies swapping directions. And when I straddled him, two children roughhousing in their grandfather's bed, I felt what I thought was sex – excitement, a swelling between my legs. And for the next year I was nauseous, pushing out the incessant voice saying *I think I had sex with my brother.*

Austin wasn't interested in staying in the bedroom. Spongebob summoning him from television, he returned to the couch and sat with his chin on his knees, his t-shirt stretched tightly over them. I made the bed, reconstructed the pillows in perfect order, and walked in the living room, sitting with my frustration on the other couch.

"Austin, come lay with me," I said.

"No," his eyes not leaving the screen.

"I'm suppose to be taking care of you while Papaw is gone," I said, "so you need to come lay with me and watch your show."

He climbed on top of my body, his hips aligned with mine, his belly on my belly, his head on my chest, and my hands scratching his back, the sound of the truck scaring us both into different positions.

II.

I learned about real sex from a ninth grader at my K-12 school. Everyone mingled and collided, trampled and touched. I mostly just observed. The older kids were giggling across the hall, making a hole with their pointer finger and thumb on one hand, sticking the index finger of the other hand through the hole, back and forth, in and out and back in. The ninth grader was small and boney with soft pieces of blonde straw above blistering blue eyes. He saw me glaring and walked over to me. "It's the sign you use for sex so teachers won't know," he said. I stood in silence, my legs locked at the tendons. Then, the boy was making small talk when he said "penis!" and held up his finger and "pussy!" when he held up the hole and then stuck out his tongue when he rammed them together and said, "sex!"

I cried that night when I looked between my legs and found that my hole was closed. All alone, in my closet, I stuck my smallest finger between the soft patches of skin there, hitting watery coating on bone, the feeling of slimy things over a sunbaked stone, but never a hole. It hurt if I tried too hard and decided that I must not have a hole like other girls, and that I would never be able to have sex. Perhaps when I was born, something went wrong, and they had to sew up the broken thing between my legs. "She'll never have a normal life," I imagined the doctors telling my parents.

I'd never heard of periods when mine arrived. Hadn't the slightest clue what to do when I started bleeding other than to do what I had always done with my secrets -hide them. I vaguely remember my mother buying me thin pads and setting

them on my bathroom counter one afternoon without a word. I read the back of the package and followed the instructions. Didn't use a tampon until my sophomore year of high school because my understanding was that you needed a hole for those. And by this time, I'd discovered that I did have a hole, the one pee came out of, but it was unusually small. Maybe that's what was wrong. I never knew what was wrong, just that it couldn't have been right.

III.

When the hunger pains kept me awake at night, I'd stay in a coal-colored beanbag in front of the TV in my room. At thirteen, I traded sleep for midnight marathons of HBO's *Cathouse*. At first, I watched on mute, terrified to wake my brother in the next room with echoes of moans and whips. Instead, the sounds came from below me –my father's room was there, his TV on a three second delay.

I'd rub my pelvis on my beanbag, hunching over it like a dog on a leg. When I came, I thought I was the only one in the world who could do that trick. Four months later, I weighed sixty-nine pounds. Then when I came, my whole body convulsed like the Pentecostal girl at school would when God was talking to her. I never heard God. But the smaller I became, the less I was able to make it happen. I was void of energy, of the ability to hold my breath. Nights were spent curled before the screen of a space heater, hours mustering the energy to climax, to take just one more hit of serotonin, promising myself a cracker or a slice of bread if I could just get there. Every few hours, I would. I never reaped the reward.

## WHAT DEATH DOES TO A DAUGHTER

### III.

I decided to become an adult. One day, I simply ceased doing kid things. I stopped playing with toys, started reading books, listening to sixties music. Never asked to go to a sleepover or a birthday party. Never asked for new clothes or field trip money. I stopped watching cartoons, started cleaning dishes and setting the table and getting up to an alarm clock in the morning. I did all I could to ease the burden, kept honing the craft of keeping my father's darkness at bay. But the older I became, the more I felt it rising to the surface. It was the little things that started breaking him. Waiting in long lines made me panic because I could feel him tense his entire body from far away. Phone calls suddenly made him uncomfortable. Grocery runs seemed to always be a source of irritation. Often he would put off going until it was absolutely necessary in order to avoid the crowd and the interaction and the frustrating cart with an inevitable fucked up wheel. One morning, when there was nothing to eat in the house, Dad asked what we wanted from McDonald's. I was starving. I hadn't gotten to eat my snack the night before and told him that I wanted two bacon, egg, and cheese McGriddle sandwiches –the pancake sandwiches with built-in pockets of syrup. "You can't eat two McGriddles," he told me. I insisted that I was starving, promised that I could eat them. I swore to it. He scoffed and said "Fine! You better eat them." When we sat down at the table with the bag and drink carrier,

he tossed the sandwiches at me and said something smart, something that let me know that he wasn't happy that he had to buy two sandwiches. I unwrapped the first one, and after only a few bites, could feel my stomach beginning to fight me. After choking down a couple more bites, I slowed down and stared at the TV in the living room. Dad asked why I wasn't eating and I told him I was full. "No, you're not" he said. "You said you would eat two sandwiches so you're going to eat two sandwiches." That morning, I wasn't allowed to leave the kitchen table until I finished both of them. I cried. My brother went upstairs to watch a movie and my dad retreated to his room to play video games. I ate slowly, for nearly two hours, until I made myself sick. Later that afternoon, Dad told me I could get up and to think twice before ordering next time. I went upstairs, threw up on the bathroom floor, and went back to bed for the day.

To say that he was a bad father would be unfair. He wasn't. He was flawed like any other parent. Sometimes, Dad's darkness would subside and we'd get to see a part of him that we hadn't known existed. He went to our favorite donut shop, Sugar & Spice, every Sunday morning to get a dozen long john caramel fudge bars. He flew us to Orlando one summer and took us to all the Disney and Universal Studios theme parks by himself. He had this hilarious way of wrapping our Christmas presents where he refused to fold the ends so the paper got bunched up in an ugly mess around the corners. He would use his fingers to pluck an invisible banjo on my left leg during car rides filled with bluegrass and Bonnie Raitt. One time, when Dad bought a new truck, he convinced Austin that he could change the radio station with his mind. It took my younger brother months to figure out that

the control was on the steering wheel. He loved fried chicken livers, to dance around the living room, to blast "Oreo Cookie Blues" through his computer speakers in the middle of the afternoon. He left me a note on my sixteenth birthday that told me how proud he was of me. Before he signs his name, he writes "I loves you BIG" and he rarely lets me leave his sight without a tight squeeze. The simmering stuff just beneath the surface of my father was just as obvious to me as the fight within him to overcome it.

## WALKING AFTER MIDNIGHT

Austin said there was murder in the front yard. Mom hushed him as paper plates gathered hot dogs and cheeseburgers, pickle spears and sunshine. She caved after Austin threw a fit and left the dinner table to check it out. “Blood in the grass,” my brother said. Barry yelled after them –“It was probably just an animal.” Mom returned with Austin and agreed –just animals killing for food. I nodded, swallowed hard, and agreed too.

I started leaving my walking shoes between the bushes beneath the front palladia window. I’d set them in the heap of mulch there between the porcelain green frog and a rusted sprinkler shaft. I’d put them there after dinner, out the front door and into early dusk, the smell of charcoal still in the air, then back inside as if I’d just wanted to check the temperature. Mom is cleaning the kitchen now. Barry is scrubbing the grill in grunts. And I’m setting my walking shoes between the bushes beneath the front palladia window.

When it’s late and we curl our knees to our chests in the worn imprints of couch craters, I am bone-cold in a grave of quilts. They retreat to the kitchen on commercial breaks for bowls of Breyers mint chip ice cream and bags of pretzel rods. Mom asks me again why I am wearing Barry’s clothes, swallowed in XXL hoodies and gym shorts. I cling like static to a Diet Mountain Dew and stare at the pile of AP summer reading on the coffee table.

Mom says the full-timers have to be up in the morning as she stands up to stretch. She shoves Barry's shoulder as she heads to their bedroom, interrupting his snoring. Austin, on his second Fudge Round, will soon retreat to his room to watch Spy Kids 3 on repeat. I scurry to my bed and fiddle with my Go-phone, setting the alarm on silent vibration for 2 a.m. I lay the phone against my cheek, skip the drifting, and fall hard into sleep.

The silence is deafening. But I break it to finger the doorknob of the front door. Its hollow creak may or may not infiltrate my parent's bedroom. So I sit hugging my knees on the front porch, just long enough to allow Mom to come investigate if the sound of the creak made its way to her bedroom. I wait, imagining what I'll say if she peers through the frosted glass door with tangled eyebrows. *I needed fresh air.* I'm old enough to say things like this now.

I reach behind the bushes to get my walking shoes. I shiver despite the stiff heat of the summer in the dead hours of the night. I start walking with a steady count of my steps. The rhythm of the shoes smacking the pavement balms me into a separate state of consciousness. I walk with fear, the tempo climbing the rungs with each passing mile. And there are twelve of them on most nights. If I can sneak in a few laps with Mom after dinner, convincing her it's good bonding time, the less I have to do in the night, when the neighbors won't notice my obsessive exercise habits and blab a comment of concern to my mother at the grocery store. But after work, Mom likely will cram herself with curds of diet chocolate pastries and sink like a rock into her crater.

1200 is the number I write on the back sleeve of the 2007 CalorieKing Nutritional Handbook with a pencil I got from my Orthodontist's office. That's twelve miles, exactly how far it will take me to walk off my existence every day. Three hours at my speed of fear, wondering if Mom still checked in on me at this age, if she happened to get up for a glass of water or a Tylenol PM. I take off my walking shoes, not wanting them to squeak against the hardwood floors.

I'd sit curled up on the steps, preparing my speech about fresh air, should Mom appear with her eyebrows. But I'd always make it back to my bedroom just before 6 a.m. and the quiet buzz of Barry's clock radio. Sitting on the floor, I'd wipe off the evidence of my exertion, bury myself back in a grave of sweatshirts and quilts, and listen for the sound of WLKY in the Morning. I'd meet Mom and Barry in the living room, squinting for sleepy eyes, pretending I'd just emerged from a cocoon of counting sheep.

I begin to pour cereal in a bowl and butter warm toast as they both grab their lunch pails and car keys. After I hear the garage door growl shut, I throw the food in the trash, remove my slippers and collapse in my crater, resting my ankles on the coffee table. My feet are not my own. Deadened and puffy, the edges of toenails stained red, knots hardened, abscesses blued. I can't stand to look at the claws.

II.

no, no sir, not everything is holy!  
my body, filthy, broken, barebacked thing  
that shits and eats and blows vile and snot  
like a poison-dart frog slaughtered, scattered  
across my lips like hash browns with ketchup  
and I thrash it and stab it and rape it

until it sleeps. but it always wakes up  
again, in the morning, the afternoon,  
fettered to me, this unwavering weight,  
this heap of noise and skin like wet-washcloth  
cabbage, churning, turning blue without air,  
deadness flowing from the ends of fingers,  
the tops of heads, the burns, blood, the bruises.

what god would make me eat carbohydrates  
for communion? fucking grape juice. hurry  
down sunset, there's moral disorder here.

## JESSIE'S GIRL

Jessie was a red-head. Natural and sown from the earth. She wore clothes with ease. Her sweaters fitting the same each time she wore them. Baby face, cute, with big lips and small teeth. She ate healthy lunches with small containers of fresh fruit and slim fast bars her mom packed for desert. Her dad was a coach obsessed with his daughter's future soccer career. She'd been asked to join a competitive club team. Her legs were painted with freckles, but I looked mostly at her thighs. They were big. And she was short. We were both 5'2". She was feminine, but not the make-up type. Always wore earrings and almost never painted her nails. She was small and tight around the middle, full set of boobs and what she once referred to, rather embarrassingly, as her bubble butt. She wasn't skinny. She skipped her mom's healthy diet bars for lunchroom pizza about once a week and picked off the pepperonis. She'd let her head fall back heavily before dropping them into her mouth one by one. Never hesitated to enjoy a portion of cookie cake brought in for someone's fourteenth birthday. She would lick her fingers and laugh at the same time.

I was what my mother called dirty-dishwater blonde. I wore it in a snug ponytail at all times, my long bangs slicked back with water and hair spray to hold the cowlicks in place. I was tense in the way I walked. Gripped my teeth together while waiting for the bell to ring. I had overtly color-coordinated notebooks and

pink and black skater Etnies. I talked a lot. Lied just as much. I packed my own lunches. Usually saltines. Sometimes a low-fat cheese stick that I picked a part string by string, savoring each small thread, until the forty-five minutes was up. I passed on party favors and the candy bucket in algebra class. I chewed gum constantly and resisted giving another person the pleasure of laughing at their joke.

The school was down a biology teacher so we spent our time in science class drawing on the dry erase board. The doodling supervisor was also the principal of the school so we were alone a lot while he did whatever principals do. A crowd of people gathered around me and Jessie while we performed athletic stunts. We did kip-ups, lying on our backs and kicking forward hard enough to push us into standing position. I could barely plant my hands on the ground without wanting to fall asleep. My tree-trunk thighs and arm muscles had deteriorated into emaciated twigs that I covered with extra-large hoodies. But I rose to the occasion. Even challenged everyone to do one with no hands. No one else could do it. I won again. At the close of the kip-up competition, Jessica and I remained sprawled out, flat on our backs, with our hands above our heads. Her polo shirt had come untucked amongst all the activity and I could see what looked like a plump slice of peach above her hip bone. She wiped the beads of sweat on the back of her neck with the inside of her shirt collar, pulling the shirt up even further. And with a final attempt to cool down, she grabbed her shirt with both hands, raising it up and down to invite air in closer. When she released, her shirt fell high near her chest and exposed her midsection. And she was sown from the earth. And she was painted with freckles and hard lines. One boy commented that she was "So tiny!" And other girls gathered

to gawk at the flat stomach. I sucked the tightest squeeze I could hold and joined in the fun, lifting my shirt to my bra line and sliding down to align myself with Jessie's body. We both laid there, our shirts held to our bra lines, our heads held up with chins to our chest, staring and comparing the sacrifice. I was half her size. And she was twice mine.

## I AM NOT A TREE

*The girth of a tree changes constantly; it expands, adding growth ring upon growth ring—and it will not stop unless felled by a natural event or a hacksaw.*

I am not a tree. There's a burl at the bend of my upper back, the bone exposed from arching at the vertebrae, hunched like a muzzled dog bark. And you can see near its protrusion where there's a triangle of moles the color of a sandstorm. They point skyward, equilateral, a three-point star of David. Uncle David had a pale yellow car with two doors. He was the first person to tell me I had legs like stumps, my thighs thick like sap. I'm buried in the ground, he said. But I am not a tree.

*Trees continue to add width to their trunks – to put out new branches and sprout leaves – throughout their lives. But the height of a tree is limited.*

Deadened skin is warped in straight lines on the thin patch past the end of my shin but before the start of my right foot. Looks like tall grass lying at my ankle. Grandma had a puny little Pincher named Alex. She carried him in her purse. The slack-jawed monster came for me in my floaties. The faster I ran, the more he showed his teeth. It was his claws that got me. Right on the ankle, streaks of red blood running into the

grass beneath the pool deck. God willin' and the creek don't rise, I swore to kill that mutt who scarred me. He left a patch of grass at my ankle. But I am not a tree.

*A tree's height is limited by the way it transports water from its roots to its leaves.*

*Inside a tree, water moves upward – pulled towards the leaves – where it evaporates into the air through tiny pores.*

A few inches below the place I wear my pockets are two cuts on tender fields of untouched skin. One horizontal incision about an inch from the other. They make my vagina look like the mouth of a Chinese man. Or maybe just squinting eyes, being birthed by struggle. Mom let me name my baby brother. I thought this meant I should take care of him. My seven-year-old sapling frame lugged around a mound of baby fat in my twig arms. It was the first time I thought about dying from the weight. Two lumps of bone punctured the fleshy beds of girlhood labia like lumber through a grocery bag. After the surgery, Mom brought bowls of chicken broth to my bed and I'd hide my face when I cried from the pain. Mom told me it was okay to cry, that even trees needed water to grow. But I am not a tree.

*If the roots are unable to supply enough moisture and nutrients to the crown of the tree, the crown will begin to die back to bring the tree's crown and root system into a more favorable balance.*

Mamaw and Grandma were both under five feet, so I could barely reach doorknobs in elementary school. In fifth grade, Mr. Palmore asked me to play on the girls' basketball team. A girl on the team told me they needed less thunder and more lightning, and I never did know what she meant. I quit before the first game. Coach P said I was the only kid he knew who couldn't get their feet in the air. You got roots in the ground kid, he said. But I am not a tree.

*It is often difficult to determine if a tree has died from drought stress or has simply become dormant and appears to be dead.*

The place with the white smells like spider bites. The doctor runs his cold fingers across my boney back, down each rib, one by one, counting and stopping at the places where heartbeat is visible. He won't talk to me, only to my mother, who stands like lead in her anger. *I won't let you kill yourself* she whispers and the nurses must drag her away. I haven't eaten in weeks and my seventy pound frame lays dormant, hair and nails dying with each passing second. The doctor speaks to me in hushed tones. He knows I won't eat, he says, but is worried I'm dehydrated. We can work on the eating issues later, he says. For now, fluids. He hands me a Dixie cup with a red straw. Not even trees can live without water, he says, with a mouth full of teeth. I suck in the moisture and catch his eyes for the first time. My tongue swore – "I am not a tree" –but my mind was still unpledged.

## WHAT DEATH DOES TO A DAUGHTER

### IV.

*“Accommodation to parental needs often leads to the “as-if” personality. This person develops in such a way that [s]he reveals only what is expected of [her], and fuses so completely with what [s]he reveals that –until [s]he comes to analysis –one could scarcely have guessed how much more there is to [her], behind this masked view of [her]self. [S]he cannot develop and differentiate [her] true self, because [s]he is unable to live it...Understandably, these [people] complain of a sense of emptiness, futility, or homelessness, for the emptiness is real. A process of emptying, impoverishment, and partial killing of [her] potential actually took place when all that was alive and spontaneous in [her] was cut off.”*

*--Alice Miller, “Prisoners of Childhood”*

Dad’s motivation as a parent came from his desire not to be like his own father. Papaw was drafted in the Navy out of high school and spent my dad’s early childhood away from home. But even when he got out of the service, Papaw still wasn’t around. He went to night school to become an engineer and worked long hours at the office. He never made it to competitions or practices or family suppers. He didn’t talk much and was the cold and unapproachable man my mother remembered him being, probably for reasons that deserve another essay. With a wife and two sons, Papaw was the breadwinner, the provider, the parent and spouse who kept the heat on. He married his high school sweetheart –a story of the basketball star and the pretty cheerleader. They married at nineteen and had their

first son, Jeff, just months following the wedding. A couple years later, my dad came along and completed the family. Papaw's wife, my dad's mom, was ready to be a mother when the boys entered the picture. Papaw wasn't. He was prepared neither for marriage nor fatherhood. Mamaw was loving and nurturing and patient and responsible and loved those two boys more than life itself. Papaw was just the breadwinner. He was both present and absent, caring but cold, loving but from a distance. When he finally realized his mistakes, it was too late. The boys were grown. Being a grandfather to me was his shot at redemption. He's been everything to me. Still, my father didn't have him when he needed him. And I suppose there's no redemption in that.

Mamaw was an assistant teacher of special education at an elementary school. Throughout my life, I've asked many people about her and there's always a consensus about the woman: 1.) she had the biggest heart anyone had ever known and 2.) she never missed any waking second that could be spent with her sons. But those statements are often followed by another kind of consensus: she also never learned to let them go. There's an oft-told story in my family about my Mamaw blow-drying my dad's hair every morning in high school. He never did his laundry or paid for his gas or had to be in by a curfew. With Papaw not around, my dad looked to his grandfather for guidance. Mamaw's father, my dad's grandfather, stepped up. Just as I had my grandfather in my life, my dad was lucky to have his. He loved and respected him. He was much closer to his grandfather than he was his own father. Still, Mamaw was the center of my dad's world. She showered him with care, with cooked dinners and allowances and gas money and freedom. She loved

her baby boy with a dogged kind of commitment. And all she asked in return was for his refusal to grow up. And he obliged.

Jeff was a bit different. Dad's brother was two years older and effectively fulfilled his first-born duties. He was driven, always wanted to be the team captain, and had ambitions of settling down with a reliable career and a family. After graduating high school, he became a firefighter, met a woman, and fell in love with her and her small child. Together, they lived in a house, complete with an above ground swimming pool. In the meantime, my dad raced BMX bikes and had a mullet. He was a ladies' man, had home-run reputations on the baseball field, lived for fast cars and freedom. He was a good fisher, could drive a ball 400 yards, and could build a computer hard-drive from the ground up. He could play guitar and had a decent Dwight Yokam singing voice. He could dance, was funny, and naturally charismatic. I often wonder if he felt small beneath his older brother's work ethic or if Jeff was ever jealous of his younger brother's aptitude, the ease with which he was able to do most everything.

My own brother reminds me of my uncle. Like Jeff, Austin is driven in a very traditional way. He's not interested in academics or grades or awards or art, but he wants to be a husband and father. He wants to serve his country and he wants to love his wife and children. He'll be great at it. He's always seemed like a family-man to me. He's protective and gentle, warm and selfless. My brother loves in an expressive way. He's a cuddler. As a little boy, he liked to touch and snuggle and hold hands and lose himself in the sound effects he'd make for his racecars. He is playful and flirty and gives the best hugs. I'm quite the opposite of my brother. I never liked

to be touched. I don't like to be consoled. I don't like to be congratulated or comforted or helped in any way.

I feel my father's darkness within me when I'm lightly touched on the shoulder or when someone helps me carry the groceries. I recognize it. I watch this inherited murk begin to emerge, boiling over into a rage, and I watch as it takes me by surprise, helpless, defenseless. If I'm opening a pickle jar, and I'm visibly struggling, people, with nothing but good intentions, will take the pickle jar and open it for me. And although I try to fight this irrational fury, I clamp down my teeth in a kind of animalistic rage, angry that they thought I needed their help. A few weeks ago, I was in a pasta line with a friend. A food cart came up behind me and she moved me out of its way with both her hands, grabbing my shoulders and gently drawing me closer to her. I spent the remainder of our dinner simmering with irritation, resenting her for not just telling me to get out of the way, as if to say –does she not think I can move my own feet? And it's been that way for a very long time. I never wanted to be touched as a child. My mother tells me often how hard it was to have a daughter and first-born child who violently shrugged off her mother's touch. I didn't want to be hugged by my mother. I didn't want to be cuddled or coddled or rocked. I wanted to be left alone. I'm sure now that it has very little to do with touching and more to do with what I associated touching with. I've always abhorred the idea of help. I hate the notion of touching because it signals to me that someone thinks I need them –and I need no one. I don't need my mother or my father or my grandfather or my brother. They need me. As strong as any instinct, I can feel my

father's rage in me, boiling, curving like a claw, ready to strike at the most innocent of bystanders.

## OF WARMTH

I'm cold. Cold to the touch. I wear layers of sweatpants and jeans and hoodies and jackets and blankets and three pairs of socks and I'm still cold. I can't sleep because keeping still makes me colder. My skin seems to be turning blue, the bones bare and round and bending in as if to hug my spine. My backbone is bumpy. I see every rib. My knee caps are larger than the thighs that introduce them. Last week, I saw 67 on the scale. I think about getting bigger clothes, to fit them over the top layer. It's the third night I haven't slept and I drift in and out of consciousness in the bean bag in front of my TV. Each time I nod off, I wake from shivering. I stand up and walk my legs down the stairs to the garage. I turn the knob and slowly inch it open. I walk down the wooden make-shift stairs and flip the light. I'm searching for extra winter coats that dad may have stored in boxes. While looking, my eyes pass over a small black metal box. I walk to the shelf, turn it around, and find a space heater. This will work.

For the next two weeks, I will spend every second in front of the heater. It's old but powerful. Its settings go high, it's heat meant to be felt from several yards away. I stick my body within inches of the woven metal screen, its edges red with heat. I stick my fingers against it, but can't seem to get warm enough. I don't feel heat as much as I feel burned. I kneel to put my knees against the screen as if bowing before an altar. I do it to my toes and my shins and my forearms and my lower back.

But I can't get enough. I turn up the setting. The arrow points to HOT. The skin on my fingers and knuckles melts against the metal screen. My nails turn a grayish color. My body is covered in blisters. When I can't get enough from the small black box, I start taking showers in scalding hot water. It hits the bottom of the tub and steam pours out and onto the mirror. I let it hit me little by little, first my foot, then my waist, until I can stand beneath the fall of water without welting. I let it burn my back. Oval patches of plastic-like wrinkles cover my shoulder blades like slices of large dried-out apricots. I steal the matchbook from the drawer in the kitchen. I strike matches and hold the flames to my thighs and my stomach. I warp my ribcage in polka dotted patch work.

When my mom takes me to Indianapolis Children's Hospital, the walls are white. I lay on a cold chrome examination table. The doctor has heavy eyes and feeds me water through a red straw. He lifts each layer of clothing, delicately, careful not to snap my small frame in two. He sees my dried-apricot skin but says nothing at all. He talks to my mother while he keeps his hands pressing on the organs, the weak pulse visible above my belly button. He begins to massage my arms and rubs my hands between his as if feeling the bones on his palms. He presses both hands hard on my ribs, and holds them flat on my stomach, atop the polka dots, pausing, and waiting. I lay my head back on the table, trying to push the tears back in my eyes. Instead, I blink, and they roll down into my ears, silently, in quiet awe of the feeling of hands. I haven't been touched in months. He holds them there, his hands, patient and still, and my stomach feels warm.

III.

my body does not say "I am sorry"

it does not pose questions or make requests

my apropos arms do not apologize

nor do my thick collarbones feel regret

my body does not beckon or beseech

my body does not seek out redemption

my body knows only how to forgive

to pardon any and all transgressions

my body says only "It is okay"

and "You are forgiven" and "I love you"

it bleeds but never forgets to breathe

it dies but never stops living

## POWER

In a high school Crime Science class, my first essay was entitled “Knowledge is Power.” The teacher made it the class motto, sealing my fate of having no friends. He’d make the declaration –“Knowledge! Is! Power!” –at the beginning of class, between pauses, and at the ring of the bell, would ring out my words like a resounding staple gun punching my navel.

### Things I wish I could unlearn:

1. Success is the opposite of failure.
2. The calorie content of every substance on Earth.

It wasn’t that I didn’t want to eat. I just didn’t know how to let myself. How do I eat a Quaker Chocolate Chunk granola bar without knowing it contained 110 calories, 3.5 grams of fat, 17 carbohydrates, and 7 grams of sugar? I couldn’t. So when I tried to eat, my mouth just hung open, awaiting a curious house fly, or death.

It was a Sunday afternoon when I taught myself that self-deception was a synthetic form of un-learning. I always kept food in my room, on the dresser, the desk, the bedside table, just to give me a continuous sense of discipline. *There it is... a pack of Hostess brownie bites. And here I am...not eating it.* I’d lie on the flattened black bean bag in the middle of the floor like a wet noodle, straining to hold my head up, refusing to give in like others would in the presence of brownie bites.

We gain power by inflicting pain, even if it be on ourselves.

But one Sunday, I looked over at a package of Austin peanut butter crackers lying on the shelf beneath the television in my room. There was no chance I was going to consume 200 calories. So I let my head fall forward, falling asleep. I jumped after only the rush of a falling sensation. Though it felt like I'd slept for hours, it'd only been minutes. At the re-strain of my neck, something in me felt like it had shifted. I picked up the package of Austin peanut butter crackers and pinched the plastic between my slender fingers.

Ecstasy is not knowing how many calories are in the peanut butter. The crackers and the peanut butter together, I knew that -220. But I hadn't a clue how much of 220 was the crackers and how much was the peanut butter. As I undressed each cracker sandwich, I slowly hunched, curling in a ball to enjoy a blurred number, a euphoric freedom from counting. I did it again. And again. Eating only the peanut butter between the crackers. Scurrying down the rabbit hole of weight gain.

Things I wish I could unlearn:

1. Success is the opposite of failure.
2. The calorie content of every substance on Earth.

In high school, Mom yelled at me a lot for "picking." I'd eat the chocolate chips off the top of the Otis Spunkmeyer muffins and she'd curse and toss the remains in the trash. I'd eat only the edges of Poptarts, only the raisins in the trail mix. I began to eat in secret, burrowing in a dark corner in the house in the middle of the night to perform my rituals. I'd blur the number of calories by tearing and dissecting my food like a small rabbit -my bony knees upright as I sat in a crouch over a mountain of mangled morsels.

In my life, I've thrown enough food in the trash to feed all the starving children in Northern Africa. I have spent thousands and thousands of dollars, stashed away in a bank account unbeknownst to my parents, buying endless groceries that I pick and shred and tear and smash enough to taste and throw away.

I take sleeves of saltines and pound them with my fist, ensuring I am unable to count the number of crackers I eat. I buy three boxes of Austin peanut butter crackers at a time now, 12 packages each, and eat only the peanut butter in one sitting. I eat loaves and loaves of bread, only tearing off the crust. I eat just the breadsticks in Chex mix, just the blue Scooby-snacks, just the chips in the bag that are folded over like tacos. I pick out chocolate chips from four dozen granola bars at a time, the wrappers and mounds of shredded crumbs scattered across my desk and floor like remnants of a natural disaster.

Now, I have a bag. I pack a large duffle of food from Kroger, wheeling it into my dorm. I gorge myself with pieces and parts, packing it back up to wheel to the trash. The next night I will pack my backpack, and the next my guitar case, just in case the desk worker should catch on to a questionable traveling habit.

Things I wish I could unlearn:

1. Success is the opposite of failure.
2. The calorie content of every substance on Earth.

When I began to eat again, I became an animal. No amount of food would make me feel full. I was eating thousands and thousands and thousands of calories, pounds and pounds of food, but I'd never eat anything whole. Family and friends were in awe, laughed at my ability to out-eat grown men. "You should enter an eating

competition,” they’d all say. I became self-conscious of my excessive eating and began watching people and counting their bites. I’d sit at the lunch table and count the bites of my friends, ensuring my number of bites wasn’t too far ahead, my mind like a cash register keeping multiple tabs.

## WEIGHT WATCHERS

I started cooking to make my family fat. My mother, a rather tall woman of big bone, has been on some kind of diet plan or magic supplement for as long as I can remember. Mom went back to Weight Watchers about the same time I became the family chef, determined that this time was the final time. I snarled, disgusted that she never actually tried to learn about nutrition –one time, when she asked me whether it would be better to eat A1 or mayonnaise on her ham sandwich, I laughed like a hyena in her face.

*On Thursday nights, Mom goes to the weigh-in meetings after work. Thursday nights are usually late nights for dinner, but the family grovels toward the table with grit and that's good for me. Mom is extra late tonight, staying after the meeting to talk to her coach about her lack of progress. The ham is tender and crisping nicely.*

I heard once that the first rule of good cooking is to taste the food. I never tasted any of mine. Not the lick of a spoon or the savor of a saucy index finger. I didn't eat it either. I served it neatly, with cloth napkins and the fancy pepper grinder from the hutch. I poured drinks, kept the bread snug with heat while Mom and Barry and Austin dug in. When the scarfing lulled and the forward hunches became uncomfortable indulgence, I'd begin to tell a grandiose story of the hilarious thing

that happened in AP English that day. Surreptitiously, I'd scoop another serving of mashed potatoes onto everyone's disheveled plates as I spouted dialogue I created from the steam of the cornbread. They'd listen patiently and when the story became senseless rambling, they'd pick at their plates in boredom. I'd talk over my smile. *Go on. Eat up.*

*By the time I hear Mom's heels clank up the steps in the garage, the food is cold. I'm sitting in a posture too straight for my age, with a kitchen towel draped over my right shoulder. She fights the back door for space, balancing her reptile purse with an emptied lunch pail, her large hips squeezing between the pantry and the refrigerator. When she says hello, I know something is wrong. Her smile is loamy, layered with silt, gloom draped around her like a necklace. She hurries to her bedroom to change clothes. I let her sadness weigh on me, my shoulders slumping as I warm the ham for dinner.*

I began thinking of dinner at breakfast. I ate a glass of water and drank half a package of milly oatmeal at most. I fixed Austin's food, gorging him with cheese omelets and chocolate chip pancakes, a mason jar of Hershey's syrup and Dean's to drink, before scrambling to find my keys and fighting the seniors for a parking spot. After school, while I researched recipes for dinner, I'd grab a Quaker's chewy granola bar, my fingers dissecting it surgically into scant bites. Before my parents made it home, I'd start cooking. I took pleasure in basting the meal with excessive fats and secret calories. I multiplied what the recipe called for, sneaking tablespoons

of extra butter into the gravy. I'd pour bacon fat on baked chicken, claiming I learned marinating from the Food Network. What called for milk, got heavy cream. I used oil for vinegar, mayonnaise for yogurt, tablespoons when teaspoons were all that it needed. Each night, a different cake, watching them devour thousands of calories in undisclosed fulfillment. I feasted on the churn of their stomach lining, their emptied bellies all for me to fill. A chef to prepare the way I please, I stewed a poison of power over the ones I love. I force fed them without their consent, withering as they welled.

*After ham sandwiches and macaroni, Mom walks out on the deck. I sit in the lawn chair beside her and look where she's looking. "Ashley, why won't you eat?" she says. "Because I don't want to," I say. "I can see every bone in your body," she says. "I have been cooking a lot," I say.*

When the number on the scale wouldn't budge below 67, I started using my Mom's ignorance to break the plateau. She didn't know any better, wasn't really sure what the concept of a calorie was, the difference between A1 sauce and mayonnaise. But I did. I devoted rigorous study to calorie counting. When she asked me, I told her *mayonnaise if you are trying to lose weight*. Knowing she was. Knowing the opposite was true. If I couldn't lose any more before death collected its bag of bones, I'd make everybody else gain. Slowly, I could get smaller in relation to them. I took up cooking to make my family fat.

*It's almost midnight and Barry is sleeping on the couch. I'm bone-cold in my grave. I wrap the quilt around my back and softly drag my feet to the bathroom, catching my breath at the sight of her. Through the cracked bedroom door I watch my mother, sitting like a cross-legged elephant atop a scale. I sink behind the bathroom door and strangle my head snug with the quilt, drowning out the hyena ringing in my ears.*

## PLANE DIFFERENCES

Meandering around the grocery store with my mother, I drag my feet and sulk when she asks me to grab two packages of blueberry English muffins in the next aisle. She scolds me for the attitude and I raise my voice, slowly elongating the enunciation of three words—*I. AM. HIGH*. I growl in her direction. We get looks for this pretty often. It happens in restaurants, at ATMs, the mall food court, and most often in the grocery store. Rubber-necked middle-aged women giving my mother the stink eye. “Her daughter is high as a kite and all she’s doing is telling her to retrieve bagged bread,” they whisper to each other.

There are a lot of analogies I’ve used in attempting to explain Diabetes Mellitus Type 1. Here’s one for good measure:

Imagine your life as a long, long (long) plane flight. Really, keeping your body functioning is like keeping the plane in the air. It is a matter of maintaining altitude. Not too high and not too low ensures that you can do the things that actually make a life worth living: learning, eating, laughing, working, Netflix. This is easy for the plane with autopilot. The altitude is automatically adjusted, always perfect. Having Type 1 Diabetes is like be given a rickety, wooden bi-plane to fly through life. Manually.

Your pancreas is autopilot. It automatically secretes the exact chemicals at the exact time in the exact amount in order to digest the food you eat. It functions without much fanfare. Your blood glucose readings are always between 80-120 mg/dL no matter if you eat a three tier chocolate lava cake or if you are on your twenty-second mile of the Boston marathon. So while you cruise on autopilot with your legs kicked up on the dashboard of your 757, I am ferociously working to manually keep my biplane from floating off into space or diving nose first into the ground.

Food makes my bi-plane soar skyward; insulin makes the altitude drop. I must measure and count and calculate every carb, sugar gram, fat gram, and fiber gram that goes into my body. I then guesstimate the amount of insulin my plane will need to compensate for the increase in altitude caused by the turkey sub I had for lunch. This sounds simple, right? Just count and calculate and things fly smoothly. Wrong. The body is an intricately complex system that makes sense, well, never.

Altitude checks must be done multiple times every day. But here's a kicker –I only get, at most, six times per day to check my level. I have six test strips that I can use because the little shits are expensive. They cost about a dollar a piece, and seeing as I have checked my blood glucose levels approximately 24,820 times, I can't really afford to prick my fingers any more than six times a day. But here's another kicker: When I check my blood sugar, I'm actually seeing what my glucose level was fifteen minutes ago. So, if in these fifteen minutes, my level dropped 50 mg, my calculation is going to be off. I can only go by the number I see on the screen. Additionally, insulin takes at least thirty minutes to begin lowering blood sugar. So,

imagine you are on a plane with an altimeter that shows you the plane's altitude fifteen minutes in the past with a yoke that changes the altitude –but when you push the yoke, the altitude won't begin to change for another half-hour. It can make for an unpleasant, nerve-racking trip.

When the altitude of my bi-plane is high, there are dire consequences. When the altitude of my bi-plane is low, there are more immediate dire consequences. The altitude we want? 100. That's the sweet spot. But generally, I am jumping for joy if the altitude check reads anything between 80-140. Most times, though, it doesn't. For example, so far today my readings have been: 212, 72, 189, 298, and 60. When my blood glucose reading is high (above 150), here is what happens: migraines or headaches, extreme thirst, weakness, excessive urination, nausea, shortness of breath, and some pretty nasty cases of confusion and irritability (especially when being asked to retrieve bagged bread). The long term consequences of this are the most devastating. Over time, consistent hyperglycemia leads to kidney failure, liver damage, heart disease, blindness, and amputations. I cannot afford to fly too high.

But low blood glucose readings are no good either, and in fact, they present more danger immediately. When my blood glucose reading is low, my hands become shaky, I have heart palpitations, my vision blurs (I often lose my peripheral vision), I begin to sweat and tingle and feel faint, and I have the hunger of a ravished animal. I may lose consciousness and may be close to a coma. Low altitude is a quick trip to smashing into a mountain; Low blood sugar is a quick trip to death.

At this point, you may say to yourself, this sucks, but it's nothing that seems uncontrollable. What if you lived off of kale and white fish? To which I say: Doesn't matter. Know why? Because more than just food increases blood sugar and more than just insulin lowers it. To give you an idea of all of the factors involved in trying to maintain my rickety old plane's altitude, allow me to name a few things that affect glucose levels:

1. Food (Not just what you ate for breakfast, but what you ate yesterday and the day before.)
2. Exercise (Exerting energy drastically lowers blood glucose levels, often to the point of extreme hypoglycemia. So basically, I gotta eat while I work out -hence, it's easier just not eating.)
3. Stress (Doesn't matter how tightly controlled an insulin regimen is, if a diabetic is stressed, their levels will be all over the charts.)
4. Hormones (Is it that time of the month? Great. Forget about all calculations because your body will become essentially resistant to any medication.)
5. Illness (Pretty much the same as stress. Forget about it.)
6. Area of injection (Some areas of the body, when injected with insulin, absorb the medication differently than others. Yay!)
7. Sleep
8. Temperature
9. Environment
10. and on and on.

Diabetes Mellitus Type 1 is a chronic illness. There is no cure. But this doesn't seem to be accounted for in the media or in the general public. Here are some responses, real and documented, that I have received from people who have just learned that I am a diabetic (and these are very common):

"Man, that sucks you can't have candy."

"I couldn't do it."

"I eat healthy anyway so it doesn't seem like a big deal to me."

"So I should probably eat these donuts later, huh?"

"But you aren't fat."

To which I say: No it doesn't, yes you could, you are clueless, I don't give a shit what you eat or where you eat it, and thank you. The fact of the matter is that the public is confused and I don't have the time or the energy to explain to every single person I encounter that my disease is not the disease of Wilford Brimley or BB King. I would kill to have "the beetus."

The confusion between Type 1 and Type 2 is the bane of every Type 1's existence. Those with Type 2 still have functioning pancreases. They still produce insulin and they need not worry about manually controlling their plane so long as they take their pill and get a healthy fuel source. Type 2s produce insulin that doesn't quite work as effectively as it should. Most of the time, this is due to a poor diet, a lack of exercise, and an excess in weight. Many Type 2s can be cured simply by losing weight and adapting a healthy lifestyle. Now, I'm not trying to minimize the plight (flight, ha!) of the Type 2 diabetic, but the pancreases of Type 1 diabetics

are dead, kaput, dunzo. We don't have an option of pills or lifestyle changes that bring miraculous cures. I literally spend hours and hours every single day of my life, and will until the day I die, trying and failing and trying and failing and trying to manually do the job of one of my body's most vital organs. My disease is not theirs.

I can count on one hand the number of Type 1s I've met. It's a pretty rare disease. The very first time I met one was freshman year of high school. Although, I didn't actually meet the diabetic himself. His father was my criminology teacher and when he saw me take an injection in class one day, he talked to me for an hour afterschool. I cried. I sobbed until my shoulders hurt and he sat behind his desk and told me the opposite of what my family had been saying. For years I had wanted someone to understand how monstrous this disease can be. I'd been smothered with sayings like "You just have to take more responsibility for you choices now" and "It's totally possible to live a productive life, sweetheart." He knew how much bullshit this was. Instead, he said "I'd rather my son have the worst kind of cancer. At least then, he'd get a day off."

## WHAT NUMBERS FEEL LIKE

Just because red is the color of apples and underbellies, doesn't mean it smells like Gala or feels like a salamander. And you might think that the smell of fresh linen, such a soft, tender aroma of lace and daffodil, might feel crisp on the fingertips or like cotton on a collarbone –but it probably doesn't. Hell, mint could feel like porcupine and Spring could taste like the hardest liquor in the cabinet.

I know what numbers feel like though. I probably can't tell you the flavor of Justice, or the texture of the word 'hypertension,' but I can say plenty about the sensations of forty-two. Come to think of it, I can even say what some numbers smell like, their sound and their appearance and taste (few numbers are as delectable as you would think). It's a funny business –this close acquaintance with numbers. Never quite adds up.

Seventy-six feels antsy. Lying in bed, legs thrashing about, making a swishing song of a panicky rhythm. It's a can't-get-comfortable, ADHD-looking two-digit bugger. Seventy-six feels like an incessant elbow nudge, or the alarm clock after eight rounds of snooze. To be sure, it is one of the better kinds of numbers. But still, it feels like a teeter, like a crazy old man from 'Nam that I have to spend time coaxing off the ledge of the local Best Western.

Considering the unnerving nature of seventy-six, you may think that four hundred and sixteen would be the calmest and most collected value you ever did see, but you would be quite wrong. Actually, four hundred and sixteen feels swollen. Its body is puffy, bruised, engorged with devilish milk, thick chocolate clumps and all. You might as well go swimming in tapioca for a four hundred and sixteen. Don't taste like tapioca. On the contrary, four hundred and sixteen taste like chalk pastel and smells like iodoform. It feels dense and cracked, with a side order of dry heat.

Now, there's a lot of talk going around about six hundred and sixty six. I guess it's the devil's number. But, six hundred and sixty six doesn't have anything on two hundred and twenty two. Two-hundred and twenty two feels like life slipping between broken fingers. It looks like wanting so badly to do something but smacking your face on a glass sliding door when you go to do it. This particular number feels like the end, the post-shopping spree remorse, the inevitable all-nighter brick wall. It feels used up, abused down, and looks like a gaunt man hovering outside death's doorway. Two-hundred and twenty two tastes like bitter nickel and smells like defeat.

There are an awful lot of numbers. But after eight years of shacking up with ones and eights and sevens and the rest of them, I don't so much notice the unwelcomed company like I use to. But still, all of them have a way about them. Forty-four is shaky; one hundred and eighty is achy; three hundred is just a bitch. They all have feeling, a personality, a face all their own.

But here's what nobody knows: Numbers are thieves of the lowest order. When three hundred is yappin' and irritable, I'm the one that gives it the needle. And

when fifty-nine starts sweating and breathing like a poor ol' bull-headed, lung-diseased smoker, I'm there with the apple juice and peanut butter crackers. You'd think the numbers wouldn't be so needy all the time.

By now, they've taken all I have, stripped me of me. Here's an example: If *you* are an emotional mess and your name was Jim, I might say 'Hey *Jim*, you must be having a hard time, what's going on?' But if *I* am teary eyed and irrational, people talk to the numbers. "Hey your levels must be high, what's your number?" "Hey you are in such a good mood today, are your numbers good?" "You need to check your number because you are being an asshole." Seventy-six feels unsettled and panicky now, but there was a time when I used to feel that. And now, if I am ever irritable or impatient, it's not me, but the bitch we call three hundred. Three hundred stole my right to feel –they all did.

I just want to know where I went. But I have no face, no memory of what I was like apart from the disease. I left myself back at the hospital, a frail thirteen year old girl, scared and swollen with saccharides. So I can tell you exactly what numbers feel like. But I can't, for the life of me, tell you what it feels like to be me.

## WHAT DEATH DOES TO A DAUGHTER

### V.

When I was twelve, Dad lost his job. He started sleeping in a lot. I'd have to walk in his bedroom in the mornings to turn off his alarm clock and coax him out of bed so we could get a ride to school. There wasn't much time spent in the living room anymore. We'd all retire to our own rooms, dad, my brother, and me, after dinner, and spend the evenings behind closed doors. Before long, Dad rarely came out of his room at all. Then, he started locking his door. My brother and I would fend for ourselves for dinner. Austin was eight at the time and I began tucking him into bed at night. I gave Austin baths, told him to brush his teeth, convinced him to let me read him books before going to sleep, helped with his homework, signed his agenda. Dad stopped interacting with us for the most part. The house was a wreck. Everything was dirty. Our laundry hadn't been done. The washer and dryer were right outside of his bedroom so I'd never want to wash my own clothes in fear of disturbing him with the beeping and vibrating he hated. There wasn't much food in the pantry, aside from a few cans of stewed tomatoes and peas. I'd see Dad in the kitchen every now and then, but we'd hardly say a word. He'd return to his room and lock the door. I packed our school lunches with plastic baggies of saltines crackers. A few times, I stole food from the vending room at school. I'd put them in

Austin's lunch and feel some sense of satisfaction at my newly found independence. I loved that I wasn't a kid any longer, that I didn't burden my father with annoying things other dads had to deal with. I reveled at playing mommy and wife and sister all at once, at knowing that things might fall apart if I wasn't there to hold them together.

After a few months of independence, or neglect, I caved and made a frantic phone call to my mother after an outburst of yelling and cursing when Dad didn't want to take me to taekwondo practice. Mom took us out of the house and we lived with her and the new boyfriend full time. Dad moved to Florida soon thereafter. He went to live with a woman he met on the Internet. Mom never heard a word of what happened at Dad's house. We never talked about it, or anything else really. Dad had spent most of the years since the divorce convincing me that my mother was the cause of the separation of our family. He told me she cheated on him with her current boyfriend. He told me she was controlling and crazy and that we both thought her strict rules were ridiculous. She was dumb and we were not. I spent my adolescence cultivating a deep hatred for my own mother. It only follows then, that after I moved in with Mom, it was only a short time before things came tumbling down once again.

## INNARDS

The aroma of the rotisserie chicken distracted us from Daddy's sadness. At the table, our heads never even made the ascent after the blessing. Our eyes opened, watched for the pack leader's signal, and with heads still hunched, we traded elbows, tightened finger grips to rip the chicken into parts. The skin sank and crackled as we touched it, leaving knuckles shiny with a buttered gloss, juice droplets slung from platter to plate.

Chicken only happened when Daddy went to fix a sick computer. Most days Daddy was sleeping in bed, but the side job let us buy milk every now and then. When the growling in my belly got really loud, I'd wish for the computers of the world to get the "blue face," which is what happened when Daddy said they got sick with the viruses. I always thought those computers gave Daddy the blue face too because afterwards, he would lock himself in his room for days and days. So when Daddy got the sickness, and Austin and I would knock until the buttered gloss coated the bedroom door, there were no dinners, and definitely no chicken. Stale saltine crackers didn't fill the monster behind my belly button quite like it filled the fold-over plastic baggies. Eventually, when the growling got to hurting, Daddy would leave as a computer doctor and return as the holy bearer of chicken.

Gawking, Austin and I would follow the trail of meaty scent to the table and sit with our hands in our laps. Daddy was always so slow. Austin and I would lunge forward at the sight of his nod, but Daddy just sat into his slouch. He always told me that his favorite parts of the chicken were the innards. While Austin and I would fight over the plumpest thighs and rip the fatty tendons to handle a drumstick, Dad would go straight for the slimy organs and puke-colored connective tissue. I never understood why he liked the stringy grease pits of the neck or the carmine veins in the liver. "Eww!" we'd squeal as he bit down on the heart, squirting juices on our shirtsleeves. It was *Fear Factor* in the Coulter house.

I was too young to call his bluff but too old for Saturday morning cartoons. And even though I always thought Dad was a little bit crazy for liking all the nasty innards, his favorite seemed to fit. Like puzzle pieces, the mathematics of life. One skinny chicken for one broken family. Two thighs: one for me and one for Austin. Two drumsticks: one for me and one for Austin. And two legs: one for me and one for Austin. Dad would help us with the wings and since he liked the innards the best, he got the heart, liver, neck, and gizzards. There would be no room for a Mommy anyway because there wouldn't be any chicken for her. The three of us sucked the bones dry, used stacks of sugary white bread to soak up the meat sap. We would eat until our tongues were raw from licking the grooves in the plastic bowls.

Almost a decade later, I sat on the couch beside dad's recliner. Still unemployed, still not filling my belly, he wrapped his depression in another hour of

FOX News. I prepared to unleash my anger, refusing to believe that he cared about anyone but himself. Frustrated and nervous, I stood up and walked to the kitchen, opening the refrigerator just to look at the food that couldn't satisfy my hunger. "Bring me that thing of chicken in there!" dad yelled from the living room. I grabbed a Diet Coke for me and the half-eaten rotisserie chicken for dad. Walking back to the recliner, I noticed the cold hardened scraps of what remained. The white meat had been devoured, skin peeled back, and innards abandoned in the corner of the plastic dish.

## TOO LATE FOR FRUIT, TOO SOON FOR FLOWERS

At the Bob Evans in Liberty Township, Ohio, I sit across the table from the wife and daughter of the man who fucked me just six hours before the waitress poured our coffee. By the time she brings us each a bowl of fruit, I'm already full from waiting. I watch him swallow chunks of bruised apples, inhaling fists full of mawkish honeydew melon without stopping to breathe. I'm drained –making it difficult to refrain from eye contact with his wife. She redirects their daughter's hands to the coloring on the kid's menu, telling her, with incessant repetition, not to color on the table. The child won't listen. "Tables are a *no-no*," she repeats, louder and louder, as the little girl scribbles X's of Battery-charged Blue Crayola across the wooden tabletop, mocking her mommy's *no-no*. Now, mommy is furious. *No, Maddie, No!* Giving up, a submissive whimper: *No*. The word echoes in me, each one sounding more and more like my own.

\*\*\*

We meet when I am fourteen, the flat body of an eleven year old and a void the size of my father. But this Korean intern is noticeably bigger. He is sculpted from the ROK Army and fresh from a prestigious martial arts university in Seoul. As he tests our skills and endurance, I bend my gaunt body in directions that will catch his eye. In sparring matches, I kick my opponents without restraint, knowing he can hear

the smack of my foot against the pads. I practice after classes, feeling him watch me while he cleans the mats. None of it is necessary. After almost a decade of competing in martial arts, I am a well-established fighter in my weight class. I win every tournament title and student award handed out at the annual holiday party. So at practice, when I force a roundhouse on Chris's jawline, almost two feet above my own, the new Korean instructor chooses me to be his understudy. For four years, he is my mentor and my father, my light and my rock. He holds me when I cry about high school relationships; he silences me when I speak words of negativity. I bow to him incessantly, a traditional sign of respect in martial arts, letting him know that I accept him as my Master. He eventually transforms me into a Junior Olympic athlete. I change over this time, my back defined by ribbed layers of muscle, my legs like tree trunks in the ground. After winning two consecutive gold medals in the Junior Olympics, I retire from training and become his teaching assistant. Once out from under his rule of strict physical training, my womanly body fills its brim and starts to run wild. The week before I leave for college, he confronts me about my weight gain. I'm hurt, but thankful. Obedient, I promise to get back in shape. I trust him.

\*\*\*

Facebook tells me of Master's new business. I follow his success from afar, skimming through his photos in my dorm late at night. Google goes directly to his business page with only the "H-A..." typed in the search bar. He has a new baby girl, Madeline, and a new martial arts school, White Tiger Taekwondo. A few months after its grand opening, Master calls and asks me to visit, to teach a few classes as a visiting instructor. I clear my schedule for a hot July weekend. On the phone, I can tell he is

eager to show off his new students, his new family, his new American life. My desire to see him happy is almost as strong as my desire to make him proud. So I go.

\*\*\*

My ass hurts and I'm out of gas. Sheila, the voice inside my Garmin, is telling me to turn right. I drive past the turn, feeling somewhat shamed by my disobedience, and into a Circle K. I check my hair in the passenger window as I refuel. My body is stiff. I scold myself for going out last night, for skipping the convention of sleep, knowing of my four-hour drive to Bum Fuck, Ohio this morning. I adjust my uniform, tighten my black belt, and drive to a building displaying his name. Before stepping through the doorway, I bow toward his office –a traditional sign of respect when entering and exiting. When I finally see him, I quickly lift my chin and snap my feet together, bowing deeply to my Master.

\*\*\*

We spend the early afternoon teaching classes. I know how he operates, how his classes are structured. I watch him lead organized lines of young boys and girls standing like soldiers, his sights on finding my replacement. He is strict but gentle in his guiding ways. In the back line, a young girl can't seem to execute a sidekick to his liking; I know how relentless he is about the pivot of the base foot. He grasps her ankle in his right hand, forcing her to hold her leg straight, allowing her to lean her back against his chest, giving her support while she learns to pivot her foot on the ground. It's a difficult feat. I watch as her eyebrows burrow in frustration, wanting to do it correctly, to hear him say "Good job!" or reach out for a subtle high five. I know that want; I still have that need.

\*\*\*

The Korean language is soft and melodious, predictable but not monotonous. I am not sure if it is the avalanche of foreign sounds or the two glasses of Soju that have me feeling dangerous and intrepid. After a long day of teaching classes, I meet Master and his friends for a late dinner. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, we lunge with chopsticks, arms flailing in various pathways like a highway intersection. We suck from oyster shells and soak the sticky rice in kimchi juice. My belly is round and the room is alive. Without warning, the evening turns to morning, and Master's wife has to leave the Sushi bar to get the baby home. With a respectful bow, she says goodnight to Master and his friends and slips behind the paper sliding door. In the midst of the phonetic ocean, I hear her call my name and I rush to meet her outside. She gathers blankets and pacifiers in her arms, balancing a sleeping child with a purse the size of my regard.

"Did you check into your hotel before dinner?" she asks, despite knowing I did. She hands me papers, the hotel reservation and receipt, just in case. The residue of alcohol on my lips has me dramatic, but sincere.

"Thank you for the hotel room, the meals, everything..." I say. She smiles tenderly. "You know how much Han and I love you. You are his American pride and joy," she tells me, reaching for her car keys and half hugging me goodbye. She reminds me to drive safely and that they will pick me up for breakfast at 9am. When I return to the table, Master tells me to come and sit next to him.

\*\*\*

Back at the hotel, I strip myself, let my bare shoulders slump, and slide between the cold sheets. I find solace in the extravagance of this hotel room, positing that it must be a sign that business is good. Master texts me and I ensure him I've arrived safely. He attempts a back and forth texting conversation, something he's never done before. I'm confused at first. Korean culture forces a large gap between teacher and student. I am not to look him directly in the eye, to touch his uniform, or to ever have my back toward him in his presence. But today he has been relaxed, has treated me more like an equal than a student. Still, I respect the tradition. As we text like middle school girls, I assume he just wants to practice his English.

*What r u doing?*

Watching TV sir. Hotel is good! Thank you!

*I can no sleep. U want pick up me?*

Yes sir if you want.

*U sure? School?*

Yes sir.

*R u come? .....Come to school?*

I'm leaving.

I can't tell if it's because I want to or because I don't have a choice. I lift the heavy down comforter off my aching body. I scurry to the bathroom and put back on the outfit I had just taken off. I brush my teeth. Before leaving, I look at myself in the full length mirror hanging on the back of the door. I'm rough, but naturally pretty, so I take out my scrunchie and whip my hair over, scrunching it in my hands to work out the dents. Lion's mane, I think. I shrug and take the stairs to the parking lot.

\*\*\*

I sit with my heels pressed together, flapping my legs like a butterfly on the cold mats of the unlit training facility. Master is spread-eagled, belly-up, his elbows like skyscrapers, pressing his thumbs into his forehead. By 5:00am, we are sprawled out on warm mats, discussing the meaning of life in a strange hybrid of Korean and English. I only think that I've made it; I think that after years of hardline respect and obedience, after countless hours of following his orders, the student has finally been lifted in the eyes of the teacher. I wonder if we are acting like this because I've finally fulfilled my mentorship or if it's just because I'm older now. Either way, I've waited for this, this acceptance and pride, since the day I kicked Chris's jawline. My thoughts are suddenly interrupted by his choppy English. He calls my name and I scoot closer with a "Yes sir." Grabbing my ankle with his right hand, he says, "It's okay. You not have to say yes sir now."

"Yes sir," I say and he laughs.

We're closer now. We lie side by side and I hold a piece of Juicy Fruit in my cheek. I sit up to spit it out, and I feel his hand grab my hip, then the other, and there's no time to respond before I'm being lifted up and rolled off my back. He pushes his hips up toward the ceiling, catching me before both knees could slam on both sides of him. I fall forward from the force and our belly buttons graze as he clutches my neck, pushing his lips against mine. It seems like all one motion. We kiss again, and again. When I feel his hands roll like water down my thighs, I pull back, shove my hands hard into his chest. I yell that he has a wife and a baby. He whispers that nobody will know.

\*\*\*

The first *No* trails off into a soft silence. These hands break pinewood; these forearms crush through concrete slabs. I feel small. Words are my only defense. But now he speaks to me in rattling Korean, claiming he doesn't understand my English. I feel his body, but I tense only in waves. I am bruised and shriveled, but not in pain; hot without heat. I haven't slept in days and can't tell if this is real. He holds my loyalty, so I lie limp against him, knowing I haven't any left to grasp onto, to rope back in. He rocks me as his puppet. I begin to fight back, discovering a small force of foreign defiance beneath the ingrained habit of submitting at his presence.

\*\*\*

It's Saturday night. I haven't slept since Thursday. My body desperately needs to succumb to gravity. I am supposed to scream, to fight, to hurt him at all costs. I am supposed to guard my dignity, not allow him to claim what belongs to me. But my fight is weakened by interrupting images. I can't tell if this is the result of trauma or if I'm in a half dream-like state from the exhaustion. He once made me practice my arm bars after class, as we spent forty-five minutes relentlessly entering and exiting the arm bar position. I'd wrap my legs around his head and squeeze his neck tightly against my inner thighs. He used to ask me after fights to walk up and down his spine, to press my hands against his lower back. Anytime he taught his favorite submission hold, he asked me to be his partner. He called it "The Spider" and it was dangerous, catching the opponent in a helpless position, their backside forced hard against his hips, arms and legs tangled in a web of him. But I didn't need extra arm bar practice. And he didn't compete anymore so why did I have to soothe his back

aches. And I was the smallest in the class so he should've used one of the grown men to demonstrate "The Spider." And he once asked me to lose my weight gain, assuring me that he cared about my health. Students don't question their masters. They never lose respect. They never disobey. And now he is touching me with pride as his tender creation.

\*\*\*

He carries me in his arms, squirming and thrashing, and grounds me like a paperweight atop the contracts on his desk. I am saying *No*, but not like I want to. Habitually, my resistance comes in reverence, ending each "no" with a "sir." He stands me up and I stop fighting. I can't muster the strength to defy him, to slap my own mentor in the face. He only takes off my pants. He only pulls down his. He sits in the leather office chair and tells me to get on top. I do. But, he's quickly frustrated, my legs entangled in the armrests, impeding his access. He stands up, holding me like a washcloth. His muscles bulge as he turns me over, gripping harder from behind. My legs are crouched into my chest, only able to burrow myself on the edge of the desk like a small animal. Now, he grips my ankle with his right hand, forcing me to hold my leg out straight. I am confused, exhausted. I moan to make him proud. He hunches, allowing my back to rest against his chest. I've been here before, sweat with this man, fought against him, grappled with entangled legs, made hard contact, shin to forearm, hip to inner thigh. He releases. Sticking his tongue in my mouth for the first time, he gathers the stale Juicy Fruit and spits it in the trash. On the way to the bathroom, peeled and naked, I turn and bow to him before stepping through the doorway. I finish the bow before breaking form and running to vomit in the toilet.

\*\*\*

At breakfast, the sprite giggling of his small baby girl in streams of morning sunshine doesn't faze me. The disgust of this meal doesn't stop me from ordering banana French toast and observing families in their Sunday's best. I have no burn between my legs, no fire in my belly. The flowers near the Splenda could be white mums. He empties his bowl of fruit down his hollow throat, reaching across my body to retrieve a grape from my bowl. As he fingers the fruit, I gaze at his fingers and follow the lines of his arm up toward his open mouth. He bites the bud in half, savoring it, pressing his lips against its juices. He catches the sudden lift of my head and turns to look at me. When his look meets mine, I clamp my back teeth tight and hold the gaze, eye to eye, steady enough to see right through him.

IV.

perhaps Persephone was on a diet  
when she snuck downstairs to play with Hades.  
she hadn't eaten breakfast that morning  
because, well, she was watching her figure  
there is high pressure being a goddess  
*you must give us vegetation!* they say  
but every woman knows you cannot eat  
the fresh oats of your own labored sewing  
perhaps Persephone could be redeemed  
for her own hungry hand in being raped  
but she stuffed her face with seven fruit seeds  
while Hades went out for a post-sex piss  
that day was not a scheduled cheat day,  
and silly girl, there is no redemption in that

## JIF

Google doesn't take me seriously when I admit my addiction. *Put animal feces in the jar* is the most useful tip it provides. Bodybuilder.com tells me I'm okay as long as I buy "natural." Yahoo! says this particular craving means I have a nutritional deficiency. Yahoo! is wrong. WebMD ensures me there is a reason my body is viscerally craving, that it must need something I'm not giving it. But I am normal. And I am swarming around aisle nine again. I walk deliberately in front of it, stop, fondle jar by jar, brand by brand, and I walk away with willpower, depleting. I'll be back.

I'm back at aisle nine again. I check the surrounding areas to ensure that no one witnessed my gawking indecisiveness ten minutes ago. This goes on. After an hour and forty minutes, I take the leap of faith and nestle it in my grocery cart like a warm, delicate child. I walk toward the checkout. I'm going through with it. No leaving it surreptitiously amongst the Trident and Duracell packs or telling the cashier with a grunt of inconvenience to set it aside, that I picked up crunchy instead of creamy, as if that ever mattered.

Climbing the stairs to my room, I use the monotonous repetition for a pep talk. *You will be fine. One spoonful and off to bed. Conan is on at ten. It can become a nightly ritual: peanut butter and Conan. Normal people would probably do that. You skipped*

*the hundred-calorie pack this morning, you can have one spoonful. Just one. A couple extra thyroid pills, jumping jacks. It will be okay.* But once inside, a place all to myself, desires become hauntings and cravings become animalistic indulgences. I sometimes forget I'm human after being hungry for two or three days, my willpower too strong to let me feed myself. But, I want to be normal in my eating habits so I act like this isn't a big deal. I put away groceries. Retrieve the diet Dr. Pepper cans and arrange them inside the door. I unpack the sugar-free Jell-O and organize them by color. I put the celery in the fresh box and the pickle jar on the shelf. I nestle the rice cakes in the drawer next to the collection of green bean cans. Meanwhile, my body aches. It feels the presence of hydrogenated oils in the room, senses that a lingering of fat has been brought here. My thighs can smell it. My jutting hipbones scream out for help.

Channel 43 and I'm normal. I see a Neutrogena splash and I'm on my feet. But I stop; think again. I won't want to watch commercials while I eat it. I sit back down; get back up at the first sight of Andy Richter. At the touch of the jar, one of us moans.

I sit cross-legged on my bed, hair atop my head, and plastic cutlery in hand. I peel the paper seal back as if I'm undressing the men's swim team. The metallic silver begs for my tongue. There is a dollop cushioned there and I slide my taste buds across it like it's wrapper cheese. I retrieve my spoonful, screw the lid back on and set it next to the bed. I feel normal.

It's gone within minutes. My body lights up with calories like a slot machine being fed quarters. I lose control. By the time Conan introduces Kristen Bell, I am violently fingering the grooves of the jar's inside, covered and smeared from ear lobe to elbow. The value-sized jar is empty and so am I. The crying doesn't help and neither does the flood of rescue plans to rid the pool of excess calories that now fester on the inside like foreign troops.

I think about throwing up. But I am normal and don't do that. I decide to live on pickles and celery until next week. I skip classes, lie across my floor in a hammock of self-loathing. My small frame is lost beneath swallowing layers of sweatpants and hoodies. Allowing the calories to seep out of my shivering body, I research my one, inexorable craving. After the seventeenth website says it's a sign of starvation, I slam my laptop in frustration. That's not it. I am normal.

## WHAT DEATH DOES TO A DAUGHTER

### VI.

In 1988, when my father was nineteen, his grandfather unexpectedly passed away before the age of sixty. My dad, instead of grieving, became angry. He was angry that he had a father that didn't act like one. He was angry that the one who did, left him so early. Six months later, my dad's twenty-one year old brother was cleaning the pool in his back yard. When he reached the pool vacuum to the far side, the cord pulled out of the wall, knocking him off balance as he fell off the deck and into the pool, barely an inch of water inside. He was electrocuted and died later that day. I was born soon after Jeff's death into a family of grief and resentment. In such a barren time of life, I brought a bit of hope to my father and to my grandparents who had just lost their first son. Dad's mom, Mamaw, didn't leave my side for the first year of my life. She spent days and nights with me, this woman so intensely grieving the sudden deaths of both her father and son. Papaw didn't cope with his son's death in the same way. He was a far cry from the cries and moans and screams and horrifying grief that my Mamaw wore on her sleeve. He was rigid. Silent. When he went back to work, he sat in board meetings and had panic attacks. He would suddenly feel the room closing in on him. Every phone call was a bad one. He replayed the doctor's words, "I'm sorry, sir...." I was born a year later. And not a year after that, Mamaw was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. She died not a year later,

leaving Papaw with a dead wife and son, leaving my father without a mother, brother, or father-figure. Dad had but one member of his family left –Papaw –and he resented him with every ounce of who he was.

I've never heard Dad talk about Mamaw or Jeff or his grandfather. He's never taken me to the gravesite or mentioned their names in my presence. In the process of writing this, I decided to go to Highland Memorial Gardens. I'm not the least bit spiritual. But I suppose I believe in the mind, in the power of an action that may be silly but worthwhile, if not downright therapeutic. It doesn't make much sense to me why I wanted to go to that cemetery. I don't believe their souls are there or that there is any shred of my family left besides the bones that lay beneath the dirt. But I went anyway.

I went alone. For some reason, I thought I could find them by myself. I thought I'd follow some kind of weird instinct like an orca whale reuniting with its pod after a childhood inside the prison of SeaWorld, jumping through hoops for the sake of keeping the owners happy. My gut should tell me where my family lies. It was sunny, but cold. I had remembered Mom telling me that they were buried next to some bushes. I counted thirty-seven bushes on the property that day.

Two hours later, I left, frustrated, breathing heavy, my hands and feet numb, snot on my face and the backs of my hands. Back at Mom's house, I put on two pairs of pants, two pairs of socks. A hoodie, a zip-up jacket over top. And a wind breaker. A scarf. Gloves. Rain boots. An hour after I returned to walking row by row, saying each last name out loud –Scott, Robertson, McAllister, Lawrence, Elliott, Freeman – I became exhausted, frantic even, still freezing. I found myself walking in circles,

looking at the same headstones three or four times. I had a few pinchbeck moments of excitement –once from afar, when I misread a Mr. and Mrs. James Culver, and another time when finding a Mary Lois Coulter, born May 29<sup>th</sup>, 1937. My mamaw's name was Vickie. I sat in my car, cried from the frustration, the incessant resistance to ask for help, long enough to warm up and venture back out into the fields.

I found Uncle Jeff first. Sat on the golden grass in front of his headstone. Beloved Son. Why not brother? I introduced myself aloud. Said sorry for not coming sooner. I listened to myself say these dumb things out loud, knowing I was talking to only myself, but that no one in that place would judge me for it. Mamaw was in the row above him, Papaw's name engraved into the empty plot there by her side. For some reason, I didn't say anything then. Just sat with Uncle Jeff for another half hour. Dad's grandpa was there next to Jeff. I learned that day that his name was Erwin. The cold became bitter. When the sun started to go down, I reached down to touch Mamaw's headstone, told her it'd been a while, that I loved her, and went back to the car.

## REFLECTION

I do not think I am fat. Not at 104 pounds. Not at 67. I do not look in the mirror and see rolls where there are only folds of skin. I see the skin folds. I see no pudge and I see no love handles where they are none at all. I see what you see. I see myself in the mirror in much of the same way someone can imagine seeing a drowning Labrador tread water in the middle of the ocean, slowly gasping and flailing and sinking to the bottom. I see my emaciated limbs and I feel a kind of pressure on my chest. I want to clench my hands together and hold the place between my breasts as if to keep my heart from bursting, my sternum from surrendering inward. In the same way it hurts to see a premature infant wheeze through tubes in her nose or an elderly woman look at her husband of fifty years without the slightest hint of recognition, it hurts to see myself in the mirror. I see hardly anything at all. It's hard to see my arms especially, their diameter so incredibly thin that I can barely lift them above my shoulders. I see death. My eyes are dry and blue. I see no eyelashes. And I see patches of bare scalp in the middle of my hairline that I now cover with wide fabric headbands. I see past the ribs and into the movement of internal organs. I see veins like spider webs. I see large eyeballs and white teeth the size of Chiclets. But I do not see a fat person. I do, however, see a human. A chest that rises and falls rhythmically. And I see the knobs of my jaw muscle protrude as I bite down on my

back molars and find the strength to keep it clenched. I see layers of sweatpants and long underwear beneath my jeans. I wear them to appear more normal than I feel. I see dead fingernails and muscle spasms from folding the laundry. I now see my 5:30 on my alarm clock and sit at the kitchen table to see the sunrise before school. I see the face I wear while I dress and act and speak as if I am normal or as if I am human. But I don't believe either. I see a child so desperate to prove her abnormality that she is starving herself. So the more I erase my body, the larger the distance becomes between me and the rest. I shrink myself to prove I am not like them. Because I am not like them at all. I am separate. I am hungry, but not fat. I will prove my difference by being what they are not. Because I don't make mistakes. I don't speak like other fourteen year olds. I don't succumb to the lowly desires of friendship or family or laughter. I don't need to study for tests. I don't need to be told I'm loved. I don't need to be hugged or patted on the back or touched or coddled and I don't need to be helped. I don't need to cry. I don't need to talk or get eight hours of sleep at night. I don't need my parents and I don't need peers. I don't feel sad or happy or ineffectually emotional. I don't want MP3 players or video games or a pink sheer bed canopy. I don't crack. I don't act out. And I don't forget or say anything that I don't need to say. I don't need to rest or relax. And I don't eat like the rest of you either. This is the only physical manifestation of the difference between me and you. Look at me. I don't stuff my face with the buttery candy corn dish on the end table of every living room set in America. I watch you do it, though. And I laugh at you. I do not think I am fat. I just think I am different.

V.

My mother grew a wrought-iron heart when  
she found me soft and small, wound in worry,  
thought and heavy-boned, wounded from war with  
myself. she tried then to save me, hold me,  
but how could she cradle just skin and bones?  
how to give me air without losing her breath?

yesterday, I let my lips crack a smile,  
soften the hunk of metal inside her,  
let green life grow into something lovely.

it has been so long since she has laughed  
in front of me, and so long since I have laughed  
in front of myself.

a mother's heart can only be as light  
as her heaviest child.

## INTERLUDE

My family says they know exactly who I am, my mother especially. I get lots of witty remarks about my perfectionism, about my ambition, my independent, do-it-myself nature, my tendency to take charge and to have heated debates and to be the “ham” I’ve always been. “That’s just Ashley,” they will say at Christmas as I try to entertain and tell stories and keep everyone from noticing that I haven’t yet been through the food line. But, then again, maybe I just became those things out of necessity. Maybe my independent nature isn’t my nature at all, but is a self-inflicted punishment to keep from burdening a dad drowning in depression. Maybe I’m not Type A, but just became a perfectionist because I was so convinced that I was abnormal as a kid that I did everything in my power to appear like the other kids. Or, now that I think about it, maybe being a perfectionist was my way of telling the world I wasn’t normal, my way of screaming for help.

People will tell you I’m an extrovert. And I am. I can walk into a room and fill it with laughter and light and stories. But I am also an introvert. Being around people exhausts me. I tend to have existential crises in large crowds. But I also tend to win first place awards in front of them.

As a junior in college, I was randomly selected to take some sophisticated personality test paid for by the sociology department. The test was two grueling hours of questions asking me to rank things according to my preferences, my moral system, my instincts. But, at the end of the two hours, the professor moderating the test claimed that my answers were not consistent. The screen in front of me flashed “UNRELIABLE RESULTS: PLEASE CHECK YOUR ANSWERS,” as if this kind of person, my kind of person, couldn’t possibly exist.

## TANK

It's half past two in the afternoon and I have writing due by five. Last night, I sat in the corner of a handicapped shower bench fighting waves of depression with an unlabeled pill bottle. I wanted to write then too. About two warts on the side of my right hand. About how I tell people I speak fluent Korean and display it by saying the phrase "double knife hand strike in left back stance" over and over until their eyes bug. About how I ate only the crème filling in an entire package of Nutter Butter cookies the night before. New Courier, 11 font, centered: Monkey. I went to bed around four.

Almost twelve hours, a Latin class, and an advising appointment later and I'm here thinking about lobsters. Not how I hate their taste, even if I do (albeit that questionable). Dad told me that I had been allergic to shellfish since the age of three. And Mom said it was a lie and I ate a shrimp to prove her wrong and nothing happened. Instead, I'm thinking about last semester, in German class, how someone told me that you should never buy a lobster that has been in the tank for more than two weeks.

Maybe I can muster a connection. Likely not. What I really want to write on the page is that I'm tired. Here it is: I'm tired. That I sleep fourteen hours a day because I can't quite learn to like being awake.

Two-hundred and thirty nine words, now forty-five. The assignment calls for five hundred. My German professor chimed in to tell the class of the time he bought a lobster from a grocery store tank once and when he rammed the knife down its back there was only the sound of hollow shell. "No meat inside," he said, "Can you believe that?" The girl said she could. It had been in the tank too long, she had said, which is more than two weeks apparently. She knew too much about lobsters.

I've just reread the four paragraphs that I am to somehow turn into a piece within the next three. Still, nothing. Seems like four solid paragraphs to me. But I am hung up on the word "that" at the beginning of the last sentence of the third paragraph. Doesn't really seem to be clear what it refers to. Obviously, I didn't change it so I am not that bothered. Again, there's a that. I suddenly hate that word.

Last night, as I sat on that shower bench, knees clenched to my chest, I heard laughter in the hallway. Probably the Forensics team. I turned on the water to drown them out, but it did me instead. Soaked my cotton panties and XL Air Force sleep shirt. I remained in the enclosure until I could no longer stand my cold toes. I should've written then too but I curled into the corner and fell asleep despite the shiver. It occurs to me now that I could have very easily changed clothes and crawled to bed.

It's a quarter past four and I have yet to decide whether I'll present this as a piece of shit or as art that is so profoundly well-done that it appears to be shit. There's little difference really. Because all the lobsters in the tank look the same. And when my German professor asked why his lobster had no meat, the girl

answered as if being graded. “Because if a lobster has been in the tank for too long,” she said, “it begins to eat itself from the inside out.”

WATER AND GLASS

after I grabbed your hand so I wouldn't lose you  
in the mess of manhattan I forgot to let go  
  
the taxi driver asked what it's like to be lesbians  
in kentucky I said *she's a lesbian I'm straight*  
  
the host at the comedy club asked how long  
we'd been together I said *I swear to god I love penis*  
  
everyone laughed even you your hands clasping  
a wet heineken your soft square tie your collared shirt  
  
your macklemore haircut that I rubbed with my palms  
that night pretending I liked the way it felt  
  
the next day I paid \$160 for a cut just like it  
at a salon in rockefeller center it took an hour  
  
to find you laughed I refused to ask for help  
the fabulous hairdresser recommended a show

on the upper east side where naked women slide  
on water and glass he said a French word I can't remember  
it was slow when I kissed you your lips patient your body  
so soft my fingers pretending to know what to do  
with the difference yesterday when the sun woke us I convinced you  
that less shower water could save a dolphin so you would bathe  
with me I put on nina simone and sang the words  
in your ear swayed back and forth my hands moved up  
your bare back to your shoulders where the bones were harder  
more powerful you're smiling this is real for you  
my hands lungs grabbing flesh like oxygen to feel you as my man  
as I pretend I'm yours

## WHAT DEATH DOES TO A DAUGHTER

### VII.

Last Thanksgiving, I met my father at my aunt's house. That morning had been a rough one, waking up to high blood glucose levels because of an insulin pump malfunction. My level was still elevated when it was time to eat, so I sat at the long oak table while everyone dug into the turkey and dressing. I caught up with family members, laughed and listened and argued over politics. After the food, a few of us sat on the back porch watching Rosie, the golden retriever, chase tennis balls. I was trying to smile, but felt like death. I had a headache. I was exhausted and admittedly upset that I wasn't able to eat Thanksgiving dinner. I sat on the porch steps with my head in my hands, slowly squeezing and rubbing my temples. Dad sat on the other end. I could tell he was bothered. It'd been about four years since he moved back to Kentucky with his new wife. Still, he radiated depression. He hadn't had a job since the one he lost when I was twelve. He was spending his days watching FOX news and playing video games. He would rarely leave the apartment and had panic attacks when he drove or was around a crowd, even if it was just the extended family. That day, he'd had to do both. He was already boiling with frustration and anxiety and my foul mood seemed to put him over the edge. After about the fourth time he scoffed at me, saying "What is wrong?" as if to say "What do you have to complain about?" I snapped at him from across the steps. "I have a dead pancreas,

Dad! That's what's wrong!" I said. I saw his jaw clench, turning his head, and saying calmly, "Well, at least you don't have a dead brain," as if it was some kind of competition. I looked back at the concrete below my feet and mouthed each word I had said, without sound, "I / have / a / dead / pancreas / Dad," feeling each word at the end of my lips, wanting desperately to rope them back down my throat.

## SHRINKING

- I. I see my first therapist when I am fourteen. She is wide and has shiny olive skin. She sits behind a large wooden desk. It's dark with golden knobs. Her hair is short; she's balding, and what hair she has left is terribly frizzy. There's a large mole beneath her left eye that looks like it gets in the way when she blinks. Her name has too many consonants for me to pronounce and there's hardly a light on in the entire place. The bookcases in her office run floor to ceiling, all stocked with books that match each other identically, as if her entire library was one big encyclopedia. Seems fake. I decide they must have come with the shelves. She looks happy sitting at her desk. She smiles often and has a belly laugh that makes her shoulders shake.

The desk is covered in paper and folders and clutter. There are no stacks or organizing system, just an ocean of notes and patient files. I'm nervous and angry. I want to be here, but then again, I don't. I have an urge to scream out "There's something wrong with me!" but I can't work up the nerve. I'm smart enough to know that most sick-in-the-head people are not aware that they are sick in the head. So when she asks me what is wrong, I tell her nothing. "I'm fine," I say, but I barely have the energy to shrug my shoulders. She's asked my mother to leave the room so she can talk to me alone. We sit in

silence while she does paperwork. She's not working on my paperwork and I think it's rude that she isn't doing what she told my mom she would do.

Without looking up from her files, she asks me if I know how to draw a tree. I scoff because I'm fourteen and think she's patronizing me. She gets out a tub of crayons from a drawer and points to the mess of blank computer paper in one corner of her desk. "Draw a tree for me," she says. I do, in brown crayon, bare branches sprawling all over the page, without leaves. It's winter where my tree lives. I finish with a large black hole in the center of the trunk –an obvious hiding place for woodland creatures. She looks at my picture as if she's disappointed and tells me that most girls draw leaves and flowers and apples. "No apples?" she asks. I clench my teeth, shake my head. We sit in silence again and when she looks up a moment later, I'm crying.

In a fleeting moment of bravery, I tell her I don't like flowers and that I would rather be a boy. I brace myself for her reaction and expect her to ask me if I like girls, and I panic that I will have to answer, but instead, she says "Okay, now I want you to draw me a house." Her voice is deep like a man's. Speaking sounds like it is hard work, like she's choking on each word in the middle of her throat. She gives me more paper. I begin to draw a house with a green crayon. It's a ranch, with a large chimney. There are no windows but there are lots of doors. There is a gate in front of the pathway and the roof is dangerously steep. Black smoke pours out of the chimney and into the sky and again I think it must be winter where my house lives. I say I'm finished.

She looks up from her paperwork as if interrupted and drops her eyebrows. She chokes out more words, asking me “Where are the bushes, the landscaping, the sun?”

II. My mother checks me out of school and drives me across the bridge into Indiana. We walk up large brick steps into a building that looks like a run-down Catholic school. We don’t say much to each other. We read magazines in the waiting room. When he calls my name, I walk to the door alone. There are three steps up to get to the door, and he shuts it behind us. His office is small with no windows and he never asks my name. I keep my eyes on the ground while he sits in a leather chair and ask “How do you feel?” I’m worried about whether I will say the wrong answer. I wonder what he wants me to say. When I begin to close up, he starts to ask more direct questions.

“Do you feel sad a lot?” he asks.

“Yes,” I say.

“How are you doing in school?”

“Fine. I’m a good student. But I can’t really concentrate,” I say.

“Okay,” he says, “and do you ever feel really happy sometimes?”

I think about it only for a moment. I know the answer is “No. Never. I feel like killing everyone.” But I’m afraid I’ll disappoint him if I said I am *never* happy.

“Yes,” I say, “sometimes.”

Two or three minutes later, he hands me a small piece of paper and sends me back to the waiting room while he calls another name. I hand it to my mother, who reads it on our way out: *BIPOLAR I*.

III. My second year of college is not going well. As a freshman, I'm put in disability dorms for my diabetes. I'm far away from the other students my age and live in a building with juniors and seniors who won't talk to me. I don't make any friends freshman year. Sophomore year, I'm admitted into the Honors College and must change classes. I'm put in classes with Honors students who already have well-established cliques. Everyone looks at me, but no one speaks. I live alone. I start having bad thoughts so I call a local therapist. He's a nice man, plump with a red face, and I see him every Friday morning for a few months. He only charges me \$20 for an hour session so I keep the whole thing a secret. I like him. But it's not long before I feel like I'm drowning, and talking to this man once a week isn't cutting it. I'm crying every night. I hide in my room on most class days. After a few weeks, I start to email professors, telling lies about blood sugar mishaps and hospitalizations. I'm fighting with my parents at the moment and don't want to reach out to them. Over the weekend, I never leave my dorm room and I decide that I can't wait until Friday to tell someone how I'm feeling. I email him in the midst of a severe breakdown, the middle of a Tuesday afternoon, crying and binge eating and wishing I had more nerve to hurt myself. I wait in front of my laptop, but he never emails back. I miss my appointment that

Friday, afraid I scared him off. I don't hear from him so I miss the one after that. And the one after that. Finally, I stop eating so I can start getting out of bed and make it to my classes. A few months later, when he clearly sees me buying sugar-free Jell-O at Kroger, he pretends he doesn't.

IV. The lady's house is in an artsy neighborhood with big ancient mansions that have been gutted and renovated and painted soft pastels. We sit in the waiting room, but it's really just the living room with magazines on the coffee table. I can tell the kitchen is on the other side of the wall. The lady invites us into a room on the side of the house, the sun glaring in through the tall windows. My mother and I sit on patio furniture while she nods and smiles and asks us questions. I'm sixteen but Mom does most of the talking. Every time I try to answer her, my throat closes and I start crying. She wants to fix our relationship she tells us.

"Can you tell me how you feel about your mother?" she asks me.

I fold my hands and shake my head.

"Can you tell me what you think she could do better?" she asks.

I sit silently.

My mom talks to her for the rest of the visit. About how much she loves me. About how much she doesn't understand me. And I sit and wonder how fixing things with my mom is ever going to fix things with me.

When the therapist tells me how much my mother loves me, I start to cry again.

“I don’t understand why you’re crying,” she says, with compassion.

“Neither do I,” I say.

V. My mom tells me that her website says she is an expert in eating disorders, but when I arrive, she is all skin and bones. The first thing I notice is the scale in the corner of the room. She sits down in front of me, no desk or coffee table between us, and gestures loudly. She’s excited to be the one that helps me. She’s overjoyed that I found her for help. Her face is tan with freckles and when she smiles, she has what looks like hundreds of small skin folds on her face, making big parentheses around her mouth.

“Now, how much do you weigh?” she asks me.

“I don’t know. I haven’t weighed myself since the eighth grade, so it’s been a few years.”

“Well, let’s get you on the scale,” she says.

I freeze. “No,” I say. “Clearly, I’m not underweight. But I still have an eating disorder. It’s just complicated,” I say.

“Well, it won’t hurt to know where you’re at,” she says, and makes me get on the scale backwards as she records the number in her chart.

Suddenly, she goes into a fury, explaining how her method of treatment is different than others but that she guarantees it works if I give it a chance and how she is so excited to help me and how she cannot wait for me to get better and how she is going to help me find peace and healing and she’s just so excited.

“Okay. Let’s begin,” she says. “I want you to create an imaginary person for all of the emotions you feel. I want you to give them life. Do you think you can do that?”

I sit silently.

“Tell me one of the emotions you feel a lot,” she says.

“Sad,” I say.

“Okay, great! Now close your eyes. What does sad look like? What appears to you when you think of this emotion as a person?”

I’m confused and I start to clench my jaw, my eyes still closed. “I don’t know,” I say.

“Well, just make it up! Don’t worry, there’s no wrong answer. What does Sadness look like? What is its hair color and shoe size and facial features?”

“It’s tall,” I say, annoyed.

“Okay, what else?”

“I don’t know. Buzzed head. Big nose.”

“Great. Anything else you see?”

“No,” I say.

“Now, what do we want to name Sadness?” she asks me. “Let’s give Sadness a name.”

I open my eyes and after a few moments choke out “Frank.”

“Okay! Let’s talk to Frank!” she screams. “Close your eyes again and say hello to Frank.”

“Hi,” I say.

“What did Frank say back?” she asks me.

“Nothing,” I say back.

“No, no, just listen to him. And tell me what Frank is saying.”

We spend the next half hour creating characters for Sadness, Anger, Shame, Frustration, and Fear. My answers are one word responses spoken through tight lips. Eventually, when I’m fed up, I finally tell her that Fear, or Bubbles as we’ve named her, isn’t saying anything to me today.

“Keep trying,” she pushes me. “Ask them a question. And then tell me what they say.”

“They aren’t saying anything!” I scream. “They aren’t real people! They are imaginary friends who don’t speak and who don’t have hair.”

When my mother picks me up in front of the house, I run down the stairs and get in the car. I slam my fists into the dashboard, hopeless, thinking no one else in the entire world can possibly help me.

VI. I’m asked to sign a form that allows our conversation to be recorded as a University policy. This is free to students, so I do. But I’m taken past the only sign with “Doctor” on it and into a room with two women. One is older, she is heavy and tired looking with blonde curls. She sits with a clipboard in her lap and stares at the floor as I walk in. The other is young, only a few years older than me from the looks of her outfit. She informs me that she is a graduate student here. The larger woman begins to take notes. When I’m asked how

that makes me feel for the twelfth time, I stand up and walk out of the office, yelling “bullshit!” as I pass the front desk.

VII. Each wall is a different color. The place is a rainbow that makes me nauseous and dizzy. Every day, I go through a metal detector and sign my name on the arrival list. I can sign in without a parent because I drive myself here. The others here are little kids. There are children scattered across the colorful play mats and train tracks painted on the tile floor, playing Wii video games and eating goldfish. I’m seventeen and don’t belong here. But, when I am hospitalized for severe depression, I’m too young to be admitted to an adult treatment center. The workers here ask me what my words mean and I use advanced vocabulary just to piss them off. I’m sick of coloring. I don’t go to high school anymore. I was skipping class a lot anyway, sleeping nineteen hours a day on the weekends. The 4.0 student suddenly got an F in AP Biology. So instead, I’m here from 8:00-4:30. I get to go back home to eat and sleep in my own bed. All day long, I sit in group sessions with eleven year olds who bring knives to school, with six year olds who bite the other kids in their class, with nine year old girls who run away from home. For days and days, I draw houses without landscaping. I draw trees with no leaves. Each morning I am asked to fill out a survey. It asks me how sad I feel on a scale of 1-10. I see a psychiatrist every day. I see a therapist twice a day. I see a social worker more than that. I see a teacher who gives me seventh grade math worksheets every day to keep me busy. After a few weeks, I stop talking in

therapy. I take my pills. I circle a number. Usually it's a three. After months of partial hospitalization, I start to give up. I'm irritated. Nothing has changed for me. I think about faking some smiles so they will say I've completed treatment. On my ninth week, I come in one day with my hair down. It's usually pulled back in a ponytail. But on this day, it's down, and it's straightened. I am bombarded by therapists who ask me why I have done my hair this morning. They all suspect it is the new seventeen year old boy who entered treatment a few days ago. All week, I am hounded about how I must be feeling better because I took the time to straighten my hair for a boy. I'm too tired to argue, so I finally agree that I like him and that he is cute. The next day, I circle an eight.

VIII. A woman sits behind a computer in a room with four white walls. I'm dressed in a white gown. She asks me questions, one by one by one. I shake my head. I nod my head. My mom is here. I can't do anything but cry. I watch patients in the hallway walk by in straightjackets. I watch crazy men across the corridor circle a chair and mumble to themselves. I watch the lady tell my mother about the options available to us. I watch the clock. A loud scream from a patient passing by the window makes me lie when the woman asks if I ever think about killing myself.

IX. A young girl, four years old, bounces and skips and sings Little Mermaid songs. She's somewhat loud, but she's a precious child. I wonder if it's her or

her mother who is seeing the doctor. The waiting room is cramped and dark and there's a fish tank with no fish in it. I made my appointment for 11:30 AM and now it is 2:30 and I am still sitting, waiting, pacing. I start complaining to the lady at the desk, but she can't help me. I want to leave, but I know I need to stay. I have a class that starts at 3:00 PM and complain that I cannot miss it to the lady at the front desk, who tells me again, with fleeting patience, that she cannot do anything about it. I know I'll have to miss class. It's fall of my senior year and I have finally given in and agreed to see a psychiatrist. I can't live like this any longer. And I certainly won't be graduating if I don't have some help getting out of bed in the morning. I'm sleeping fourteen hours a day. I haven't eaten anything but veggie subs from Subway in months.

I decide to stay and sit down to email my professor. When I look up, the little girl's mother is texting and watching YouTube clips on her phone while her daughter runs around the waiting room. I move closer to the fish tank and settle into a blue recliner. When a passing nurse asks how old the little girl is, the mother doesn't even look up to reply. She sighs and grunts. She's tired and seems to have given up. "Well, I got a twelve year old boy at home," she says with irritation, "and then there is this *crazy* four year old. And believe me, she's insane." The little girl looks up as if answering to the insult. The nurse then calls my name and I return the magazine to the rack.

"Can I use the restroom before I go back?" I ask her.

"Sure," she says, "just come on back when you're ready."

In the bathroom, I start sobbing. I look up in the mirror and stare at my own eyes for a while. I'm talking to myself in my head again. Finally, when I come out of the bathroom, I walk over to the little girl, who is sitting on the floor with a coloring book and a bucket of crayons.

I kneel down next to her, her mother not even registering the strange person approaching her daughter. "You know, I've been called crazy too," I say, "but actually, I'm just strong and brave, like you."