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Tiny Furious Circles

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Tiny Furious Circles

by

Ann M. Herrington

B.A. History
University of Missouri — St. Louis, 2014

A Thesis

Submitted to The Graduate School of the
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Fine Arts

In

Creative Writing

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Advisory Committee
Eamonn Wall, Ph.D.
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Dedication

This manuscript is the work of two decades, though I suppose I have worked on it longer; really most of my life. And so, it has been inspired and supported by so very many people:

To my peers, friends and teachers, especially my thesis advisor, Eamonn Wall, thank you for your guidance, patience and wisdom. I'm a better writer and a better person for your presence and example.

To my parents, Chris and Nicki Herrington, who gave me the world. My best friend, Cara, who has been my sister for 32 years. My other family, the DeMichele's, who chose me and gave me the big family I always wanted. More recently, Ben and the kids, Genevieve and Jonas, who taught me that hope springs eternal. To you all, thank you. So very, very much. I love you.

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Beginning	
Common Gull Ascending	6
Haiku	7
McIntyre Georgia, 2013	8
Snake River, Boise, Idaho 1983	9
Krueger's, Age 21	10
To Properly Fill a Space	14
Sun Wrangler	15
First Son, County Galway	16
Tophet	17
Torn	26
Delmar Lounge, 2002	27
Feeling Things	28
Green Road	34
Covered in Your Tracks	35
Story	36
Swallow Me	46
In between	47
Letter	48
Inside, On the Subway	49
Middle	
Undeveloped	51

Time to Learn	52
Thoor Ballylee	53
Tom	54
What Good	58
Empties, Kinvara	70
On a Purpose Driven Life	71
Takes A While	72
A Kind of All Right	73
Krueger's, Age 30	83

End

Sleeping Alone	90
Work	91
Draiocht	92
Symbolism in Yeats	93
Brilliant Burden	102
To A Woman I Have Been	103
14 Henrietta St.	104
Caged	105
Stirrings	106
Skin	114
The Only Spell I Know	120
Breaking the Surface	122
On the Day You Would Be Born (a)	123
On the Day You Would Be Born (b)	124
Wave Becoming	125
Inheritance	126

How Many Are Left on the Wire?	127
Paint This Life in Water	128
Truer Culmination	129

Introduction

I have had time to live and time to reflect on that living. What I have found is that certain things present themselves, over and over, wearing different skins. And though they look different, there is a certain whiff of familiarity that activates the soul's hindbrain and pulls you close. That's how it has been for me. Because of this — my failure to learn the first time; my need to see a thing from all its sides; my constant picking at the half-healed — certain themes repeat. And because they have come to me at different times in many forms, I have responded in kind.

This work is divided into three sections: Beginning, Middle, and End. I'm told every story has these. In this collection, the work is separated less by chronology than by how fully saturated it is by the theme or lesson (Has it sunk in yet?). And so, I hope this collection demonstrates the growth of an artist over time and across genre, and the growth of a person in age, but more importantly, in depth, as she scrubs her way, in tiny furious circles, through this life.

Beginning



Common Gull Ascending

Haiku

It starts like this — night

Fell. Heavy velvet pierced through

Worn like a skinned thing

McIntyre, Georgia 2013

Railroad tracks that scissor the yard
The hellions raised beside them
The white frame house that bears them all
The two bedrooms where all seven sleep
The kitchen where she lost an eye
The floor where she was struck by lightning
The table where they gained the weight
The couch they spread it out on
The door he leaves his boots beside
The chalk he mines in sleep
His chest that's full of backward parts
The heat that brittles the paint
The sun that feeds the kudzu, strangles grass

Snake River, Boise, Idaho 1983

I caught that fish that day,
the little blue gill the size of my hand,
pulled it from its cold stream
on a line you baited and gave to me.
I watched its scaly flesh swing,
dripping in the air, saw you
smile at my quick expertise.
You grasped the line and freed my fish,
its tiny jaw working against your big
fingers, and held it low for me to see
its mouth, its gills, its fins.
You rinsed the sand from its flesh.
I wanted to hold it before we let it go
so you put it in my hands, inside
your hands, and I felt its cool, slick
skin shudder in my palms.
Then you took it back. I bent toward
the water to wash my hands and
watch its release.
But you were not behind me.
You laid my fish on a rock
and it flexed against the rock
and then flexed against you,
its body curling like a leaf.
And you split its small white belly open,
quickly with your pocket knife,
And I watched its liver spill,
And watched you slice it,
And heard your voice —
“Bait.”

Krueger's, Age 21

It's fall again. It's night again. It's not yet cold enough for wool so we wrap our lighter jackets closer to our bodies and hold them there with tight fists and flushed cheeks. The leaves we crush beneath our feet are still yellow, fresh and dry. The wind that blows my hair into my eyes catches some of these leaves and they sizzle across the black street. A few more quick steps and we're there. With the cool autumn at our backs we pull open the solid green door. The curved brass handle is cool and heavy and the paint peels and flakes. For a moment in the entryway, we are caught between two realities. The dark street, the cool pavement, the hushed sounds of outside are blown behind us as the bar exhales its hot, smoky breath in our faces. We blink as the cymbals crash. Our hair, not knowing which wind is stronger, quits its tangling dance and falls twisted to its place. We step forward, leaning into the warm embrace of our escape. Eyes adjusting slowly, we let the door close behind us and walk in, willingly, eagerly.

Dennis tosses out two coasters with Vegas expertise, and drops a sweating longneck on each of them. He smiles at us, one white, furry eyebrow creeping over the top of his glasses, and we smile back, a little too obviously. He laughs and we laugh. It's Krueger's, and no, not everybody knows our names, but it's a clean, if not well-lighted place, so for now...

I lift my beer, feeling its weight in my hand and its cool lip on my own. It is cold and bubbly. It feels like fur in my throat. I swallow, looking to see if his beer is furry too, but his nose isn't crinkled like mine and he doesn't seem to notice. He stops watching the

ceiling fan for a moment and looks at me. His eyes are warm with familiarity, if not love, and standing next to him with my favorite jeans loose around hips and this beer in my hand, it's easy to feel satisfied.

We lean against the deep brown, fading bar. I let the small of my back settle against something hard and cool. I put my weight against it, and it slides gently toward the bar. I stand up again, looking behind me. A stool, a solid stool but not the kind that is welded into place, so it gave when I leaned against it. I put my foot on one of its rungs instead.

“You know why I like you?” Dennis asks me. I shake my head in response because my mouth is furry again with beer. “Because you don't make it difficult. Always a Bud Light, always pay cash, never keep a tab.”

He tries to make it a joke, but he's only half kidding. I know our relationship is the easy fulfillment of easy expectations.

“Seriously man, hold on to this girl if you know what's good for you. They don't come much easier.”

We both smile and blush and because I'm not his to hold and we both know I'm not so easy.

We sit at a table. Hours drift past us and fade. Our conversation lingers between our relaxed foreheads and the smell of fried bar food clings to our clothes. Our table is getting crowded with bottles. I order another round anyway and lean back as I look around. The stuffed turkey in the corner stares into the shadowy space in front of him. His name is Gerald. I can't remember why exactly, but it's some joke that was funny

once. He looks black beneath the dust and shadow and I wonder which life he liked best; his one as the sentinel of tame drunks, or his last, as a living turkey.

In the opposite corner, a wooden Indian looks to some distant horizon no one else can see. His hand is raised to block the neon from his eyes. He seems proud with his chest puffed out and his arms rigid. I can't help but notice that he is carved slanted. He was made to fit into a corner. I don't like him.

“What do you think about the décor in here? Pretty tacky, in a good way though.”

A voice seems to echo my thoughts. I shift my focus from the Indian to the warm bluish eyes in front of me. I'm too drunk to be startled by his telepathy and so I answer him.

“Yes. It's a bit cliché, but in a good way.”

A debate follows regarding the origin of the neighborhood bar cliché, and whether or not this bar in particular pre-dates said cliché. The blue eyes are certain that the neighborhood bar has been around since time immemorial, and that this bar is thus the contemporary reincarnation of a constant. I try to argue that this place is unique, independent, an isolated phenomenon. The rings on this table, the circles under Dennis' eyes; those things are irreplicable. He argues that irreplicable is not even a word. My case for Krueger's is hopeless.

As we sit in our newfound silence, I finally hear the music. It's a good song, something about searching or traveling and I know my Dad would know it, but I can find only a hazy recognition of the melody. I can't make out all the words and it's then that I realize all the layers of sound around me. The noises of people sit on top of the music,

and the sounds of chairs, glasses and bottles clink and rattle like punctuation for the bar's soliloquy. I am amazed that even the sounds around me have texture. I let the buzz of these sounds lull me into complacency. Sometimes it's easier to be happy enough.

Dennis bangs on the bar to get everyone's attention.

“Last call!”

People scramble to get one last drink like they might miss the train. Like they haven't already. I finish my beer. I don't want another because my head hurts already. I can't drink like I used to. I ask if he is ready to go. I don't want to be here when the lights go on. He nods. We wave goodbye as Dennis winks. I pull the door open for us and he reaches for it. I wish he would reach for me, but then I remember that I hate him and love him and that he's allergic to my cat.

We step out, alone there next to each other, into the cold air. It's like I can finally breathe again, and I look, and he's breathing too. We walk back up the street, our arms brushing against each other, wanting so much to be with someone else — wanting to be someone else — convincing ourselves that we're happy enough.

To Properly Fill a Space

Long past decision,

The point where good

Wraps round to bad

Arches back to good again

And I am staring,

Still.

Trying to fill a space that is

Too painfully small

Or too painfully large for

My swollen, aching limbs.

Tucked in, spread out,

These limbs do nothing

But accentuate the impossibility

That is my shrinking or swelling

To properly fill a space.

A person of action might

Hack them off, gnaw them away.

But I am staring,

Still.

Reaching and tucking,

Flapping dirty wings

That won't ever dry.

Sun Wrangler

— to a genius and a junkie

And what is better? This power plant,
a central cell that burns like a sun
'til it's spent, or my own — an Ever Ready,
buried in a drawer waiting for expiration?

Even so,
there is a part of you that's proven.
So many suns you've spent already.
How many could be left?
We sit and watch you, waiting. Watch
you wrangle another and pull it in.
Saddle it. Ride it 'til it dies.
It's a painful fascination, the watching
burns our retinas.

But then, who else wrangles suns?

We watch with terror
or respect or love.
We smell your searing flesh,
and it numbs us.
We hear the screaming in spite of you
and we do nothing in spite of ourselves.

You are stronger than you know.
Even in your diffusion you burn us.



First Son, Co. Galway

Tophet

My brother is this long, thin, twisted-rope of a person. He is complicated, and to know him, is to know of him. He is inaccessible. To me, he is everything and nothing depending on when you ask. He was everything the night I took him to his first AA meeting, and the first time he almost died. And the second. I'm not close to him. I can't be. I cling to the possibility that he just hates all women, which may very well be true, and even as his sister, I am not exempt.

Growing up with my brother was hard. I was afraid of him and his disappointment. I swear sometimes his anger was like the wrath of God.

I can think of a hundred times he hit me. The last time, he walked across the checkerboard marble floor of our family room with an urgency that startled me. I guess he still felt close enough to touch me. I was sprawled on the couch. He bent down and hit my leg hard between the muscles. I turtled up, pulling myself inward. He was smiling like he just let go of something terrible.

"God, I haven't done that in so long."

He didn't hit me the next time he came home, or the next, or ever since, so I guess I'm glad he enjoyed it. He hasn't touched me at all, actually, except that morning when he thought he was dying.

He couldn't call our parents, so I got this tearful, terrifying message that my brother was probably dying and would I please come over. I went over.

Our mother said once that until he was eight months old, my brother wouldn't let her put him down. She even held him in the bathroom because otherwise he screamed and screamed. Sitting on the couch, huddled in blankets and shaking, I thought he looked like a child; a child with bloody nostrils, and deep purple circles beneath his sticky eyes.

The illusion was gone.

"Jesus."

The word came out like a breath. He glanced between my face and the rug, back and forth, not really seeing either.

"What did you do?"

I knew without knowing and I was mad and scared. He shook his head. With two long, flat hands he rubbed his face. I sat on the other couch and listened to him.

He was scared and lonely and strung out and wishing he was coked up, or had never been coked up, or was already dead. Each time he hit a dead end, he looked across at me, begging for redirection. Every time, I ached to say something of value and didn't.

He is a genius, really. His intelligence is amazing, and even strung out his mind worked on this higher plane.

He was lost. I couldn't find him.

We played this game when we were little where I wouldn't talk, I would only make sounds and he would interpret for my parents. I was shocked that it worked — that he could understand me. I was not nearly as good an interpreter. I'm still not.

There he was, screaming sounds, screaming words, and still, I couldn't find him.

Then somehow, amid too many faulty connections, there was a glimpse of understanding between us.

Did he want me to hug him? The stretched-carpet skin that covered his frame and pulled across his face was dim and gray. He nodded and we stood up.

He bent low to put his cheek on my shoulder. He was bowed over like a bass clef and his back felt damp and hard. It was more awkward than the first time I had sex, but we tried to act natural and I put as much love into as I could. He smelled like salt and sweat and stale booze. I walked out of the door feeling naked.

We weren't raised with religion, not really. We went to church until I was ten and my brother was thirteen. It had no real effect on us. We were Methodists and without structure and rigor and demands. Our Catholic friends had first communions and mass and P.S.R. We played tic-tac-toe on the donation envelopes. I never found faith. My brother refused to pay attention to any of it. And church fell out of our lives.

I walked to my car. It was calm and warm outside. I left my brother's apartment with terror and respect and love — like a Manson girl? I don't know. It was just after four, and maybe now after fifty-seven hours of peaking and crashing and a makeshift confession, my brother would fall asleep. I wanted to go to the bar and didn't. I went home instead and drank leftover wine and tried to feel like I helped him.

When we were young, my brother sat across from me at the dinner table. We never sat next to each other, I guess because we fought a lot, or maybe because families weren't supposed to sit that way.

It was a pretty ineffective method of conflict resolution. I still kicked his feet as he tried to claim all the space beneath the table for his own. A few times, when our kicks got wild and caught mom's shins by mistake, we had to sit Indian-style on our feet and not talk to one another. I didn't mind not talking to him. I hated him again. I hated him again a lot. But I remember when my brother tried to make a truce with me.

"You and I have not always gotten along," he said. "In fact, we hate each other. But from now on it has to be a united front against the common enemy. Are you in or out?"

He was fourteen and mad because he got grounded for something stupid and declared war on our parents. Maybe he was doing a unit on WWII in school. Whatever it was, his earnestness and importance seemed funny to me even then. Still, I was happy to be on his team for once, and for about a week we wreaked general havoc and conspired and laughed.

Then he wasn't grounded anymore and the alliance fell apart.

My brother decided that he needed to quit drinking. He wanted me to quit with him, but I said it was AA not Weight-Watchers. You can't get a group rate. But I went with him to his first meeting anyway. Moral support, or something.

We walked down the stairs of the coffeehouse/AA meeting place. The smoke and warmth pushed up against us. I walked ahead of him and we sat down. The meeting began with a prayer.

The man who was in charge for the night asked if this was anybody's first meeting. My brother raised his hand and I sat up straight next to him.

"Ok. It's good to have you here. I'm Joe, this is Dave, that's Tom and Greg, and over there is Marcie and Beth. And you are?" the man in charge spoke to my brother.

"My name's John. And I'm ... do you guys still say that?"

"No, you don't have to," the man said.

The room said, "Hi, John."

I was confused. My brother's name is not John. He turned to me and winked.

"Security," he said.

And after passing my brother a bunch of literature and phone numbers and things, the man in charge introduced the main speaker for the evening.

My brother was in AA long enough to get a sponsor, but not long enough to actually meet with him.

His life went on. All of our lives went on.

He got accepted to law school. I got to retake biology.

The night of my brother's first serious overdose, I got a call from one of his friends who sounded just about done himself.

"Hello? This is Peter. I'm calling to tell you that your brother is a little sick."

"A little sick? What the hell does that mean?" I was more annoyed than worried because with my brother and Peter, that really could have meant anything.

"Well, he fell over at the bar and I couldn't pick him up and then these ambulance guys came in and picked him up and took him with them."

"He's unconscious? Jesus. Peter, which hospital did they take him to?"

"Um, hold on a sec." Peter took his mouth away from the phone and started shouting. "Hey, where did they take my friend?" Someone near him said "To the hospital."

Peter got back on the phone and said "To the hospital."

I was done with Peter's bullshit.

"Peter, put someone else on the phone."

There is nothing worse than fucked up people when you're sober, except when there is an emergency involving fucked up people when you're sober.

Finally, I found my brother with tubes in his mouth and nose and IVs in his arms. He was still unconscious. His skin was yellow and thin and rubbery. His hair was matted to his forehead above his right eye, and I wanted to brush it off, but I didn't. A fat, tired nurse walked into the room. She shook her head and made some clucking noise with her tongue.

"That's one lucky man lyin' there."

My face must have shown my bitterness because her eyes opened wide and said, "What? That man had so many chemicals in his system he's lucky his liver, let alone his brain, didn't quit on him."

"Oh." It seemed obvious to me that his system was full of something, and maybe it was a miracle that he was still alive, but lying there, all sweat and rubber and chemicals, I thought he was far from lucky.

She hastily checked his tubes and bags and vital signs. She turned to leave and I wanted to kick her in her saggy-bottomed pants, but I thanked her instead.

I sat in the room for the next eight hours until my brother woke up. He blinked and breathed hard and stretched.

"Hey. Now that you're awake I have to call mom and dad. Ok?"

He sighed and nodded his head and rolled over.

"Yes, he got sick last night. Yes, he is conscious now. No, I'm not sure what exactly happened. Something like that "

I went back to his room and sat on the chair next to his bed. He didn't look at me. He started to say something but didn't. The machines made a peaceful whirring sound that filled the space between us.

It was strange, the removed closeness I felt for him. It was like the time I had a beer with my ex-boyfriend. He had been my first and I had been his first, but there had been many since and so much time and so much everything that the closeness we had had was buried and obscured and misplaced. We didn't talk about it. We just felt it. Close in memory, not in reality.

I felt that way about my brother. We were close now, but it was a dead closeness.

I heard my parents coming down the hall. I tried to remember the sense of urgency I had the night before. It was gone. My parents were terrified. My mom rushed in and brushed the hair off my brother's forehead. She was all questions. I left to get some air.

My brother spent five days in the hospital. Just before he was released, he sat on his bed and pulled the sheets up around his shoulders. He told me that he was afraid to leave and go back to his own life.

As his eyes turned red and filled up, he turned his back to me and said, "But it doesn't matter. I mean, I'm fine. Besides, aren't we all a little too tortured these days?"

When my brother was a freshman in high school, he broke his collarbone playing soccer. He was already asleep when I got home that night. I pushed the door open and peeked in at him. The light that shined through the open doorway fell across his face and chest. He was still dirty from the soccer game and he had this fluffy, white, strap-like thing under his arms and bracing his shoulders. It looked like wings. I meant to laugh, but a cough came out instead. A cough and tears.

My brother spent six months in rehab. He put law school on hold and tried to get better. And he did, for a while.

He took long walks by himself. Everything about him seemed quieter. His footsteps and his voice, even his sharp and bony frame, took on this cautious softness. It was an uneasy peace at best.

But as time continued to pass, his guilt and everyone else's worry dissipated and his sharpness came back, first to his wit, and then to his jaw, and eventually, even back to his clothes. No more wrinkled T-shirts and dirty jeans. He was back, and as scary as it was, everything felt natural again.

Our family had a dynamic that fit. We were Us again. And he was coked up again.

It didn't take long. Inevitably, he over did it. This time, he was unconscious for just over a week. We weren't sure that he was going to wake up. There was anger and guilt and fear and worry. But mostly there were tears.

Ancient Carthaginians had this place, a Tophet, where they buried the bodies of their first-born children. They sacrificed them. They believed that the first ones belonged to God. That was a long time ago. We don't kill babies anymore, not all of them, not my brother. I think maybe he knew he outlived his time; that he never belonged to us. He certainly isn't one of us. And he knew. A part of him was already dead. He sacrificed it himself.

In the hospital bed, his breaths were forced into him by some machine that beeped and purred all around him. His food came through a tube in his nose, an unnatural umbilical cord. We stood around him in loud hospital silence. There were moments we thought he wasn't coming back, that we would have to give up, that we would have to give him up. I was sick and lonely, a mass of rock-hard emptiness.

Before we knew that he would live through this, that he would get better, and that we would eventually be here again, I thought a lot about God and sacrifice. I kept asking questions that can't be answered, and the more I thought about it, the farther away I got, until I ended up at the end of the universe, alone and bitter.

Somewhere out there, I thought I saw my brother.

Torn

This much is true —
I never liked the torturer
In me,
Despite the way it seems.
And even that once
It was temporary —
My power drying fast,
A worm on summer blacktop.
And there I was,
Hopelessly fucking torn
The me that beats you
Bloody-knuckled and
Shame-faced. Eyes and fists down.
And the me that is beaten,
Bloody-lipped and shameless
All at once.
And hopelessly fucking torn.

Delmar Lounge, 2002

You were hurt, and I liked you because
You were hurt, and because you looked like
A whole lifetime of hurt, and because
I was hurt too, but you couldn't tell.
Or maybe you could, but I think it was more
That my shirt was too small and I let you
Squeeze the fat on my sides.
You smiled and squeezed too hard and
I liked it. Your front tooth was chipped,
Just a bit, and I thought I might love you.
And you smiled because
You knew you were hurt
But you didn't *know* you were hurt.
And we drank because it was time to drink.

We stood there with each other and
My sides stung from your tight fingers.
I wanted it to hurt.
And we left. And I waited. And you came.
And it didn't hurt.
So I bit my lip, and then my finger.
I pulled my tight pants back on and stood up to
Leave. You were already sleeping.
And I was happy because after all,
It did hurt a little,
And the sidewalk was cool
And the bar was still open.

Feeling Things

“Can you feel that?”

She lightly ran the tip of her index finger across the back of his from the first knuckle to the nail.

“I know you’re doing it.”

“But can you feel it?”

“You mean if I’m not watching you?”

“Yeah, I guess. If you don’t watch me do it would you know I was touching you?”

“No.”

He moved his hand from hers and squeezed her thigh. Her pants were too tight. He looked at her face. She was still watching his hand and her wire-rimmed glasses tilted up on one side. Her hair was falling out of a loose ponytail. She seemed much younger than he had first thought.

“Are you going back to the doctor?”

“Sure, I still have to get the stitches out.”

“Will you tell him you can’t feel your fingers?”

“I don’t know.”

He was just sort of talking, letting her go where she wanted. He would probably pull the stitches out himself, in the bathroom with toenail clippers, but her concern seemed genuine so he humored her.

She took his hand from her leg and covered it lightly with her palm. Without taking her eyes from the stitches she leaned toward him and said, “I mean, you have to be able to feel things.”

Her whole body seemed to mean it, and it made him forget all the disgusting things he would usually say when someone talked about “feeling things”.

“All right. I’ll tell him.” And for a moment he meant it.

“Good.”

She came back to him then and smiled and rolled down the window of the cab.

“I love the fall.”

She put her face into the wind and closed her eyes. She crossed her leg toward him, and he reached out and rubbed the exposed skin of her ankle with his thumb and forefinger. Her skin felt thin and soft and cool. His thumb came to rest in the shallow spot just below her ankle bone. Her eyes stayed closed and it seemed like she had always been there, picking at the peeling plastic of the green seat. She belonged with him, a man she had met two hours ago and screwed in the ladies’ room. She belonged in that cab, next to him, headed to his apartment to screw again.

The cab stopped beside his building. She leaned forward and paid the driver. When they stepped out, the cab pulled away and left its space between them. It was the farthest apart they had been since she walked into the bar, and he started to feel awkward until she smiled and walked over to him and raised her arms to let him slide his hands around her waist. He held her close and felt happy.

“Come on.”

He led her up the stairs and along the hall to his place. He didn't usually bring women to his apartment. It was small and messy and the whole place seemed very brown.

He told her that as he opened the door and she looked at him over the top of her glasses and said, “It's no public restroom, but...”

The intimacy of laughter struck him more than her half-naked body had, and he looked at the floor. She ran her hand across the radiator and traced a chipped piece of paint with her finger.

“I've got beer and orange juice.”

“Gin?”

“Scotch.”

“Even better.”

He walked across the room to the kitchenette and bent down to get the mostly-full bottle of scotch from beneath the sink. He stood up and she was glancing through a pile of mail. He saw her mouth his name and put the mail back down.

“I'm sorry. I couldn't remember. You seem like a Jake, but I knew that wasn't right.”

“It's Jack.”

“I know. Now I know. Sorry.”

“It's fine.”

“Do you know my name?”

“Yes.”

“Of course you do.”

“It’s Liv.”

“Of course.”

“Isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

They seemed far apart again. She walked across the room and opened the window behind him. She took a drink from his glass of scotch and pressed her body against his back.

“That’s better.”

She felt hot against him, between him and the cool air from the window. He turned around and thought that he had always known her name.

Two hours later they were almost sleeping on the futon. He had his back to her and she was curled around him like a small sleepy animal. He was naked and she lay there running her fingertips over the back of his numb fingers. Then she gently pulled away from him and slid to the edge.

It was still dark outside and the room was cold from her open window. She was pulling up her pants when he opened his eyes. He lay still, watching her body blinkingly in the darkness. She was curvier than he usually liked. He mostly went for thin and dark and skanky. She was soft and full. She looked like the type that wanted clean and soft, but she wasn’t. She had walked up to the bar and stood close to him, her hip against his leg.

She had put her fingers on top of his bandaged hand and said, “What happened to you?”

He had told her that some thugs pushed him through a glass window and that he had thirty-seven stitches in his wrist and hand, and nerve damage in his fingers. She had asked to see it and he had unwrapped it and she seemed worried. They had talked and while they talked, he had put his hands on her and squeezed the flesh on her waist with his good hand. She had pressed herself closer to him. Fifteen minutes later he had followed her into the bathroom. Now she was bending over looking for her shirt and he saw her belly over the top of her pants.

He wanted her again and he moved to get up, but she turned to him and said “Good morning, sweetheart. Have you seen my shirt?”

He sat up in bed and rubbed his face hard with both hands and shook his head.

“No, I haven’t. Did you look down there?” He pointed to the foot of the futon and she stepped closer to him and looked.

“Thank you.”

He moved to get up but she put her hand on his shoulder and half smiled and said, “Lie back down.”

She pushed gently until his head was back on the pillow. She didn’t seem as young or as desperate or as electric as she had. Her body had lost its live-wire quality, except in her near-perfect breasts, which held on to it effortlessly, and in her half-smiling face, which she forced to keep charged. She cocked her head to one side and let her

shoulders relax and blinked slowly. She put her shirt on and then her glasses and kissed him hard on his mouth. Her breath was light and warm with sour alcohol.

“I should go.” She scanned the room for anything she might have left as she bent to slide her shoes on.

“All right. That’s everything. Bye.”

She kissed him again quickly and smiled at him as she closed the door behind her.

“Bye” he said to his closed door. He slept into the afternoon.

He thought about looking for her as soon as he woke up, but there was nothing to say. He shut the window and sat down in his only chair. He picked at the white, synthetic stuffing that poked through the worn, brown skin. His mother loved to tell the story about when he was three and he took a big dump behind that chair. The story and the color of the chair always made him think of turds and he thought about them for a moment. When he left home his folks let him take the chair and his dead uncle’s dresser from the garage. They had never seen his place and he figured it was probably a good thing since even though it was cheap, which they liked, it was not neat. It was small and brown, kind of like a turd, but he was comfortable and he could afford it.

He sat for the rest of the afternoon, flipping through his five channels and thinking how only a few hours ago there was someone with him in his bed. He knew that it was real, he did not question that. Instead, he sat wondering about how things change from one moment to the next. How very, very quickly things change. Yesterday, she

didn't exist and now it was just her and his chair and their almost empty glasses of scotch, and her smell, very faintly, on his pillow.



Green Road

Covered in Your Tracks

The first time I spread my legs
to straddle this humming metal horse
of yours, I wrapped my arms around
your waist and felt the wires
come alive inside me.

Your motor revving, stuttering
into a whine, I followed you —
my cheek pressed into the
worn black flesh of your coat.

The smoke from someone's fire
and our oily exhaust
came in with the cold. Hard air.
And I held it there, hollow.
I felt the road beneath us
like I was the road and
it was good, for a while, to be
covered in your tracks.

Story

What is it about night and sleep and smoke? They were all the same to him. They all left him with the same feeling of hot then cold, of tight then loose. On nights that Joe couldn't sleep he sat in the dark on the hardwood floor beneath his open window and smoked. It was rest. He sat Indian-style and his legs fell asleep, first in his toes then up slowly through his calves into his hamstrings, finally overtaking his ass cheeks. He pretended he was melting into the floor, inch by frozen inch. Last week he melted too much and he woke up when his head cracked against the floor. He jerked himself upright and was frozen again. He lit another cigarette.

From a colorless dark blue to light gray to dirty yellowish orange, his window digested the night. He knew it came from the sun and the rotation of the earth but sometimes he couldn't stop the feeling that the light came from inside him, from his stomach, because he wanted it to. He stretched his arms above his head and his legs out in front of him. He was glad that another lost night had been swallowed, and he left his introspection on the floor.

The smell of stale smoke disgusted Joe. It coated him like thick, rotten peanut butter and he took long showers to wash it off. He finished the expensive shampoo Sarah bought for him. He liked it. He would not buy it for himself. Now, it was gone. Like Sarah's smell. Like Sarah. He was over self-pity even before she died. Anger too, was mostly gone. Confusion, frustration, a hint of bitterness; those things were left. He breathed deeply, steam and soap and shampoo. He hummed some soap commercial, but

she was still with him. He let himself float through it all again, quickly and lightly. It was six months before their wedding. She noticed this tiny gray bump on her tongue. She wasn't worried about it. Her father was. She went to the doctor to make her father happy. It tore him apart. Two months after her diagnosis they removed her tongue and half of her lower jaw. She lost her hair and her smile. Then, six weeks later, after the poking and puking and swelling and draining, her twenty-six years ended in convulsions. When it was finally over, when she had been buried near her mother, and the hospital smell had been washed from all his clothes, he was able to think about her. He remembered her mostly when she had hair and a mouth. There were the mornings he reached out and put his hand on her stomach. He had marveled about how tiny she was and how she anticipated his hand like it was her own. He scratched at his own hairy stomach, white and slick from the foamy lather. He thrust his head under the hot stream of water and forced the air from his lungs. He tried to rinse her off or breathe her out. Just for a second. The soap slid off his body and circled slowly around the half-clogged drain before it was sucked down. He turned the shower off and left for work.

The door on his red, late-model ford pick-up didn't close right. He had to slam it hard, usually twice, and then push it in the rest of the way with his hip. He liked its character. Its ride was rough. It let him feel the road. The sedan he drove before was sleek and smooth and boring. He bought the truck after Sarah died, after he quit med school. He couldn't imagine a lifetime of charts and meds and tests. He wanted to do something real. Something that wasn't so clinical. His parents were disappointed when he took a job at the Williamson Home for delinquent and abused young men. It was a non-profit, partly

government subsidized residential facility for boys between the ages of ten and sixteen. It wasn't glamorous. It didn't pay like being a surgeon would. His parents had always expected that he would come around. For the first year his mom left almost tearful messages for him:

“Joe, honey? It's mom. Dad and I just worry about you. You have a gift. You're special. I know you can do it if you just try. We'll be here for you. You know that, right?” followed by an audible sigh and then the long cold dial tone.

Joe let them be concerned. They were good at it. Joe knew they loved him. The kids who came to stay at the Williamson Home didn't usually have parents that loved them. They had parents that hit them and burned them and had sex with them. Joe tried not to think about all that more than he had to. He tried to focus on being a good role model, on being trustworthy, on being gentle. As a rule, he did not swear in front of the boys. They got enough of that everywhere else. The kids didn't know what to make of him at first. They did what they knew how to do, some by yelling, some by spitting, one by hiding the closet for days. They weren't sure about a man that could keep his temper until they had tested and retested him. Slowly, one by one, they came to an understanding with Joe. Sometimes they broke down. Joe did what he could to put them back together, but there were too many pieces missing, or they were crushed into too many tiny splinters. Like David. He was the first kid Joe met at the home. He was shy and wiry, almost fifteen. He had this habit of twisting a chunk of his mousy hair, right above his temple. It wasn't just a nervous tick. He did it all the time. He was smart, mostly. Joe had been helping him with algebra. When David didn't come down to the study hall Joe

walked upstairs to his room. The door was open wide and David was on the floor with his hands clenched tightly in his hair.

“David. What’s going on? You ready to do some algebra?”

David didn’t move except for the gentle rocking back and forth. Sometimes, you can’t push these kids. Joe wanted to let him work it out, develop coping skills.

“David? I’m gonna give you some space and close the door unless you tell me otherwise.”

He got no response. Joe stepped quietly into the hallway, the dark maroon carpet sticky in places beneath his feet. He reached out for the door but David shot up and stood blocking Joe’s arm.

“What? What did you say?” David was visibly shaking and he screamed the words into Joe’s face. “I didn’t say close the door. I didn’t excuse you.”

Joe stepped back slowly, putting space between them. He spoke softly and slowly.

“David. I need you to calm down. It’s just me. Joe. I came to help you with your homework. Now I’m going to leave you alone so you can calm down.”

Joe started to walk away hoping to cool the meltdown, but David’s face turned red. With his left hand he pulled at his hair. He was squeezing something in his right.

“I didn’t say you could move.”

David charged out of his room and threw Joe into the wall, his one-hundred-and-ten-pound frame somehow powerful enough to tackle Joe. He struck Joe in the head three times before he was able to pull the boy off and sit on his chest to keep him still. The yelling had drawn the other kids from their rooms and the psych team

was there in moments. Joe felt the wetness of his blood before he realized what it was. It ran onto his lips and he tasted it. He watched as the front of his shirt turned red. He was surprised by the brightness, the vividness of his blood. He tried to open David's hand to see what had cut him.

“David, let go. I need to see what's in your hand. Please open your hand now. I don't want you to get cut.”

David held on tightly until Joe pried his fingers open. Then David let him take the curved piece of metal from his hand.

“What is this? Is this from your window?”

It looked like the handle David reported broken over three weeks ago.

“David, did anyone fix this for you? Did it break again? Why didn't you tell me it was still broken?”

David was not talking, not moving. He stared away from Joe, his eyes not focused. A little patch of pink scalp showed through his hair. It was the size of a quarter, just above his temple. Joe consciously slowed his breathing. He wanted to swear, it's just what you do at a time like this, but he resisted the impulse and sat quietly. He got twenty-seven stitches in all, mostly on his forehead and around his right eye. David was transferred to a facility for kids with mental illnesses. Joe fought against the move. David had promise, he was special. In the end, Joe didn't have any say in the matter, and David went to “the best place for children with needs like his.” Joe felt like quitting. He didn't.

There were other instances, other kids. One thirteen-year-old killed himself by jumping out the fourth story window. Perhaps reality was too real. Joe wanted to help

these kids, it was not just a job, but he was too late most of the time. Joe had enjoyed the small, everyday victories, like getting through the day without being spit on, or getting Tony, the mostly illiterate fourteen-year-old, to read the funnies to him. Joe had been spending most of his nights on the floor beneath his window, and fatigue and hopelessness were beginning to wear him down. Then Kevin moved into the Home in the first cold week in October. Joe showed him his room, he explained the rules, told him about the game room. Kevin held on to the green nylon strap of his duffel bag tightly with two hands. He nodded when Joe paused and his floppy, dark hair fell in front of his eye. He flicked it back with a sharp turn of his head.

“Does all that makes sense? What else do you need to know? Oh, lights out at 10:30. Ok?”

“Yessir,” Kevin responded in an automatic monotone.

“Kevin, don’t call me sir. Call me Joe. All right?”

“All right,” Kevin half-smiled and looked at him with giant eyes. “Thanks Joe.”

As much as Joe put into his work, he respected certain boundaries. Working with boys these days almost seemed to imply some sort of sexual perversion. Joe was careful to keep doors open when he was in a room with a kid. He abstained from playing video games and watching anything but sports on T.V. He tried to maintain his position of authority in a quiet, subtle way. Beyond that, he realized that the kids needed him in different ways. The younger boys often wanted to be close, to share everything with him. They latched on to anything positive. The older kids tended to be more aloof. They were subtle in their acceptance and appreciation of him. Or they ignored him altogether. Kevin

didn't fit into any category. He was a smart, sarcastic sixteen-year-old. He didn't seem damaged, broken like the other kids. He smiled sometimes just because and his eyes were always everywhere, taking it all in. Sometimes, Joe wondered how Kevin could be so "well adjusted." When he pulled Kevin's file, he learned that he was molested by both his father and stepfather for almost three years. Joe put the file back in the huge cabinet, filled with other files that were filled with the same awful pasts. It was impossible to understand what the kids felt. Some days he felt lucky that his own tragedy was over, that his life could go on, that what he experienced was a natural part of life. What these kids had been through was at the very least, unnatural.

Two months after he arrived, Kevin tried to run away for the first time. The Police brought him back the same night, smiling. He had been spotted in the park a few miles south of the Home talking with a group of men. The Police had tried to scare him a bit, asking if he knew what freaks in the park might do to him, but Kevin shrugged like all teenagers do and tried to act as though he were listening. Joe was disappointed, not angry. When the Police left Joe led Kevin into the study.

"What's going on? I thought you were doing ok here."

"I am."

"Then what's with running away?"

"I wasn't running away. I just wanted to get out for a bit."

"You can't just 'get out for a bit.' That's not how things work around here. If you need to get out you tell somebody. There are plenty of people here who will go with you."

“I know. I just wanted to be alone for a while.”

“Ok. I can live with that. But this is going to be a reported incident. I have to put it in your file. I know it’s not so great here, but Kevin, there are places that are so much worse. This is your first report. If you try this again, you won’t be allowed to live here anymore. That’s not up to me. So, if you want to stay here, it’s up to you. Ok?”

“Ok.”

“Good. All right. We’re done here. Time for bed.”

Joe patted Kevin’s shoulder as they stood up. As he brushed past, Joe smelled sweat and smoke and Old Spice. He realized that he didn’t want to know what happened in the park.

Joe took the long way home that night. He recommended additional therapy for Kevin in the morning. He didn’t know what else to do.

It only took a few days for things to get back to normal. Kevin seemed like himself, and Joe pretended to forget the whole thing. It was a cold night in February when Kevin disappeared again. Joe didn’t report it right away. He thought maybe Kevin was still on the grounds somewhere, then he thought maybe Kevin would come back before anyone noticed. When he didn’t come back, Joe went to look for him. Joe double slammed the door of his truck, rubbing his gloved hands together ineffectively. He drove around the Home, just in case, then he headed for any place teenage related. He stopped at the arcade, at the Wal-Mart, at McDonald’s. He drove by each of the places again. He turned towards the park unwillingly. He circled the exterior three times before he pulled into the central road. He had to turn the high beams on to see. His stomach was hard, he

breathed lightly, bursts of frozen breath whitening the air. And then there he was. Sitting by himself, toeing a patch of filthy, week old snow. Joe stopped the car. Kevin looked at him and then back at the snow. He didn't move.

“Kevin, I need you to get in the truck so I can take you back to the Home.”

“So, I can pack my bags?”

“No. I haven't reported you missing yet. If you get in now, we can keep this between us.”

“Really?” A small conspiratorial smile spread on his face.

“Yes. But don't think there won't be consequences.”

Kevin stood and brushed the leaves from his back side. He wore a light jacket and no gloves. He opened the door of the truck and slid in quickly. Looking at him, Joe could see how young he was. He was almost beardless, a few stray whiskers below his nose, and his neck was thin. He stared out of the window in front of him, no longer smiling, concentrating hard. The air in the car was still cold, and Kevin's breath came out in long billowy strands.

“Let's go.”

Joe turned back to the road and steered out of the park. When they pulled up in front of the home, Joe turned to unbuckle his seatbelt. Kevin had already taken his off. He reached for Joe. He held on behind Joe's head, pulling him closer. He thrust the other hand into Joe's crotch grabbing frantically at his zipper. Joe felt Kevin's slippery tongue before he knew what was happening. He pulled his head away, but Kevin tugged at him wildly. Joe raised his forearm and thrust Kevin back, pinning him against the door.

“What the fuck are you doing, you little fucking sicko? Jesus fucking Christ.”

Joe could not catch his breath. He held Kevin there against the door, staring at him in anger, searching for a clue.

“What the fuck? Seriously, What the fuck. I come and find you; I try to take care of you and you try to...I don't know what the fuck you were trying to do.”

There was not a word to describe the look on Kevin's face. It was empty, it meant nothing and everything. Joe pushed against Kevin again with his forearm and his head bend forward on his thin neck like a dying tulip.

“Get out of the car.”

Joe let go and walked inside. Kevin followed behind mechanically.

“Go to bed.”

“Yessir.”

Joe quit working at the Williamson Home the next day. At times he felt like he abandoned them, just like everybody else. Then he thought that they were broken children that would soon be broken adults. He couldn't fix them. He couldn't sew them up or give them transplanted lives. As he sat on the floor, cold beneath his open window, he lit another cigarette and tried to be frozen. But his fingers tingled and his back ached and he couldn't stop his blood from circulating.

Swallow me

Your walking in is the milk letting down,
Uncomfortable, inevitable, and I am full
For your unwanted mouth, in spite of myself.
My words, the leanest bits of me
My organs, that heart, the softest —
I snip like herbs for the stewing.
Scrape the scales from my scalp
To sprinkle in your bowl.
You, the blinking, the floating away.
And me, the bleeding, the following after.
Early, so early, I bite them off for you, these fingers
Pink tendons that snapped, flesh as pulp
I chewed for you, wet on my tongue and dropped.
“Swallow” my bloodied mouth urges.
And still there was nothing you wanted from me
Save ballast for the couch.
My TV dinner body, pale and cold. And waiting.
And you, a thing not made for eating.



In Between

Letter

My body could bring you here
Would stretch, give for your growing form
Even without me.
But skin is pliable. And thin.
Not like concrete or steel or nighttime.
Not the angry pieces in me, or the fragile.
Nothing gives like skin, baby.
Not me, and not the world.
Even if I tried.
Still, I know I could love you,
The soft sleeping piece of myself,
I could love you.
But even you know,
In your tiny non-existence,
In your enormous and looming non-existence,
That that's not enough,
Not ever enough.
I could never love you enough.

Inside, on the subway

Veins like rivers.

Tender purple streams

beneath the cool, thin flesh of her palm.

Tiny, untraceable rivers that begin and end inside her.

She watches for their still motion, feeling it nonetheless in her

Chest and thighs and feet. She has those things now too,

Not recognizing their absence until their return.

Eyelids raise and lower and raise again.

Her chest moves like an ocean.

Almost undetectable chemicals control her internal

Processes. The ones she can't see. The other ones she can't see.

She feels their distant rumblings like aftershocks. Or the motion

Of the subway, except the subway rumbles beneath her.

She sits across from herself in the darkness,

The car not being full. Her coat is green and heavy and

She doesn't recognize it on herself. She watches

Her shoulders move with the rocking of

The car, her stacked vertebrae allowing this.

Her head is loud with sounds outside itself.

Clicking and mumbling vibrate her

Near microscopic ear bones.

Still, she is quiet.

She has muffled herself in a green coat,

And rubber soled shoes.

Her movement is the movement of the subway,

Round metal on flat metal. Mechanisms she can't now see.

The darkness passes as she sits,

Her eyes and her glass eyes.

Inside her rivers flow.

An ocean swells.

She moves beyond herself.

Middle

Undeveloped

You're still here. I knew you were. Your brown dress shoes are in the closet. I slept in your t-shirt last night. But today I was cleaning, I'm always cleaning these days, and I found you, your latent image rolled tightly in four undeveloped rolls of film. You were in a box, in a drawer, in a cabinet. It is strange that someone as young as I am has so many hidden places, so many shoe box-sized receptacles that are filled and tucked away, but I'm not good at letting go, and things have a way of seeping. In a box with our photographs, bits of paper, your grandmother's address, I found you. Images of you, of moments lived, not yet relived, were wound inside tiny, lightless containers. I felt my chest winding again, felt my hair wound tightly around your big fingers, and found my own finger wrapped around these moments of you that are gone, but are not. I thought about developing them, watching you surface in the safe-light, seeing what I have already seen. But we won't develop differently, despite my careful hands and measured chemicals and proper agitation. And it breaks my heart to leave you there, knowing but not knowing. And it should be enough that you're here on tiny scraps of paper, and folded in with my laundry, and waiting here in a drawer to smile because you love me. It should be enough. I said it was.

Time to Learn

It is time you learned, they say.
And supposing they would teach you, I will have to intervene.
The things that they would tell you
They are telling to themselves.
 a canker sore they lick and lick.
 “See how red it is?”
And there are things they will not tell you —
Consider the violence in a chair.
But truly it will come to you, the horror
That is being, in so many gentle maimings
A thousand limping pigeons sent to break your heart.
So, remember this, I guess;
 Every animal is cold
 Heal does not mean fix
 Things will bleed and bleed
So I pop these stitches like champagne corks
To see what bleeding does, and have a drink to them.
Those ones who would have you learn.
Those ones who think they’d teach you.

Thoor Ballylee

Because the world is shit (and everybody knows it)
Let's stop the fatuous smiling
When a cashier gives the change, when the bus driver pulls to the curb
That hollow gratitude we shellac ourselves in.
"Oh, I love your eyebrows."
Enduring his interests like throwing a stick
for the dog who never tires "Mmm, lovely."
And can I stop pretending that having my tea in this paper cup
Isn't ruining the whole thing?
So hard to keep my eyes from rolling, the old woman
So happy, so eager, to share her boring stories.
Three minutes I'll never get back, or six, who knows? A lifetime?
I wasn't talking.
Some try to wash them out, the jaded spots that bloom
A song or sound or mouse. A little thing that catches
And scrapes a bit away.
And some let it grow, full and thick. A thousand mallet
Strikes to break it. Or one really good one,
Life being the dealer. Blah, blah, blah.
I have a tip: If you don't want your moustache waxed, don't grow one.
And one more: Dear god, do not care.

Tom

“Tom, is that you? Don’t slam that door! What the hell took you so long? And don’t tell me that truck broke again. I told you to get it fixed last week but did you listen? Well, I’ll tell you what, that money’s comin’ out ‘a your half ‘a your check. I ain’t gonna scrimp and save cause your too lazy to get a damn truck looked at. And take those muddy shoes off. Well don’t just leave ‘em there! I ain’t your god damn maid!”

“You ain’t no kind a maid, that’s for sure.”

“What did you say to me! You better shut your damn mouth. You ain’t no kinda man, and that’s for damn sure. No lazy, worthless man is gonna tell me I can’t keep a house.”

“Nadine, I am not in the mood tonight.”

“Well that’s just it ain’t it? You ain’t never in the mood! When was the last time you satisfied me? When was the last time you came close to satisfyin’ me? You know what? I’d like to know the last time you so much as got it up. You worthless piece a crap. If I’d a known I was getting some lame idiot I’d a never showed up at that weddin’.”

Tiny, iridescent beads of sweat made Tom’s face look slick. His hands turned to tense rocks at his side. Anger shaded his face red, but shame kept his eyes on the floor.

She was right. It had been a while, a long while, but how was he supposed to love a woman this angry? Saying she was right only made her more vicious, and he never could sweep her off her feet, even when he had wanted to. So he would just have to take it. But damn, she tried his nerve. Sayin’ he was lazy, well hell, he’d gone in an hour early every day for the past two weeks. Ain’t none a the guys at work have to put up with this

much. And blood kept bursting through the capillaries in his face and neck. It made him hot, and he kept sweating. A man's got his limits. Damn, even a good man.

“What the hell're you bein' so quiet for? Now you can't talk neither? Great, now I've got a damn mute on my hands.”

“Nadine, I think you should be quiet.”

“Praise the lord he can talk! But don't you tell me to be quiet! I'll say whatever I damn well please and you can just take it. Like you always do. Like a god damn kid. What am I your mother? No, if I was you're mama you probably would be able to get it up, you sick son of a bitch.”

And that was it. No man had to take that. He flattened out his hand and raised it until his fingers touched the peeling paint of the door frame, and brought it down swift with the force of years. And she was on the floor when she looked up to see him breathing heavy through his teeth. Tiny drops of spittle spraying and gathering in the corners of his snarled lips. But there, obscuring her view of his face was ...? No, is that ...

Tom stepped away, his face staring up at the ceiling, with his eyes closed tight. His face glared red, but his neck had deepened to purple. He closed his lips and clenched them, as if he could suck all that blood, all that feeling back into his belly. He expected shame immediately. He was raised right. He knew you don't hit a woman, but shame didn't come. He stood braced for humility, but his own strength and her silence, silence finally, made him feel... good. Very good. Powerful and strong, like a man, a damned man perhaps, but man no less. And it occurred to him, like a slap across the face, that he

was turned on. He wanted to fuck. He looked down at her. She stared back at him with a puffy, dark face, somehow without anger. In fact, she looked amazed. Not shocked, but pleasantly surprised. And it struck her that she wanted him.

“Baby, let’s go to bed. I think we could both use a good night.”

She had to talk. That damn woman can’t keep quiet. And alongside his desire rose disgust. What, that stupid woman wants to get slapped around? That’s why she’s been bitchin’ all this time?

“Shit, why don’t you go get in bed, I got to get somethin’ in the bathroom.”

“Alright, but don’t you take too long.”

Christ.

Tom stepped over her in the doorway and went through their bedroom into the bathroom. As he started to get undressed, he heard her getting in bed. He saw himself in the mirror. What the hell was he gonna please her for? And he decided not to.

“What’cha doin’ in there? Don’t keep me waitin’ all night.”

But Tom refused to hear her. He sweated, and bit his lip to keep quiet. Two minutes, three...and a half. Huuuh! His breath came out, all of it, as though it had been trapped forever. And without it his spine felt loose, slack. Whew.

“Tom, are you alright? What the hell are you doin’ in there?”

That same irritation trickled in her voice, while the bathroom door opened. Not hesitantly, but not with great force either, and there was Tom in the open door way, pants open, smiling, sweaty, and spent.

Confusion danced across her eyebrows for an instant. Then her entire face settled into shock. Eyes wide, mouth wide ... and she was speechless. And the look on her face was worth another ten years of abuse, if he felt like takin' it.

What Good

It's raining and she's edgy. She opens the window to feel it raining, to make sure that it's real, and the air the window sucks in, that she sucks in, is cold and wet. The air snaps in her lungs like sheets snap when they are smoothed. Her palm, extended beyond the windowsill, catches meaty drops without effort. She pulls her hand back inside and examines its patchy wetness. Her palm is pink and fleshy, slick from the drops of rain that have rolled into one another, now a tiny pool in her cupped hand. She feels reflection encroaching, can't help but trace the path of drops on her skin with her fingertip, and gives herself slowly, yields slowly, to the past she feels concentrating within her.

"Why do you want to do this Cat?" he said with a forced show of irritability as he buckled his seatbelt and readjusted the mirror.

He was fidgeting more than he normally did, awaiting her response. She stared out the window, her eyes concentrating but unfocused. She didn't move. She had made her decision. He sighed, put his hands on the wheel and lost the confidence he had in being angry. He looked to her and started the car to demonstrate his cooperation. He put his hand on her thigh and squeezed gently with his fingertips.

"Are you sure this is what you want?"

"Yes" she exhaled, ready to feel the car in motion, her body moving to a determined point.

She heard his words again as though they were her own. She searched herself for an answer, is this what you want? And came up with nothing besides a tension in her insides that was anxious and eager and as fresh as it had been for all these years.

In the car with Michael, finally on the road, she was able to calm herself. The decision had been made, the bags packed, doors locked. She was traveling towards him. Again. Still. Her father was not well and she was driving west, from Baltimore to Chicago to be near him. Michael had been against it. And though he didn't mention all the instances of her father's indifference and cruelty, Cat knew what he meant when he said he didn't think it was a wise decision to go visit.

"You can call every day. I don't know why you have to go across the country to sit in the same room with the man."

Michael tried to protect her. He had witnessed some of her father's episodes and he was unable to understand the bond they shared. Michael's own family was fairly close, but the intimacy of Cat and her father's relationship was unrecognizable to him. It was uncomfortable and raw, and watching it grind into Cat was almost too much for him. She was aware of how Michael felt. She understood that he couldn't understand. She didn't really know herself except that he was her only family, and her father, and had raised her, and that in some, maybe sick way, they needed one another. Michael had met Cat's father, Mick, about three months after he and Cat moved in together. Cat had been nervous about putting it off for so long, but her anxiety about her father's reaction kept her away. That was seven years ago. She and Michael had been together for just over a year when they first made the journey to her childhood home in Chicago. They had

driven the same interstates then, watched the same towns and fields roll by, and Cat was quiet then too, trying to keep her anxiety from spreading to Michael. She had tried to prepare him, had warned him about her father's hardness, but Michael was confident in his loose khakis and young tanned skin. She loved his smile and his certainty. Though he was a year older, twenty-three to her twenty-two back then, he seemed much younger, much lighter. Smiles rested easily on him and she couldn't shake the thought that he had a very young soul.

That first night in her father's house while they cleaned off the table, Cat felt that she had taken some of that from him, that bringing him near her father had harmed him. She blamed herself. Everything went well until dinner.

Her father had come out onto the front porch to meet them. He had hugged her and taken Michael's hand, "Call me Mick."

He showed them to their separate rooms, as Cat had told Michael he would. Her father was so near pleasant that Cat was able to joke with Michael while they cooked. She bounced her hip against his and laughed when he spilled the green bean juice on the counter. If her guard had not been compromised by her father's mild behavior, if she had not been distracted by Michael as he fought to put her at ease, she would have seen it coming, would not have been blindsided so completely. But sitting next to Michael at the table, remembering the safety in distance she had grown accustomed to, Cat was momentarily unprepared for her father's words.

"So, you two live together now."

It was a statement, not a question, and Cat's stomach hardened. Michael nodded, his cheek full of chicken, and tried to swallow quickly in order to respond, but Mick had his eyes locked on Cat.

"Yes, Dad," she had responded, her shoulders rolling forward.

"You're not married," he had said, still staring.

"No, we're not Dad. We don't want to get married." Cat had nearly crouched, her body tensing against him.

"That's something stupid women say when they can't get a man to stick around." He had kept his jaw working, chewing hard.

"Dad, we just don't think it's necessary." Cat had said.

"Well. I hope you're enjoying your whore's life out on the East coast."

He spit out the word 'whore' like it actually tasted dirty. He had held Cat's eyes a moment, widening his own for emphasis, to clarify that he had not misspoken. Michael had half snorted, thinking it was a joke, but Cat's eyes on her plate and her unmoving hands tight in her lap had silenced him. She had sat like that, still, while her father finished his dinner. He had dropped his fork in the middle of his plate, pushed himself away from the table and glared at Cat as he said, "I'll let you two clean this up."

Michael had written off her father after that visit, though he had asked, almost hopelessly, if there had been any good times. Cat told him that yes, there had been, and she had sat next to him in the car, traveling ninety miles an hour away from her father, sifting through the small but very real collection of happy memories. His pride at her first

communion, their fishing trip to Idaho, the way he patted her head with something like tenderness whenever her mother's death was mentioned; there had been good times.

"Cat, how are you?" Michael's voice brought her back.

"I'm fine."

"Are you sure? Do we need to stop?"

"Michael, I'll tell you if I need to stop. I'm fine."

She looked at him as he glanced between her and the road, looking for signs that she was not fine. He grinned at her. She smiled back, one eyebrow slightly raised. For the first time in the two months since it happened she felt something sexy going on between them. She let Michael run his hand along her thigh and brush the hair back behind her ear. It felt good to be touched, and Cat ran her hand along Michael's thin forearm. Michael had been extremely careful with her recently. Cat loved him and his concern, but it was a constant reminder that things were not as they should be. His hand between her legs, not rubbing her shoulders as it had been for months, felt good.

When Cat woke up, they were somewhere in Ohio. The road was gray and flat, like the air. The embankments along the highway were yellow, full of the soft, wave like motion of tall grasses. Michael was concentrating, his face pulled in around his mouth like he was sucking on something sour.

"What are you thinking about over there?" Cat stretched against her seatbelt.

"What did your Dad say when you told him about the baby?"

“I already told you. He asked me what good could come of it. He said I was having a bastard, that we couldn’t raise a baby in an apartment and that we couldn’t afford a child since we don’t work.”

“Even though we’re committed to one another, looking for a house, and both work two jobs? The man’s insane.”

“Yes, he is.”

“But what did he say when you told him we lost her?”

“He didn’t say anything.”

“Nothing?”

“Nope.”

“How did he say nothing?”

“I didn’t tell him.”

“Cat.” Michael’s eyes were wide. His lips got whitish, and he gripped the wheel hard with both hands. “How did you not tell him? Cat this is sick. I can’t let you see him like this. What’s he going to say? No. I don’t want to know what he’s going to say, and I don’t want you to know. This is sick. You want to tell him in person?”

“I think he’ll figure it out.”

“Cat. Honey. Listen to me. Your father is an ass. He is mean to you. He gets off on being mean to you, and you want to show up on his doorstep, with your ‘boy that won’t marry you’ when you’re supposed to be eight months pregnant, but you’re not? Cat I don’t think this is healthy.”

“I know it’s not good. It’s not going to be good.” Cat’s voice was quiet. She looked out the window, her shoulders rolled forward.

“Cat. I’m not mad, honey. I’m worried about you. We’re both still raw from all this. Cat, sit up. It’s ok. I’ll go in first and tell him, and when he starts in at you, we’re leaving. That’s all.”

“Michael, I want to tell him myself. I need to.”

“Why do you think you have to do this? You don’t, you know. You don’t owe him anything.”

“I know.”

There had been a time when she agreed with Michael, when she was certain she would stay away from her father forever. She knew that she was not whore, and that fathers should not call their daughters whores, even if they were. She knew that she was a good person, that she was grateful for everything that she had received, and that it was not her fault that her mother died. She didn’t see the need to hear her father tell her otherwise. But things had changed. When Cat was lying in the maternity ward, after she had given birth three months early to a stillborn baby girl, she had thought of her father. Her daughter was to be named Lillian, was named Lillian, on the death certificate that she and Michael signed. She sat and stared, held on to Michael, and was sick with thoughts. She lost her daughter. If her father was capable of a tenth of her feeling, it was wrong for her to leave him. Parents needed children. Even bad parents, she thought. When the nurse called, she knew she needed to be with him.

They stopped at Mick's house first. Michael got out of the car, and raised his long arms over his head, stretching fully on his tiptoes. He let out a deep breath and turned to Cat, flicking a stray piece of brown hair away from his eye.

"We're here."

"Yeah. We're here," Cat smiled. She looked at the house; it's odd green siding and concrete steps. The porch had crumbled some, the thick bushes gotten thicker. She took her pillow from the back seat and carried it under one arm up the narrow walk to the door. She opened the screen door and unlocked the deadbolt. The air in the house was cold as she stepped in. She spun around to the thermostat in the living room and turned it up to seventy-two. She was rubbing her mittened hands together, glancing around when Michael came in with their bags.

"God, it's cold in here." His words came out as wispy plumes in the cold house.

"I turned the heat up. It's going to take a while though. Do you want to go to the store while I go see him?" Cat was still looking around, noticing that nothing in the house had changed. The brown carpet, the tan and brown patterned wallpaper and tailored furniture her mother had picked out were exactly as she remembered them, except older, sadder. The picture of Cat in her first communion dress sat on the sideboard covering the scratches her jacks made on the polished surface.

"I think I should go with you," Michael said.

"I want to see him alone first. I'll be ok. Just drop me off. I'll call you when I'm ready to come home."

“I’m taking my phone. I’ll be there in two minutes.” Cat gave Michael directions to the store. They pulled up in front of the hospital and she kissed him before she got out.

“I’ll call you soon.”

“Good luck.” Cat smiled as she shut the door, but the tension was back. She swallowed a wave of nausea, and breathed deeply. This is what she wanted. It was the right thing to do; she repeated the words to herself.

The light in the hospital was harshly artificial. The air was stale and warm, thick in her nostrils. She walked up to the long, light green counter top. The fat nurse in tight white pants waddled towards her.

“Can I help you?”

“Yes. I’m looking for my father, Mick Callahan.” The fat nurse flipped pages on a clipboard and ran her finger along the listings.

“Callahan, Callahan, Callahan...” the nurse repeated his name as she searched.

“Here it is. 524. That’s on the fifth floor. The elevator is to the left.”

“Thank you.” Cat waited by the elevator, tapping her palm against her thigh gently, nervously. She rode up alone and walked out onto the floor. She was aware of the door closing behind her as she looked to the left and then to the right. She could see the door to her father’s room from where she stood. She walked the few feet and knocked softly. Her father’s voice came through from behind the door, “Yes?” She turned the knob and felt her shoulders roll in instinctively.

“Hi, Dad. How are you?” She stayed close to the door, her coat zipped, her arms crossed in front of her. She smiled. He was grayer and older, especially around his mouth

and beneath his eyes, but he had kept most of his bulk. He was not frail as she imagined he would be. He sat up straight and looked at her.

“Catherine. You’re here. You know, they’ve upgraded my status. I’m not dying anymore.” He spoke louder than he needed to, filling the space between them.

“That’s great, Dad,” Cat said, but her voice didn’t sound relieved.

“When did you get in?”

“About twenty minutes ago. The house was cold, Dad.”

“I haven’t been there for a few days. I had John from across the street turn the heat down.”

“That’s good.”

“Mmm Hmm.” Her father watched her closely. She could tell he was thinking, could see him evaluating. “Where’s the boyfriend?” he asked.

“He went to the store. We’re going to stay a few days.”

“The store, huh? I imagine you’re pretty hungry these days. I thought you’d be bigger. Your mother got huge with you.”

“Yeah Dad, I thought I’d be bigger too.” Her cheeks grew hot. Cat learned there was no delicate way to tell people that she had lost her baby. There was always confusion, apologies that made Cat uncomfortable, tears. She didn’t know what to expect from her father, so she spit it out. “I lost the baby, Dad.”

“Oh.” He looked at her stomach and then her face and then the floor. “How long ago?”

“Two months.”

“Are you all right?”

“I guess. Physically.”

Her father kept his eyes down. He turned his body around, letting his legs slide off the bed. He stood slowly. Cat thought for a moment that he would hug her, but he turned his back to her, and paced and wheeled around the small room bear-like.

“Dad?” She thought that he was confused, that the shock of the news had caused another stroke, and she reached out to steady him.

“I’m all right,” he snapped, brushing away his arm with his big hand. Cat stood there behind him, shocked that he was so moved. But he turned to her before she could realize the improbability of his sympathy and said, “I’m just fine. Things only work out as they should. You can’t have a baby like you are. What good could come of it?” He turned to face her, calm and satisfied.

Cat shook. A million things happened at once and she was broken and whole again and again in the instant that she stood before him. The tension in her shoulders snapped and she straightened. Her mouth dried. Nothing like tears came to her. He watched, waiting. He began to speak again, expecting Cat to stay. She reached for the door. “Good bye, Dad,” she interrupted. “I’m going home.”

“Will you and the boyfriend be by tomorrow?”

“No, Dad. I’m going home. To my home. In Baltimore.”

“Oh,” he said somewhat surprised, but mostly unaffected. “Good bye, then.”

She turns her hand over, spills the drops that have gathered there. She wipes what dampness remains on her soft, faded jeans. The cold air from the window fills the room and wraps around her shoulders. A voice from the inside calls her, from the warm rooms beyond her door. She stands, places her palms firmly on the thick, white frame of the raised window, and forces it slowly down. She seals the room, feels the pane of glass separate her from the cold. She stands, and walks toward the door. She stares back at the window, recognizes her comfort in its coolness, and turns the knob. The warm air rushes over her skin and she closes her eyes, feeling it surround her.



Empties, Kinvara

On a Purpose Driven Life

It was the third copy of *A Purpose Driven Life* I'd received that I left, unread, in a stall in the bathroom of a Texaco, somewhere deep in Tennessee. If someone found it there, put it to good use "excavating their authentic self" or propping a table leg, then they got more use of it than I did any of my copies. Of which there were three. Did I say that already? And none of them more useful than this last, brand new, beneath the toilet in a gas station on the outskirts of Knoxville. Why? My fingers resting on the wheel, spinning the radio dial in search of contact, night closing on this greasy sky and the miles stretching out between us, are real. My friend who drinks too much — like there's only one — he says, when he's drunk and driving home, "Who's driving this car?" and he laughs and laughs. Three copies. And how many beers? And this road. I don't know more than now. And now my purpose is to steer this thing carefully, that means with care, around the sloping, growing turns, forward always, and holding steady, the needle flicking back and forth, somewhere near eighty.

Takes a while

It takes a while
to be sad that I've left, putting
between us time and miles.

I remember my skin on fire,
your hands beneath me and on my belly, and your whisper that
it might take a while.

But it didn't really, I loved your smiles
and you loved mine, but always
between us time and miles.

My hands couldn't reach through those telephone wires
but your voice came through loudly,
"This might take a while."

I tired of waiting, I was just a child,
and it's hard to take, being alone all the time with nothing
between us but time and miles.

Sweetheart, everything takes a while.

A Kind of All Right

There is something beautiful in crazy. Something like a rigid fluidity, a hardened artery with a vibrant core, a senseless order that feels as good as three-day-old sheets. My home was full of that kind of beauty. For a while. Looking back doesn't bring it back. My muscles don't seize like they did. My blood doesn't burn. But there is still something there, me, I'm there. In part. And I'm not sorry that I was. People tell me I should be, that I was lucky to get out of it. I think I was lucky to be in it. So mostly I smile, not weakly anymore, and tell them thanks for the concern, and that I'm all right now. But I was all right then, too. A different kind of all right. A tooth rattling, wrist snapping, deep thigh bruising kind. But like I said, it was crazy.

Our home was a dirty two bedroom on the second floor of an old brick building. The bar below us was mostly quiet, never crowded, but always with us, the grease from the fryer and the cigarette smoke rising through our floorboards with the tinny sounds of country western music. It got so we could tell who was there, could fill the bar stools, by the muffled greetings and bits of laughter, those high notes now and then, and the steady flow of quarters in the jukebox. Merle back to back signaled John's arrival. Patsy Cline was either Sue or Jerry, and Garth Brooks was the kid who worked second shift at the brewery. But they were strangers mostly; a collection of sounds that we could name. I wondered what they knew about us, if they could tell my footsteps from his, if they knew the scrape of the broken bed frame when we fucked, if they could sense skin on skin, those high notes. I know now they couldn't. A bar full of people has ears for itself alone.

Still, we could hear things. Lying in bed with the TV and its static snow pattern turned to mute, we'd lean back, his head against the wall, my head against him, and listen. We were hot or cold depending on the season, but always close. He was always touching me. And always smoking, one hand on my hip or in my hair, the other flicking ashes in an empty beer can. I think about that, being nearly broke, nearly drunk, nearly sleeping, but so very close to that man in our bed that nearly never had clean sheets.

We had been fucking for a while, his clothes beginning to pile up, his things to find places of their own, the first time it happened. I was on the bed on all fours, my ass in the air, his fingers wound in my hair, waiting for him to fuck me. He rubbed his body against me and let his half-hard dick slap between my thighs. I arched my back, pressed into him, let my hips sway just a bit. I could feel him growing tense, his legs stiffening against mine.

I felt his fingers tighten in my hair and his breath on my back when he almost yelled, "Fuck!"

I spoke quietly, "Babe..." but he cut me off.

"Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't nothing."

I could feel his coldness then, was curious, and said to soothe him, "Okay, but..."

And before I could say more, he jerked my head back hard by the hair so that I slammed against him and landed on the floor at his feet.

He kept my hair twisted in his fingers, pulled my head back, his face against mine and said “What does nothing mean to you?”

I kept my lips closed. He held tight on the back of my head, like an animal by the scruff of the neck, and shook.

“What the fuck does that mean?”

I didn't answer and he let go of my head, took a half step away from me, and swung hard with the back of his open hand. My head twisted with the force and my face was hot, wet. I sat up and touched my chin. I felt my lip, the bottom one, swelling, and looked at the blood on my hand. He must have walked away, have left the room, but he was back in a moment with a towel and ice. He reached for me, gently now, and I let him take my chin in his big hand and wipe the blood that was still running. He slipped his index finger in my mouth and ran the tip of it along the edge of my lower teeth. He felt the sharp edge of one that was chipped and kissed my forehead at the hairline. He rolled my lip outwards, held it there to examine the wound, and sucked in his breath.

“Jesus.”

He kissed the gash, put my whole lip inside his mouth and sucked gently. When he pulled away, he was concerned but solid, not shocked or scared.

He smoothed my hair back, pressed a stubbly cheek against mine and said, mostly to himself, “Baby, what happened?”

He sat on the bed then, still naked and wrapped an arm around my naked waist.

“Come here,” he said, and pulled me to him, working us both up to the head of the bed.

I put my head on the pillow, my back to him. He pulled a blanket over us, made sure my feet were tucked in, and buried his head in my hair. I was still, my back against his big chest, and felt him breathing. He wrapped his long arm around me, his forearm settling between my breasts. He held the ice to my mouth and as it melted, the water diluted the blood that dripped and a soft, rosy stain bloomed on my pillowcase. I was almost asleep when he slipped two fingers inside my mouth, kissed the back of my neck, and fucked me softly.

I was biting my lip the next morning as he dressed, a cigarette still smoldering in the ashtray, another one between his teeth. He turned to me wearing nothing but his baseball cap and dirty jeans and said, honestly concerned, “Do you think it’ll come out of the sheets?”

My teeth let go of my swollen lip. “Yeah, it’ll come out.”

He smiled then, kissed my mouth, bit down gently on my lower lip. Then pain as the wound burst open, a grape in his teeth. Intense, enlivening. He saw the blood in the corner of my mouth and slid the heel of his hand across my face to wipe it away.

“Oh, baby.”

He patted my cheek then, put on his shoes and a shirt, straightened his hat.

“I’ll see you tonight.”

I sucked hard on my lip and nodded.

I have that pillowcase. I use it. The stain is there, a blotchy circular design like a watercolor flower just past full bloom. It didn’t come out. If I put my palm in the middle of the stain my fingertips just reach its lacy edge. The sheets are gone, too gory to be

saved by the end. But the pillowcase is here with me, a soft, thin reminder, as real as any scar. It's hard to say how things work, why they do or why they don't, but the two years I spent with that man, with his hands on me, were some of the best I've had. No matter what it seems. It wasn't love, for me, it was never about love. And I'll say this and I'll mean it: I was happy. It was crazy, and beautiful, in its way. And simple. I would stand, or sit, or lie in front of him and simply feel. Just react. And even then, my reactions were forced from me as they rose to the surface of my soft, flexible skin; burst capillaries, jagged tears, loosened teeth. It's hard to feel things sometimes. He made it easy.

Time is strange, the way one moment can take forever and be gone so fast all at once. And it's irreversible. Something is about to happen, then it's happening, and then it happened. That's all. It's just done. And there's nothing left to do but lie back and press your fingers into sore spots, rub your palm against the bruises, and wait. So that's what I did. He went to work during the day. I stayed in bed and slept, or read a book, watched the news. And waited. He came home in the evening, and I would hear his quick steps in the stairwell. He brought dinner nine times out of ten, and we would sit on the bed and eat out of the flimsy cardboard containers. He sat Indian-style across from me, smiled between bites of fried rice, or manicotti, and rubbed whatever part of me he could reach. We ate, we listened, he smoked. When we finished, he would toss the empty containers onto the floor and sit next to me. He always took my shirt off, liked my skin against him when he held me, and traced the edge of my bruises with his fingertips.

He had been there, in our real and untidy nest, for a while when he figured something out. I was lying sideways on the bed, naked. My feet hung off the end, and he

rested one knee on the bed, standing over me. He had knocked me down with a closed fist to my right cheek, and I could feel it swelling, all hot and tingly. He had already struck my shoulder and ribs, and was working hard at my hip when he caught a glimpse of my face. My eyes were closed against the light of the muted television, and I was deep, somewhere in that rhythm. I must have been smiling.

Somehow, he knew where I was, and he said, "You like this don't you, babe?"

I opened my eyes and smiled at him.

"You're one sick bitch, aren't you?"

I kept smiling, kept my eyes on him and said, "Say it again."

"Say what again? That you're a sick bitch? You are. You're my sick little bitch."

His fist came down hard to punctuate each syllable, and I rolled onto my back, shut my eyes and fell back in.

Before he left, before they found me and dragged me out, "saved" me, before they threw out our bed and our empty boxes and turned our home into a storage area, before all that, I told him to stop. Just once.

He had been angry for a while. When he came home at night, he drank a six-pack while he smoked, turned the T.V. up loud, and held my hand. He said "fuck" when he saw my bruises, shook his head, and closed his eyes. He clenched his fists and his jaw over and over again, trying to reel something in. He hit me in short, angry bursts. Hard hands and hard eyes. Then he melted, looked sad or sick, tired, and lit a cigarette. He would fuck me for a long time, two and three times a night, until he finally slept. It was slow, languid, and I let him paw at my breasts and stroke my thighs lightly while he came

and I pressed hard on any sore spot I could find. It kept going, all his drinking and fucking, and we both got edgy. Then he didn't hit me for seven days.

On the eighth night, during a break mid-way through this new nightly routine, I pulled away from him and sat up. I faced him, Indian-style, my thighs too sticky to close together, and said, "What's going on?"

He clenched his jaw when he looked at me. Not yet angry, he said, "What do you mean, babe?"

"I mean this?" I gestured around the room, held my open palms out in front of him. "What is all this?"

"This? Babe, this is normal." He was being cold, arrogant, and I didn't like it.

"This sucks," I said.

I stood up. For what may have been the first time ever, I stood above him, pulling my shirt over my head, dressing while he lay there naked.

"Are you kidding me? Are you fucking kidding me?" He sat up, mad now, but still calm. "You're leaving? No. You're not leaving. Sit here and talk to me and be fucking normal."

I put my jeans on and looked around for my shoes. He was more concerned now, angry that I wasn't listening, maybe angry about what he would do to keep me there, and sad, perhaps, because it wasn't normal.

"Fuck," he said as he stood up and reached for me. He yanked hard on the neck of my shirt and pulled me back onto the bed.

"Is this what you want?" He hit me hard across the face. "You want me to hurt you?"

He hit me again on the cheek, his knuckles thick and said, "I'm tired of hurting you. It doesn't feel good anymore."

As he said it, he kept hitting me, the way he used to.

"I'm fucking tired of hurting you," he screamed.

He hit me over and over. I felt my nose crunch to one side. Something in my cheek popped in and out as he swung.

"I don't want to hurt you anymore."

He was still screaming when I felt my ribs go. I was unconscious for a few moments, but when I opened my eyes, as much as I could through the swelling, he was still on top of me, and my hands were in front of my face, and I was telling him to stop.

When I woke up, hours later, he was gone. The T.V. was still on, its flickering light bouncing in the corner. It hurt to breathe. My chest was heavy and sore, and even the shallow breaths I took in through my mouth burned like rubbing alcohol on open flesh. I could smell leftover Chinese on the floor. It was warm, late spring, and the air around me was full of almost-rotten food, and stale piss. Everything around me was damp, but my face was dry, caked over, and huge. I felt my heartbeat in my dry, swollen lips, and the gash above my forehead, and my heavy, heavy chest. It hurt. My heart beating hurt. The people moved in the bar below me. I heard their stools slide on the floor, the door open and close, quarters in the jukebox. And songs. I lay there listening. Alone. Nearly dead.

A day had passed when I heard them on the stairs.

"I don't want to surprise them."

"They're not home. I haven't seen him come or go in days. And normally we hear them thumping around a bit."

Jackie, the woman who ran the bar and owned the building was talking to her husband. I heard keys rattling, slow feet.

"Well, we'll check it out. Their rent is how much late? Six months? Jack, you shouldn't have let them go that long."

"I know. But they seemed like good kids. Quiet mostly. I just hope they cleaned up if they left. I can use this space for storage while we're remodeling."

They were knocking then.

"Hello? Anybody home?"

I heard the keys in the lock, the door scraping against the jamb, and I hoped I would die before they found me. But I didn't. In the ambulance they put me on a morphine drip, and nothing has hurt since.

It's a complicated thing, living. It just keeps happening. And everyone says there are right ways and there are wrong ways to go about it. Maybe that's so. And I'll say the right things, about harmony and discord, finding a balance. But I don't mean it. Everything's different now. There's counseling and group, police reports I didn't want to file, and meds. I don't need them. I don't cry because I was there, I cry because I'm not. And everything I'm supposed to want- love, tenderness, partnership- sounds as bland as boiled chicken; feels as good as life regulated, its occasional high notes mitigated by, the

padding of so much medication. I don't need caressing; I need my cage rattled. Remind me that I'm alive, the way he reminded me, with the back of a hard hand across my face.

I'm not looking to be saved. There is really nothing saving about this place. But I'm just shy of desperate, can feel the vibration of a painful lonely starting in my chest, and I have come here, without thought, because it will save me anyway. At least, enough for tonight. His eyes on me are quick and thorough, and I know I don't have to but I say, "I thought you might need help."

He has already dunked and wrung out the rag and he smiles as he tosses it to me, his real smile, and already I know I will sleep tonight. The tables have been spread into an unnatural configuration. My hips graze their edges, slide along the rounded backs of chairs, as I move between them wiping the flat surfaces. My hand is steady and purposeful for the first time in what feels like months, and I give myself to this task completely, because I'm able to.

I used to drink there. Not every night but nearly. After work or not, with friends or not, and I got so comfortable there that I said it was like my living room only smoky. And it is, with its dark wood and low light. And, like my living room, it is almost cluttered with bizarre, dusty knick-knacks; A dead turkey, a bronze African head, a hammerhead shark. My living room is more conservative, but there are strange things tucked tastefully in corners and on windowsills. But more than that, the bar is like my living room in that I can walk from one end to the other without thinking about myself, how my limbs move, how my jeans fit. It is a rare kind of comfort, the kind that comes

from escaping not just “the grind” or the family, but from one’s self. That time we spend away from ourselves is precious. It is not always healthy, not always right, but there are times when it is absolutely necessary. And times when it is self-indulgence. I have spent more nights away from myself at the bar than one has a right to. I have missed dates and jobs. I have missed parties and family dinners. I have missed a hundred deadlines, and half of my twenties, but I haven’t missed myself.

Behind the bar, he is counting money and smoking, he started again, and I watch him and his reflection as they work. The hair he has left is silver. Its ends rest on the collar of his navy polo. He is bigger than he should be. He tries to keep his Diabetes and chronic knee problems in check, and though he is often in pain, he rarely complains, jokes instead. He is closing the place for the night, and I am helping him. We are the only two left in the bar, and for the first time tonight, I don’t feel like crying.

I can see it for what it is; a tiny, dirty, tacky neighborhood watering hole with a decent burger and sixty-year-old regulars. That’s it. I see that. And it’s not that I’m doted on or fawned over. I can count on one hand the number of drinks that have been bought for me. I am no one special, but I am recognized. Among the pack, my presence goes unnoticed. It neither requires attention nor alarms. I move about freely, an accepted outsider.

Dennis turned sixty last Halloween. When we finished closing the bar, we went to another bar, and I bought him a couple Wild Grouse and sodas. He told me about how he won the best watch he ever owned in a poker game while he served in Vietnam, and how he ruined it on a float trip. He was swinging his arms while he talked, and laughing hard, and I remember thinking that there was nothing gentle about him. Sometimes he raises his voice, sometimes he yells, and once when he was acting all innocent, I told him that he had even yelled at me before.

He pulled his head back, looked surprised and then a little hurt and said, “I have never yelled at you. I’ve yelled *around* you.”

And another night a woman came into the bar and got wasted. Loud, awful and singing wasted. Some people knew her and said she’d been in and out of treatment for years. At the end of the night, her boyfriend wouldn’t come pick her up. We left to play poker. Dennis joined the game late. He took the woman home, paid her bar tab. He sat next to me and we all laughed at the giant red smudges on his cheek. And he laughed too, because he felt pretty good for a change, and it was still early, and he would probably win. Maybe there was more to it than that. But I got a wet paper towel and sat next to him. And as I was wiping some drunks’ lipstick off his face, I felt something more like jealousy than I was comfortable with. I drank that away.

I drank a lot of things away. Even things I didn’t want to go away. And that’s a strange thing when you don’t know what you’re trying to lose or trying to keep, and it stops mattering anyway because you can feel it all walking away when you swallow.

That's what is scary about it; you can't pick what you lose. So you drink to lose things and then drink for the loss. At least, I did.

Then one day, I stopped drinking. I can say why. There was nothing good left.

What was it like after that? It was the same. It still is. So I'm still here. Why would I be here in the first place? Why would I hang out with sixty-year-old alcoholics? And the truth is, I can't do anything else. I can't be around people my own age without getting squirrely. I can't go new places without crippling self-consciousness, and I can't stay home because I hate the company.

“The usual?” Dennis is more telling than asking, and I have to yell and wave my hands to tell him “No, No. I just want a Diet Coke tonight.”

He stops and puts the beer back in the cooler.

“You feeling all right?”

I'm trying to act natural.

“Yeah. I'm just taking the night off.”

But then they figured it out. A few weeks in I told them I quit, and there were eyebrows raised, dismissive hand gestures given, but mostly no one cared.

Dennis asked me once “When are you gonna give this up and start drinking again?”

I told him when I was skinny and happy I might have a drink or two, and he said “So you’re never gonna drink again.”

Probably not. But maybe.

I have gathered the ashtrays, dumped their dusty contents in the trash and tossed them into the sink. The kitchen has been closed for hours but the oil from the fryers is still heavy in the air. I stand on a chair to reach the switch for the neon signs. They flick off in an instant. I can measure the accomplishment that quickly. I see the act have an effect. I wipe the length of the bar again, not because it needs it, but because I need it.

There is comfort in ritual. Even things that are painful become calming, comforting, when repeated ritualistically. I am thinking now about the scarification of some African tribes, and though it is a far stretch, I offer that it is the same in some small way, to my repeated nights at the bar. Obviously, there is nothing noble in my endeavor. I will not make my parents proud, or complete a rite of passage. But by returning, over and over again, to this one place, I have imposed order, convinced myself of its necessity, assigned it worth. Is it worth anything? Either way, the scars stay with me.

Dennis is sitting on a stool in front of the video poker machine, blowing out enormous clouds of smoke. He is half listening to me while I bitch about something, and chuckling because he has set a record on the game.

I'm behind the bar washing glasses and talking, not a lot, but enough, because he says to me, "Annie, the thing about people is, no one's as bad as you think," he raises his index finger for emphasis, "and no one's as good as you think."

He drops another quarter in the machine.

"Yeah Dennis, probably so."

The bar is quiet now, and dark. Dennis' huge back is toward me. My hands are working carefully. And I'm dunking another glass, feeling its smooth weight in the warm water as I fill it and empty it, try to make it clean.

End

Sleeping alone

“I like to sleep” he said
and turned his back to me.
“So sleep” I said, and left.
I did it easily.

I have a bed at home
That’s empty, soft and clean.
I like to sleep alone,
These boys can be so mean.

So I’ll lay down in bed,
It’s me alone tonight.
‘Cuz it’s good to be alone.
Sometimes, I’m just right.

Work

He is kind of broken from the work. His leg and his arm. But he wears the uniform most days, thick and polyester, his name and the name of the shops he's worked in over the years embroidered on the breast pocket.

Today he is in the driveway. The hood of a giant and rusty '68 F250 is raised, and he is twisting bits together, tightening them in place. He is dirty, a bit, and I watch him knowing that it hurts him but also that he likes it. I like it, too.

Most days, I go somewhere. The restaurant, the rec center, the cubicle I spent a lifetime in, and pretend things all day long; "Really, I'm not hung over." "Yes, I'm prepared." Work in administration is dissecting a thing to bone and sinew, fondling the bits, putting it back together, and expecting it to hop. It should matter, but it doesn't. We should do better, but we don't. It's the anecdote about the camel being a horse designed by committee. Still, there are moments that weigh something- his wedding, her miscarriage- and occasionally some work that feels good. And it's nice to pay bills, or at least, to be able to. What is a price to pay but the trading of one thing for another? His body, those skills. My time, your money.

And today my time and your money have bought this:

My bare feet on a cool tile floor, the laundry spinning and soft, a white cotton dress that feels like nothing but the bit of sweat on my lower back, and my busted man fixing my broken truck out the kitchen window.



Draiocht

Symbolism in Yeats

The landscape of Yeats' poetry is the landscape of Ireland at its most ancient and wild. It is heroic, it is nature beyond nature, it is truly and figuratively enchanting.

Throughout his poetry there is a sense of standing on the edge, of being near enough to grab the veil or pull the trigger, and the recognition that to do so will have a price. Yeats and his narrators do not take this payment lightly, seeing both the losses and what they stand to gain as things of value, and wisely so; the costs being no less than their humanity or mortality, the ability to be comfortable in their skin as they are. These high costs are disguised in beautiful but simple imagery, just as the land itself is beautiful and harsh at once, just as a beautiful piece of writing is made alone, away from one's loved ones. To examine these works is to examine the pull toward more, and the price to be paid for it.

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I was desperate to have an Irish farm experience. My time in Galway was dwindling, my chance to be near animals and the fields they spend their lives on was nearly gone. The best recommendation I got was hours away, unresponsive, expensive. I looked instead for fairy forts close by, something I could squeeze in in a day. I found Pat Noone, the fairy farmer of County Galway.

I walk a few steps behind him, his hands folded behind his back, his argyle socks bunching around his ankles. His pants are cut off at the knee, sort of, as though he got angry at each leg's length for different reasons on different days, and tore off the offending bits. The right side was more offensive than the left it seemed. We duck the

electric fence, walk through his first pasture spotted with sheep and cattle, and cross the railroad bridge that split his fields. Everything is golden. We follow a rutted path to a stone encircled portion of his property where the grass is long and swaying.

“What do you work at, Ann?” he asks me.

I tell him that I manage a restaurant, but that I’m in school as well and before that I was in administration, office work stuff. I tell him the restaurant is an easy job but hard work and that I prefer it to being in an office because I get to move around and meet people and

“And be fucking normal.” he interrupts me.

“Yes. Be fucking normal.”

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In “The Stolen Child” Yeats shows the beauty of natural world in short and simple images; “There lies a leafy island where flapping herons wake,” “...wave of moonlight glosses the dim grey sands with light,” “...ferns that drop their tears over the young streams...”. Though incredibly lovely here, these are common enough sights in Ireland. They are comfortable and known. The human child the fairies call to sees these things every day, or could. And yet in this poem they are laced with danger. The fairies have vats of the reddest stolen cherries hidden in this safe landscape. They whisper to sleeping trout to unquiet their dreams in the same pools where this human child would play. Without the child knowing it, a choice is being subtly presented. Because entwined with that danger is an invitation, a temptation; “We foot it all the night, weaving olden

dances, mingling hands and mingling glances...”. Here is a place where the human child can be wild. He can see all that is beautiful in the land and he can claim it. He can have the reddest berries. He can whisper to the animals and they will hear him. So too, he can claim the wildness that is within him, demonstrating his desires by holding hands and looking into the eyes of those he wants. And as a final bit of magic, the cherry on top as it were, he leaves behind “a world more full of weeping than he can understand.” The trade at this point, the cost of leaving the status quo and joining the fairies, seems light. In fact, the danger or cost is only inferred from those few words- stolen, anxious, scarce, unquiet. It is a tone rather than a statement until the final stanza, when the cost becomes clear.

“He’ll hear no more the lowing
Of the calves on the warm hillside
Or the kettle on the hob
Sing peace into his breast...”

He will trade his warmth, his home, the quiet simple things that make a human life, and he will go to the waters and the wild. To be part of the world as he knows it, he must endure more sadness than he can understand. And so, a choice is made. To stop this weeping, to claim his environment, to own it, he must cease to be as he is- human. Yeats tells us this cost simply; a tea pot warming to a boil, baby animals in the sunshine. These things are not a revelation. And yet, to think of losing them is ever so slightly unbearable.

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“There is the entrance to the Otherworld.” Pat is standing tall. His hands are in front of him now, and he gestures to the arch way formed by the branches of two trees.

“I’ll go first and you follow me in a few minutes.” He walks through. He calls. I follow. The tree branches are old and thin. They are covered with moss and lichen, not dead but alive inside, I can tell. I pass beneath them and the temperature cools. I breathe in. There are cows and cow smells and all that gold. It is all around and I still feel it inside but the branches hold it back, a curtain they have dropped between me and the light. My fingers feel like they should tingle.

Pat asks me what I felt. I tell him a lot of lightness, he nods, and a lot of darkness. His eyes narrow a bit, considering.

“Right. Will you go back in?” he asks.

“I think I will tomorrow.”

“Good girl,” he says.

* * *

In “The Song of Wandering Aengus”, Yeats’ narrator has a different experience with the supernatural than did the boy in “The Stolen Child.” Unlike the child in that piece, this narrator has only a brief encounter with a creature from the Otherworld. He is not slowly wooed or coaxed toward the fairies. He sees a creature that is from somewhere beyond his understanding and is hooked instantly, like the fish on the berry-baited thread. And though his experience and fate differ from that of the boy in “The Stolen Child”, it is in the natural world that both of these encounters begin.

The narrator has a thought that he will start a fire and make some dinner. He thinks a fish would be nice to eat, so he breaks off a twig from a hazel tree and makes a fishing pole. He plucks a berry from a bush and ties it on a line to toss in the water. He

probably sits on the bank and looks at the sky, or he has, in one of his previous fishing sessions. And in the past, as it happens this time, he catches a little fish and brings it home to eat. He goes out onto the land, into his environment, and finds the shiny thing he is searching for. The surroundings and the landscape are familiar and reliable until they are not. Because unlike in the past, this shiny thing that he is quite content with, turns into an enchanting, all-absorbing, wonderful thing that he can't be content without. His environment is full of things, magical things, that he stood nearby and never suspected. Nature and the land are more and bigger than we know. And it is this brush with the supernatural, the glimpse of this otherworldly thing, and ultimately, it's loss, or the lack of finding it again, that shapes the remainder of his human existence.

As with "The Stolen Child", the language is simple and clear- "I dropped the berry in a stream And caught a little silver trout." As a narrative, the piece is straight forward and linear. The path the narrator takes is plotted in three short, rhyming stanzas. As a result, it is at first easy to miss the jewels Yeats has set in the piece. In the first stanza "...white moths were on the wing," is paired with, mirrored with, "And moth-like stars were flicking out...". The second line repeats the word moth but raises the stakes significantly, taking the familiar image of little moths flying and the time of day when they do, and turning them into stars, giant and powerful bodies of the night. In the second stanza, as the narrator is stoking the fire he has made to cook his fish, "...someone called me by my name...", he is interrupted. In the middle of doing something mundane, the ordinary becomes extraordinary and perhaps frighteningly, recognizes him. In going about the course of his day, he has stepped into the wild and brought back with him a tiny

piece, a little living thing, that is unexpectedly familiar. Again, Yeats doubles-down, this time with the phrase “called me by my name,” as the fish becomes a glimmering girl. These five simple words have a large footprint in so short a poem. They are important. In repeating them, Yeats makes it clear that this bit of magic and wildness had been close at hand. And then, as soon as it announces its self, this magic- the glimmering girl- runs and fades. So we learn that magic is waiting all around us, that it knows us, that it is familiar, and that it is fleeting. The final stanza shows the cost that the narrator has paid for his moment of recognition. He is human still, but stunted, unfulfilled, transformed. He has lived a life wandering in places that are hollow, empty, or hilly, fraught with difficulty. He has foregone a life with family and a home, has lived a life that is stripped of meaning, in service of finding this one bit of wildness that revealed its self and knew his name.

It is easy to believe that Yeats is also talking about the life of a would-be artist in this piece; that the world can inspire and ignite something in us. That that spark can change the way we see and interact with the world around us. That losing it or not attaining it again leads to pain and emptiness. Knowing there is more, and that it is beyond your grasp, is devastating.

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I cannot find the entrance to the Otherworld at first. I know it is by the stone wall but somehow, I walk the entire length around before I find it, there, just past the gap. I am not sure how to feel. I try not to try to feel. I have a strong sense that I should not ask to

know things that I do not want to know. I search myself for something clear and simple. Will I be ok? No. I don't want to know if I'll be ok. I want to be reassured that I will be. The ground seems to agree. I decide that I will ask nothing. I will let them tell me what they think I should know. They tell me to leave my walking stick outside.

I have chills before I step in. My skin pulls tighter around me, tries to make my fur stand up, to make me bigger than I am, to protect me. My phantom fur and I pass through the entrance and the air cools. My senses feel heightened- I am looking for something or being watched. I wonder what they would make of me, if they called or if I am intruding. Either way I am here now. I feel them sort of sighing. Their recognition is old but certain. This one again, they seem to say, I'll go get the mirror.

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In "The Hosting of the Sidhe", the call to join the Host is clear. It is a challenge more than an invitation and both the fairies and the narrator seem to recognize this. Unlike in the "Stolen Child" and "The Song of Wandering Aengus" there is no passivity or coyness to the supernatural. The host is galloping across the landscape. The wind is a horde of impossibly beautiful and fierce and free creatures. They are shining and glowing. They are heaving and storming. They are powerful. They are terrifying.

In this piece, the deal is made plain. "Empty your heart of its mortal dream" and become one with the wind and the host. Become eternal and beautiful. The host are free in a way the people of Yeats' world would not be; "...Our hair is unbound, our breasts are

heaving, our eyes are agleam, our arms are waving, our lips are apart...”. Decorum, manners, and modesty were praised and expected. Being a part of a human community meant staying within a prescribed set of behaviors and denying the more natural, passionate part of one’s self. Hair is up, collars and sleeves are buttoned, voices are polite and controlled. Life is circumscribed.

But there is more on the horizon. The natural world, with its storms and hills and cliffs, tells us so. There is power and beauty and passion. All one must do, Niamh says, is gaze upon them. Recognize the alternative they present, see it for what it is, and you become it. There is temptation in this, but also terror; “We come between him and the deed of his hand, We come between him and the will of his heart.” Once you have seen the host, you are transformed. The cost is your place in society, your humanity.

Again, Yeats is speaking to the creator or to the creative process. One can embrace and follow their creative instincts, and maybe even has to, so powerful are they. But the ability to have a comfortable human existence while doing so is impossible. Yeats is telling us that such a life is worthy and that it is expensive.

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I have an overwhelming sense of my own ferocity. The thought comes back to me consistently, waves into the land, subtle and persistent. I am interested but frightened. They are telling me that fierce and cruel are very different, and while things like me can be cruel, I do not have to be.

I have been soft for a long time. Impressionable, having things pressed into me. Feeling too much the things around me. An answer to a question I am not asking rises from the ground, surrounds me and my would-be fur.

I am as soft as I am, as tender, because I have to be. It took this much gentleness, this much fragility, to balance the strong things I am made of. If I wasn't so diluted, I would never pass for human.

I am not sure that I am glad to know this, but they are glad to have told me.

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In these poems Yeats shows us that, like the landscape, things in Ireland are beautiful at a cost and deceptively simple. A fish becomes a beautiful girl that knows your name, the wind is a triumphant horde that seeks to claim and so to set free, the land hides and beckons to us from our first days. Nature, or magic, or passion; they are relentless. No more so than in the wild places of Yeats' Ireland.

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Brilliant Burden

Remember, remember

Not long ago

That you were charmed completely

Your heart falling out at every corner,

Each curve or straightway.

And as you bent to pick it up,

To stuff it back in the

Loose laundry basket of your chest,

You found treasures for palm and pocket —

Black feathers with thick white roots,

Stones of exceeding smoothness, or chipped and sharp,

A threat to fingertips — delightful.

A bit of sheep's fur caught on the metal

Thorns of barbed wire.

And those things they meant —

A path, sweet certainty,

Their tiny weight tugging the fabric of your clothes

The heavy weight of their meaning landing hard

In the ground of you.

Why now do they hurt you so?

Brilliance become burden,

And your pockets full.

To a Woman I Have Been

I do not miss you

Sitting there, always there, not leaving there.

Your body sponged with sweat, matted in fur, thick with sebum.

About to shake or shaking, you laugh or cry, it's all the same.

A hinge works by being affixed to a thing that is fixed, solid or steady.

Your hinges worked like finger cymbals, like books slamming shut,

Or falling open.

Swollen slippery with sorrow,

And wallowing, yes. I do not miss you.

But sweetheart, you brought me here.

I forded the river on your bursting corpse.

No, not quite. But close.

I owe you, sister. I'd fight for you.

I'd sit so close behind you and comb the knots from your hair.



14 Henrietta Street

Caged

This morning my muscles ache quietly, the quiet
cost of a movement's repetition,
and I play their stiffness with my fingers.

— the desperate repetition of movements that mean nothing.

Strange too, how the skin gets lonely, how it aches
with lack of use, learns the tricks, so that
a hot shower is no comfort, my own hands
an angry reminder. Untouched. So much so that
eyes bruise, hard glances sear.

And I'll be here, wanting to be seared, to be
burnt and branded if that's the cost of it. I'll beg,
sitting here, then standing, arched
on tips of toes, the muscles poised
and screaming- Somebody, Some Body-
Rattle this cage.

Stirrings

Charlotte was painfully introspective. Her ability to see herself, to access the inner-workings of her body was to her, both terrifying and delightful. It had taken some time to develop, this gift of hers, though the need to see her insides was innate and powerful. She had thought at first that her abilities were due to a profound connection to the world around her; that the laws of nature could be bent once one had made some communion with them. But she realized rather quickly that this was not the case, was in fact, the opposite of the case, and that she, Charlotte, was so far removed from the world outside of her that its laws applied to her only in part. As an adult she had near-complete knowledge of all things inside, but even as a young child she felt stirrings within her skin, stirrings without names like happy or hungry, and she thought that if she could get inside to see them, she could begin to understand them.

They were quiet at first, these stirrings, coming to her softly in her blood, in warm patches and tiny bubbles. She was calmed by these instances. They acted as some proof that her body was her own, that it did in fact, exist, was capable even, of feeling. She would lie in her clean twin bed full of spoiled-ten-year-old-happiness, with a full belly and an empty head, and wait for something more to stir her. She continued to be calmed as the warm patches grew hot and the bubbles became tiny exploding light bulbs. It was not painful exactly, but uncomfortable and ever-present, demanding her attention in a way the world outside her skin was incapable of.

She imagined this life inside her was glowing, blue electricity. The first time she went looking for it, she was frightened that her eyes would not let her see it because

certainly, it was there. She stood high on her toes leaning over the dripping sink in the dark bathroom. She opened her small mouth wide into the mirror, expecting to be bathed in her own soft blue light. But the light did not come on. She opened and closed her mouth again and again hoping each time that she had found the right switch, but realizing finally, that her own new permanent teeth and short pink tongue were all that was there. And yet, the light bulbs continued to burst.

Charlotte had tried to be satisfied then. For years after, she tried to accept that the stirrings could not be seen, that she could not see their work or watch them move inside her. But as she got older, the stirrings became more violent, even as the world outside her died. She had friends, family, and they mattered to her and they didn't because they had nothing to do with her insides that stirred and because from their casual interactions, she could tell that they were not stirred by some such force. They did not reach her; so she filled her days with breaths and heartbeats and thankfully, the biting surges of her own blue electricity. It was about this time, when the stirrings had begun to boil and the bubbles had reached a firing-nail-gun-intensity, that she decided to examine them once again. Charlotte knew that they were not in her stomach or up her nose, those experiments having failed her as a child. She determined that they could be seen in her flesh, so she sat on the white tile floor of her parents' bathroom and laid a selection of instruments before her. She would start in her forearm. She palpated the meat feeling its protective layer of fatty tissue and the firm muscle beneath, its soft underside white and thick like a fish's belly. She dismissed the butcher knife, had known she would, its volume unsuited it for the delicate task. The pizza cutter had been a joke, but she

regretted now her lack of gravity. She held it by its red plastic handle and lowered it into the trash, the dull round blade clinking gently against its axis. The boning knife and the paring knife would both have been satisfactory, but she opted instead for her brother's old pocket knife: something about its weight or versatility. Charlotte flipped open the large blade and laid it lengthwise against her left forearm. She pressed hard and watched as the first layers of her epidermis gave way and near-microscopic traces of blood gathered on the blade. She realized quickly that this was to be a painful enterprise, but she persisted. Drawing the blade swiftly towards her body, maintaining a firm and steady pressure, she made an opening four inches long, gaping to nearly an inch in the middle, tapering to a distinct point at either end. In the instant before her blood spilled, she was struck again by the likeness of her forearm to a gutted fish. Then the blood came.

She had decided earlier that she would not panic, that this was to be an exploratory mission, and that no matter the pain or blood, she would find some evidence of the electricity that stirred her. The blood came too quickly to wipe away. She could not see inside. So she stuck her index finger in the opening and felt its depths and edges. The pain of this nauseated her and she wanted to stop but she didn't. She pressed into the deepest place of the opening and cried when the world turned blue. She pressed it again and again watching her electricity projected on the world outside her. This epicenter was a hard, flat disc, something like a watch battery, deep within her flesh. She followed its firing with her finger farther up her arm and felt a second disc that sent bubbles and bursts and nails through her body. She pulled her finger out quickly. It was all so horrible

and wonderful and she sat in her own gore and watched as her skin closed itself perfectly. She licked the place where the wound had been and tasted her own blood, already dried.

Charlotte slept that night, on the floor in the bathroom, exhausted and overwhelmed. When her skin closed the stirrings inside her stopped, like she had caused some circuit to break, and she wept because the stirrings were all that mattered. She was afraid that they would not return, but slowly they did. The warmth and bubbles filled her body as they had in the beginning, but her forearm throbbed with the constant firing of nails into flesh and she felt the boiling beneath her skin. It hurt. And it was wonderful.

All she thought about then, as she counted breaths or heartbeats, was how perfectly intense the stirrings had been when she reached inside herself. The world beyond her was a much better place when she saw it in her own blue light. And she could not wait to feel it all again. Her arms did not heal as perfectly the next time she opened them. Or the next. She developed thin, pink, milky scars like seams along her incisions. They grew thicker and harder to cut through. Her openings got smaller as her arms became webbed with scar tissue. But she did not want to stop. When her flesh was open, everything was blue and wonderful. She felt the stirrings in her blood acutely. She wanted to live there, inside herself, watching the blueness that poured from within her. Then one day, her arms would not open. The stirrings that had come so naturally would not now return without her manipulation. Even the closed flesh, now sealed, did not burn with the same rawness that it once had. She could not reach the discs that fired the forces

within her, and so for days she sat silently in her room wanting to be as dead as she felt. But she didn't know how to die. So she went looking for someone to help start the stirrings again.

It didn't take long. In a smoky bar, or a parking lot, she found men who tried to open her. They had their own tools, their own methods. They bruised her and she pressed hard, hoping to find a new disc, a new source for her stirrings, but she could not feel good through the pain. They spent themselves on her, their rage and their testosterone pouring out on to her, leaving Charlotte bloody and sticky. They cut her, but inside she felt only the warm goo of her muscles, and she cried as her skin was sewn shut in the hospital. Then Charlotte found another man. His hands were huge and his skin was pulled firm over firmer muscles, and she liked him because his eyes were the same blue as the world when she electrified herself, and because he was good at hurting her with his big hands. He grabbed her and threw her, bent her in ways that she did not bend and hit her so that on a good night, the world flashed with blue. She lay in bed- bloody, raw, and waited for him to come back, to bring out some tiny part of the self she used to have. But it did not stir her. It came from somewhere else, from someone else, and she realized that her stirrings, her electricity could not be accessed by anyone but herself. A pool of latent energy must surely be inside her, so she resolved not to be beaten to death.

Then she decided to reach inside her abdomen.

She lay there, quite broken, and felt between the bruises and shattered ribs. There was no reason not to try. Whether she could do it or not, if her skin would heal itself, if

she would live, was uncertain. She knew only that she had once had feelings, and that they had been wonderful. She would turn herself inside out to get back to them.

She leaned over the side of the bed, felt along the floor for something hard. She found socks, a misshapen coat hanger, her dirty t-shirt and an empty beer bottle. She held the bottle by its long, cool neck and struck it against the peeling window frame. The pieces fell to the floor and huddled on the sill. She dropped the neck, watched gravity pull it to the floor, and ran her hand through the pile of shards searching for one to use. She selected a thin rectangular chunk, feeling its sharpness on her fingertips. She rolled on to her back, holding the glass between her face and the light from the window. It cast a luminous brown image of itself on her flesh. She had trouble recognizing her stomach. It was discolored, swollen around the floating pieces of rib. Her hips were stiff and purple, the right more so than the left, and her arms and legs were covered in fist sized continents ranging in shades from green to red to black, floating around on her thin white skin. She lay quietly, filling the moments with heartbeats. She was ready for something else.

Spreading the flesh with her thumb and middle finger, Charlotte pushed the glass into her stomach. She was relieved that it gave way so easily, like cutting through a peeled apple. Her nerves had fired themselves into numbness long ago, and all but the most excruciating pains seemed to her, more like sneezes. But the pain she felt sawing into her abdomen with broken glass was more terrible than she imagined, and she was thankful for that. Her blood boiled over the edges of her stomach and ran down the sides of her torso, saturating the sheets. She arched her back, feeling the tension in each muscle. Her arms began to shake, and it was hard for her to keep working the glass back

and forth. She started cutting a million years ago, and her breath and heartbeats and blood fought to fill the moments. Finally, she reached the far side of her body, and she let the jagged instrument fall to the floor. Her body was split nearly in two, the wound on her belly stretching waist-high, from one hip to the other. She lay shaking, the puckering edges of the gash rolling out like two bloody lips. Her heart kept beating. Her breaths were ragged but persistent. She was not dead. She would not die from this. The realization gave her the strength to loosen her clenched fingers from the soggy, twisted sheet. She touched the outside edges of the wound, gently with two fingers. Her skin was slippery with the blood that continued to run. She pressed her fingers into the cut meat of her abdomen and felt her hibernating nerves awaken. She winced happily. Charlotte pressed lightly, over and over, enjoying finally, a sense of control. She tortured herself.

When she had nearly exhausted herself with pain and anticipation, she reached into the wound. She felt her stomach, smaller than she expected and remarkably flexible. She wrapped her fingers around her esophagus and felt its width in her fist. She pushed beyond and held her organs, one at a time. She ran her fingers along the lumps of her intestines, and marveled at the weight of her bladder. Her liver required two hands. It was a thick, firm slippery piece of herself and she petted its smoothness. She could not believe that these chunks, these strange globs of tissue worked somehow to keep her alive. It seemed humorous to her, and she dug her hands in deeper looking for the electricity that actually let her live. She pushed her uterus to one side and reached in until she felt something she could not name. She pulled it from its hiding place amid her intestines. It was round, the size of her fist, and quite hard. It was covered in a thick layer

of scar like tissue, and used her fingers to tear at the covering. She worked at the tissue, digging in her nails and picking off tiny pieces. Specks of blue showed through as she tore. She worked with desperation, her hands slippery in her own blood, until she had cleaned the tissue off and she held a glowing blue sphere. It was lovely. Even the bed filled with her insides brought outside was beautiful in its light. The room where she had been beaten seemed calm. It had been worth it.

Charlotte was full of breaths and heartbeats and blueness. She was stirring. Her flesh, her wound, her organs and her blood; all bubbled and surged and grew warm. She wanted to stay there, inside out, and be stirred. But she could not. Her blood was running more slowly, coagulating along the edges. The wound that had stretched from hip to hip was now half that long. She reached deep into her belly, placing the sphere gently inside. She felt the soft, quiet stirrings surge through her body. The wound closed as she removed her hand, leaving behind smooth pink skin. She rested her head and filled with breathing. She had seen what was inside her, had found something silent and beautiful and blue. She did not open herself again. She didn't need to. She found what stirred inside her. And she was happy.

Skin

I don't remember the first time I lost myself to someone's touch. I know that it was early. From birth even, maybe, I was disappearing, becoming what was touching me or the thing being touched, depending on what, I don't know. But my skin has always been tuned in, eager to give itself away to something warm and solid. I remember being rocked to sleep, held close and carried to bed. I remember a large hand patting, patting, my back softly until I slept. It has been said that I didn't sleep through the night until I was three, though I can't fathom that. I do remember my dad trying to help me sleep, but I was probably five at the time. The memory is like this;

My room is full of dark and gray and night. His weight compresses my mattress and I sink in next to him. I am not crying, but there is sweat on my temples, the hair is stuck to my cheeks, and I think I probably have been crying. I am quiet now though, and hot. The hair is being peeled off my face and I am blinking but it's not getting any lighter. There is one finger now, making slow figure eights around my eyes. I try to keep them open, but the hand is slow and persistent, and I'm losing. My eyes are shut now, and heavy, and I am nothing but the figure eight around them. And then nothing.

I am thirteen. It was not the first time I was felt up, but it was nearly the first time. And it was in a movie theater. I didn't particularly like the boy, he was smooth-like, a hustler, and even at thirteen I knew I was not more to him than a small set of breasts. And I let him anyway. There is nothing satisfying about being groped. Nothing really bad about it either, and I remember being excited but also thinking that it would soon be over.

It was a few days later that my mom called me into her room. She was under the covers, ready for bed, and she said to me,

“Ann, what did I read in your diary?”

“Nothing I hope.”

“You don’t need to play with Nick anymore.”

“You don’t need to read my diary anymore.”

“That’s not the issue.”

“I think it is.”

“Ann, we don’t let boys touch us.”

It still makes me want to throw up. Because *we* aren’t the same person, and *we* kind of like boys touching us, and really, how awful was that whole thing? In the years that followed, my mother read my diary at least ten times, and I slept with Nick exactly once.

Strange how the skin gets lonely, how it aches with lack of use, learns the tricks, so that my own hands are an angry reminder. Untouched. I have been this lonely. So lonely my skin ached. It was at these times that I washed my sheets daily, or almost, the tiny bits of dirt unbearable to my hyper-sensitive skin. It seemed to me that my body was electrified, humming and crackling like the static between stations. Now it occurs to me that it was probably just the opposite, that my body was, in fact, sucking the energy toward it, pulling at anything that gave, absorbing all it could. A black hole.

The skin acts as a conductor; takes information from the external and internalizes it, brings it inside. Changes in temperature, pressure, texture, are all detected and

registered, adjusted for. In that way, the skin is a medium for the world at large. But it reacts to internal forces as well. When we are sick, the skin demonstrates it. The same when we are tired, or hot. In most cases, the skin cooperates, and though it is not desirable to look sick, it is a natural occurrence while the body is struggling. What is truly frightening is the skin that does not cooperate.

I don't know when it happened. Probably because it didn't just happen, it took a long time. I got sick. And no one could tell. Not really. For the most part, I looked the same, but I wasn't. And then I couldn't live that way, outside and inside all at once. It was like being twice as much as I could be, and absolutely nothing. My skin was in revolt. So I did what I have since learned is embarrassingly common; I made my skin look the way it felt. And it felt torn and bruised and ripped open. Raw. Let there be pain. It was something. It wasn't nothing. I was sick.

At first, it was almost nothing. It was a tiny pink pocket knife in my hand. It was a scratch so slight it hardly bled. It didn't bleed, it pinkened. It was nearly fun, hardly desperation, and it seemed like a game I knew but couldn't quite remember. My skin was being tested. I was testing it, and it was passing. I think now, what hurt that bad? Nothing did. I did.

Later, I was drunk and reckless. Vicious is the word that comes to mind, and I am afraid of that person, of her desperation, her anger. What I remember most about that time is the tension. It was as though my skin were stretched to the limit, bursting, tearing under the tremendous pressure of holding that person together. There was no safety

valve. The pressure built. There are only pieces left of what I did. I do not have them all. The ones I do have look like this:

He is with me in my tiny dorm room. I am angry, and everything is moving quickly. Careening. That's how it seems. I know it is dark out. I know I have been drinking for a long time, and that my stomach is hot and raw from the alcohol. My breath feels thick, heavy, more like a liquid than air, or paste maybe. I am stomping around the tiny room, and yelling. I have decided that my brother's cocaine problem is too much to bear, that I am being crushed by the weight of him, and that screaming and breaking things will make it better. I have broken a mirror now and I am smashing the pieces with my fist. Shards of glass dig into my skin. I am holding a large, jagged piece of the glass and I have dragged it across my forearm, tearing the skin apart. He is yelling at me now. He is telling me to stop, holding my wrist, and I am yelling that I can't stop, that he is dying and no one is doing anything about it. He's dying. I am dying, but I don't say this. I don't even know it, really, but nothing hurts anymore, or it hurts so much that it has cancelled itself out, and I am punching the concrete wall because it can't all be dead. He says he is leaving if I don't stop, so I do.

“Just one more time,” I say to him, and I swing hard to make it count.

Every organism craves balance, homeostasis; all systems working together to maintain the fragile and necessary equilibrium. When that balance is upset, the body, the organism, does what it must to restore order. The brain sends out the message “we're in pain,” but there is no place that hurts. The brain sends out the message “we're in pain.” The body keeps looking for the injured places and finds none. The message is repeated

over and over. The nerves aren't firing properly. They won't let anything hurt. So the hands take over. And the brain says "see, I told you we were hurt." My body is webbed in pink, milky scars, and when people see them, they say, "oh wow, that must have hurt."

And skin has an amazing capacity for holding onto things. Sweet things, like birthmarks and freckles, and not sweet things like scars from surgery and injuries. Our bodies, our skins, become constant reminders of where we've been, evidence that each moment bears a lifetime of consequences. It is inescapable, this permanent record. Travel far, you're in the same skin. But at the same time, skin is remarkably resilient. Bruises surface and fade. Flesh begins sealing its self the moment it is torn. Only the deepest, most jagged wounds leave behind scars of consequence. And even those seem to fade with time, if only a little bit. What does that mean? I don't know, but it must be something.

He is a weight against me, his chest pressing into mine, and I dissolve beneath him. I am all nerve endings and sweat, not more than skin, and from somewhere the thought comes to me; "I know what it is to melt." And I have melted many times. Under certain conditions, I have no choice but to melt. I have tested this. Let's say, melting for the sake of it. So often it is better to be touched than not. One hand, dry and firm against the small of my back and I am gone. That's all it takes. I guess I'm easy.

I have one now; a man that I melt for. And it occurs to me when we're lying in bed together that there is very little else that matters. For a moment, for moments, I am nothing but the softest skin he has ever felt. He tells me this, his mouth pressed to my ear, and I know there is nothing I would rather be. That is a moment of simple, satisfying

calm, fleeting but real. He is a warmth beside me, a comfortable reminder of the external, of life beyond myself. And I realize how dependent I am. We are two creatures in the midst of millions of creatures. He is the only one I curl myself around. He is the only one I am held by. I am everything and nothing under his heavy arms, his big hands. It is a mix of feelings for which I am grateful.

Lately I have had a strange sensation. It is warm, sometimes hot even, and covers my body from my lap to my chest. It is a pleasant sensation, something familiar. And though I don't have to say it, I will: it feels as though there is a child sleeping against me. I am relieved that I have this sensation when I'm happy. I don't cling to it in desperation; I allow it to share the good. It is tangible, this phantom child. I feel it like I feel anything. I do not wish for children now, but this warmth I feel seems promising. Somewhere there is a part of me that could do it. If nothing else, it is hopeful. I picture myself years from now, rocking him to sleep, his soft new skin, his hair damp against his temples, and the thought comes to me, "I knew you before you were you."

The Only Spell I Know

From my bed I see inside the old and painted cabinet. There are scraps in there; coins from other places, packets of seeds not meant for planting. Papers with ancient hexes in my hands and others. Strips of leather, that is skin, and delicate things, bits of glass and metal shaped into the shape of something. Leaves reduced to veins, strings and fabric pulling apart and twisting together. They are my treasures. They are magic in my hands.

At a flea, the girl walks ahead looking in each stall. She has been here many times. Today, she has five dollars and instruction to buy a present. She is happy with the having of choices and she says the wisdom as she recalls it:

“One person’s junk is another person’s junk.”

It is our nature to have pouches, things to wear to feel their closeness and to fill with precious things- minerals, gold and salt, spices when those things are scarce, cards that tell the future, bones to cast and get an answer, figures of salvation. Tiny things in tiny bags we long to feel the weight of.

Bird droppings from the sky. Someone tells me it is lucky. And it may be good luck, but it is definitely bird shit, so I am ok without it.

And when my husband left, I scoured my surroundings for lessons. Grass growing in the sidewalk crack- tenacity, washing my face- absolution, bits of cat claw stuck in the couch- a shedding. So aching for meaning I would have reached inside, my own sort of haruspicy, divinity in my entrails.

And maybe that would mean something, my liver spread and pinned, the way a groundhog's shadow does, or the bird shit in my hair. When I get home and before I leave the house, I pick them up and hold them close to me. I feel them, warm and whole, and over them I cast the only spell I know. I love you. I love you. I love you.



Breaking the Surface

On the day you would be born (a)

I crossed a country for a mountain
I stood in a town beneath it
And watched our star not set, but drift
So slowly, out to sea.
I saw a seal in the bay break the surface and breathe
A local woman told me they never come so close.
On the day you would be born
I shared a meal with a friend.
We crossed an ocean for this city
And talked about fresh foods and effort and grandparents
I heard a singer say his *grandmother still gives him ten bucks*
On his birthday, and she told him that sleep is god's medicine.
On the day you would be born
I woke up in a tiny rented space
That is clean and only mine.
I crossed a room for a shower
I felt the water warm around me,
And smelled the soap I brought from home
I washed a body that is only mine.
My shoulders broke the surface and I took a breath.

Italicized words come from the song "God's Medicine" by John Moreland

On the day you would be born (b)

If I lived to hold you,
Hot and soft against me,
My shredded body would break
With love for you.

I would trace your tiny edges
Those first moments of you
Already as old as you'd ever been.
And in that way, you'd teach me
About coins and both their sides.

I would pray for the universe to stop
To gather us like apples
In her outstretched apron and
Hold us safe, together.

I would forgive the women I had been,
Each one bore you in her way,
And all of them, forgiven, would hold you
Like my long hair wrapped around us.

I would disbelieve the commonness of your miracle
My one and only, ropes of blood our binding.
My face to your tiny neck, I would breathe-
Me, the blood and sweat, you warm like bread.

I would mourn the losses born with you,
Names forgotten, weathered gravestones in an instant.

I would fold the heavy sweater of my fear
Put it away for a season.

I would slip inside the fur and claws
That were my birthright and your protection
And I would pray to bear
The terror that was my love for you.

Wave Becoming

We call it breaking —
A wave becoming
More than a swell

Declared and destroyed
These words are small
They relent.

But wave and wave and wave,
Broken in becoming,
Stretches toward a shore
Claws or strokes it

Then gathers herself
Like drawing breath
Comes back together
Reaches again

And we with our words,
Sit still
And call this breaking

Inheritance

1a. My grandad taught me how to hold a hot cup of coffee while driving a car. Level but loose, elbow and wrist, gross and fine adjustment. From the porch he watched us rake a mountain of leaves from his hollow and set them ablaze, no more precaution than half that cup of coffee. He ran for everything and rarely won. He dyed his hair and drove a Cadillac and those times when he was sick, my granny was his precious pearl.

1b. My granny had beautiful Christmas ornaments, blown glass like paper, of characters and animals, and we fought over the hanging of the statue of liberty. She had a windowsill of bowling trophies and her uniform from WWII, but she'd scratched herself out of her wedding photos and cut her dress into pieces. She threw heels of bread and apple cores down the holler for animals, filled feeders with slick black seeds, even in snow, and made sugar water for hummingbirds. But she poured concrete in the burrow of groundhog who got too close, set traps that shredded moles in the ground. Things that were cowardly were "chickenshit" and when her mother died, she heard angels talking.

2a. The first thing he would buy, if he won the lottery, was the town of West Terre Haute. He made me a dollhouse, white and green like my own, and with his long fingers clenched to knobby knuckles he would bend his arm at my brother and say "leave her alone or I'll lay the hammer on you" and wisdom I use like "Annie, it takes a big dog to weigh a ton" and "A pig's ass is pork, girl." He was a carpenter and a Union man, but thin, thin, my grandma folding his waistbands and sewing them in place. His widow kept letters he'd written her at seventeen and he built her a house.

2b. When my grandma died, we found a stick by her potted water plant. With it, she poked her used teabags into the water below the roots to nourish the plant. There were hundreds in there. She kept snips of elastic, the waistband of underpants, the collar of a t-shirt. My aunts were disgusted but I saw only possibility and our magpie blood. She died with a little house but a big garden, yard sale clothes, a hundred clocks, and a million dollars in the bank.



How Many Are Left on the Wire?

Paint this Life in Water

Use my hands to carve a branch-
It's forever a limb I've marked,
Some thing of me, or
It is a stick that never called for marking.
In doing and in not
I am scared.

The Universe, she told me once,
I get as many chances as it takes.
The relief in that, still water
But grief stays firm against it,
A rock in quiet current.

Crush this flower, a hill of flowers,
And scratch a note in their blood
so I might remember to buy milk.
Or leave them to grow,
That they might swallow me, drive their roots into my flesh,
Take bits of me to bloom.

These bedsores ache despite
my decision to fly from this wire.
Between decision and flight is every speck of dust.

I would pull a pulpy molar, use its weight
To pay my fare.
But no one deals in teeth, and still
I've paid too much.

So then I'll paint this life in water
As each breath dries and disappears
I mourn the chance I've lost
And beg to be worth my teeth, my fingerprints,
The dust of my skin.
And these endless fucking chances.

Truer Culmination

And if the crescendo is discordant
Be brave.
For what is it but a sign
That resolution nears.
Each swollen striding came to this.
Each string of sinew that screams or hums,
Play them, pet them,
Rest them when you must.
But press again.
Not a rat with a button, but
That first landing fish whose murky lungs
Took in, let out, took in again.
The pressing is important.
Know then, the grains we spill are meant for spilling.
Beneath each blink or shrug or sigh,
The dust of us collects —
Such tiny stars we shoot.
Try then, to see,
between each breath or step or sob,
Each worn key and rotted door,
That a truer culmination is the quiet after.