

ABSTRACT

The Journey Home

Julia Pantleo

Director: Ginger Hanchey, PhD

The idea of home is one that is central to a sense of identity. However, what makes someplace a home? *The Journey Home* is a creative thesis in which I explore the idea of home through short stories and poetry. In my thesis, I break down the concept of home into one's national identity, physical house, family unit, and Heavenly Home. Within each of these categories, I play with the strengths and shortcomings of each classification of home on one's sense of self. For example, I explore the detriments to personal identity that may be caused by an international or nomadic upbringing, strained family relationships, and lack of religious faith. However, I also illustrate the benefits that come from seeing the world, building one's own house, choosing one's own family, and exploring one's own beliefs.

Within *The Journey Home*, I integrate research I have done from the works of Mary Oliver, Anita R. Reidinger, Gregory Orr, Simone Weil, and Theano S. Terkeni, among others. I also draw inspiration from other authors' ideas of home, such as those from Sandra Cisneros, Margaret Atwood, Ernest Hemingway, Katherine Porter, and many others that I have been exposed to during my studies of English Literature.

The Journey Home is a creative exploration of where to begin the search for belonging.

APPROVED BY DIRECTOR OF HONORS THESIS:

Dr. Ginger Hanchey, Department of English

APPROVED BY THE HONOR'S PROGRAM:

Dr. Elizabeth Corey, Director

DATE: _____

THE JOURNEY HOME

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By

Julia Pantleo

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Introduction

Name? Major? Classification? Hometown?

Julia Pantleo. English. Senior.

When I began my studies, these were always the first questions I was asked. The Baylor Four. People use them to break the ice. They're supposed to be the gimmes, the throwaway questions, the first and last easy A's of college. Name, major, classification, and hometown.

For me, they never were.

Growing up as a military child has been one of the biggest blessings of my life. I attended eleven schools by the time I graduated high school, most of them in different states and even countries. Because of this, I was able to experience culture firsthand and travel to places some of my peers had never even heard of. In a lot of ways, moving around a lot as a child prepared me for what I was about to experience in college. But, when it came to The Baylor Four, my nomadic childhood was not an advantage.

So, what does a veritable sponge who wants to learn everything under the sun do when she doesn't know what it means to have a home? She makes it her Undergraduate Honor's Thesis topic, of course.

I spent my three and a half years at Baylor reading anything I could get my hands on, if it had to do with houses and homes: from For Sale listings to the depictions of homes in American Gothic Literature. I studied stories and poetry: the buildings that authors use to house their ideas on the topic. I learned to construct crude little word-homes of my own.

I set up this Honor's Thesis how I imagine a syllogism would be laid out, if syllogisms were made of artwork and not logic. I identified four major categories that are commonly used to determine and describe a home: national identity, physical buildings, family, and religion. Within each chapter, I first present the idea that home is fully encompassed within one of these four categories; for example, in Chapter 1, I suggest that home is found through national identity. Then, for the remainder of the chapter, I dissect the idea to discover where it falls short. By the end of each chapter, I muse that perhaps the next category represents the true meaning of home. In order, I present each of the four main categories for vivisection, until I come to my final chapter, where I conclude that the true home is found in heaven, because it perfects the best elements of each previous chapter.

But, having said this, I want you to forget the structure and the syllogisms. These are secondary and unimportant; what is said is never greater than what is done. Please, just sit back and peruse this hodge-podge collection of words on a page at your leisure—preferably with a steaming mug of tea close at hand.

CHAPTER ONE

Home as Nation

“So I, often wretched and sorrowful, bereft of my homeland, far from my noble kinsmen, have had to bind in fetters my inmost thoughts”

— “The Wanderer”

“Home is a notion that only nations of the homeless fully appreciate and only the uprooted comprehend.”

— Wallace Stegner, *Angle of Repose*

Sailor's Song Part I

Art imitates life: the greatest lie ever told.

Art imitates life?

Art feels no desire, no sadness, warmth, cold.

Art is dead.

If art imitates life, then why is it that I

Have been rocked

By naught but sea? Here I was born. Here I will die.

I was born

Upon a deck, upon a schooner, upon international water.

Then stowed away. Scorn

Must have been my mother's voice—she called me Peter.

I have no ground.

No rock. Only waves. Waves and water and waves.

No earth; only sound

Of waves and water and waves.

Art imitates life?

Where then is my heroes' journey? Where the songs?

Where the fife?

I am adrift. There's no rising action here.

Only the steady

Rise and fall of the sea; whitecaps climax. I am no Peter. I see no stone.

Only eddies.

Flower Picking

“You’re an old dandelion.” You said to me, lying in that field:

“You’re an old dandelion with wild hair that stands on end.

And your mind is taken with the wind—

Thoughts diaspora; heart spread too thin.

You push up uninvited sidewalk cracks and rows of geraniums.

Pulled out. Push back. And up and on the wind.

Yes,” you said. “You’re nothing but an old dandelion.”

Better to be in the wind, I thought,

than left to rot in one tiny plot of land.

To be a naked stem wilting in the sun.

Or worse, plucked by some grubby hand

Seams ripped by childish half-moon nail; milked for fun.

If I am to be nobody or nation,

I will gladly take the latter. You may keep your simple patch.

Give me my wind.

The Green Lady

“Keep off the rail!” Mama would warn me. “You’ll slip and fall and catch your death. And if you don’t the spray will trap the wind just so, and you’ll catch it either way.”

But I was too busy catching glimpses of mermaid tails to pay her any mind. At first, I saw them fourteen times a day. They peered up at me from beneath the loading dock and danced in the wake of nearby ships. But as we waved goodbye to the Amalfi, some waved back at me, before diving back to home. Now, I was lucky to find one, and always then just in the corner of my eye.

Mama, I’m hungry, I used to say. “You’re lucky that we got the steamboat,” Mama would say. “Only a few days, maybe a few weeks. Just last year we would be a few months. Count your blessings, Hail Mary. And keep away from the rail. You’ll catch your death. Count your blessings, count your blessings, Hail Mary, and count your blessings.” After a while my complaints stopped. But even counted blessings don’t fill rumbling bellies. And I’m sure the mermaids can hear my grumbling a thousand leagues down, but, even still, they never throw me a fish.

“Just imagine,” Mama would say. “Imagine the house Papa built for us. The house of our dreams. More than just one room. A roof made of real tile, not tin. *Il balcone* over the food as far as you can see, and farther still. *Una sala da pranzo*, a dining room for us three. You and Papa and me. And a table filled with all the food you can see. You’ll see. Just you and Papa and me.”

But Papa left when I was six. He left for *L'America*. For *la misericordia*. For a new life for our growing *familia*. Papa left when I was six; when we were five. But today I am eleven, and today we are two. Just Mama and me. And the mermaids. And Papa.

And the Green Lady up ahead.

I think a boy saw her first, but soon the whole deck was crowded. Mama was crying. She was crying and was not telling me to keep off the rail, I'll catch my death. "*L'America*," she cried. "Hail Mary and count our blessings!"

Mama was smiling, and so was everyone else. Waves of happiness crashed out onto the waves crashing around the island. Mama was smiling, but for some reason I could not make myself smile, too. I knew there were no mermaids here. They had been scared away. Or maybe there were no such thing as mermaids. Either way, I knew I would not find any here. I knew it from the Green Lady's tightlipped smile. That, and the glittering lamplight reflected in her cold, green eyes.

The Blarney Ditty

It began quite pure, as these things are wont to do:
Stolen glances; whistles playing at ears—Dum diddle lie
Fingers flirted with strings, ringing, singing with delight.
Feet jig of their own accord and could not help be merry— Diddle dum die.
Not when the merry love to fiddle and the merry love to dance.

I found myself the middle before knowing began.
Body rooted in the land of the free—Dum diddie die
Soul flying unbound over emerald meadows,
Chasing bee-loud glens and silver fishes.
Bogs beckon, purple pillows of peat call:
“Come, rest your weary head;
I am yours and you are mine—Diddle lie die”
And how I longed to meet like likes; kiss native things.

Think not of me with sadness
For I have left this house but to come home,
The sea is wide yet I swam over—Dum diddie dum.
Was ferried across hill and glen
Until I came to rest at Blarney.

I slept beneath the castle's cool shade,
And when I pressed my lips upon dead stone
I felt fair Ireland kiss me back.

The Puzzle Piece Heart

Once upon a time, there was a girl named Ella. Ella didn't look very special—in fact, she was rather plain. She had two brown eyes and a pair of ears that held back mousy hair. She had ten fingers, ten toes, strong arms, and a slightly upturned nose. But the one thing that made her different was something no one could see. Ella was born without a heart.

“It’s perfectly fine,” the doctors had assured her worried mother. And for the most part, it was. Ella learned how to walk, speak, and laugh. She rode her bike, did well in school—that is, if you don’t count math—and could even play the clarinet. But, as she grew up, Ella knew something was missing.

“Ella, what’s wrong?” Her mother asked, pulling the sixteen extinguished candles out of the birthday cake in the center of the empty table.

“Nothing,” Ella replied. And it was true. But her mother sighed ruefully at the chairs that should have been filled with laughing teenagers, banging on the table, demanding slices with the biggest frosting flower and teasing wishes out of their friend. So, she put down her work and told Ella everything.

“It’s perfectly fine,” the mother assured her worried daughter. “Really, people live for years without a heart. You can do just fine without yours.” She paused, tracing the outline of the grain on the mahogany table. “But if you wanted to go out and find yours--”

Ella interrupted her with a warm, strong hug.

The next morning, Ella's bookbag was packed. She didn't know how, but deep inside, she knew where she had to go.

"Are you sure your heart's in Doha?" Her mother asked skeptically from her side of security, clearly uncomfortable that her teenage daughter was travelling so far from home. It was too late to turn back. Ella was determined.

"I'm sure of it," she tried to explain. "I don't know much, but I know it's where I'm meant to go. I just know I'll find it. And as soon as I have it, I'll come right back. I promise." She pulled her mother into a final hug and stepped into the line.

As soon as she stepped off the plane, her feet knew exactly where to go. The sunny air was heavy with heat and spices as it blanketed her on her walk through the winding dirt streets. As she travelled down the lane, the white buildings around her were transformed into a beautiful market swarming with people, buzzing like flies. Children squealed gleefully as a bearded man tossed flossy, beige ice cream into the air, teasing them before he placed a heaping scoop into their empty cones. Women wrapped top to toe in luxurious black silks glided through the alleyways lined with stands and tents and building. Clouds of perfume lingered behind them, marking their path through the labyrinth as clearly as a piece of string. Men lounged on stiff, embroidered cushions, reclining on the ground as they laughed and talked business. Each held a vial of tea with their right hand, sipping occasionally. Ella was just becoming conscious of the rudeness of her staring when she felt the small tug on the back of her jeans.

Before her stood a young girl of ten or eleven. Her kohl-lined eyes peered up at Ella from a small patch of skin left uncovered by her red and gold scarf.

“Hello,” Ella said, as kindly as she could muster. “I’m looking for my heart. Can you help me find it?”

The girl blinked.

“My heart,” Ella repeated, placing her hand on her chest. “I’ve lost it. Do you speak English? Do you know where it is?”

The girl stared up at her for a minute, then took Ella’s hand in hers before leading her down an alley to the left. The path seemed to go on forever. From all sides, vendors were selling spices and herbs, wind-up toys and purple flags. There were small, decorative wooden boxes and large, ornate ebony wardrobes. To her right, a man handed out samples of sticky dates that exploded on her tongue, despite their apparent dryness. On her left, a woman emerged from an air-conditioned room positively dripping in gold chains and glistening pearls. Ella could swear she even saw a row of live falcons through one of the doorways, though she did not linger long enough for a second look. All the while, the dusty sky above was filled with the most haunting song Ella had ever heard. It was slow and mournful and surprisingly beautiful. Like an invisible lover calling out from some distant cloud, in hope that his true love would hear it and return to him.

Finally, the girl stopped in front of a shop draped in silk scarves. She exchanged words with the shopkeeper in a throaty language, playfully arguing over something. When the two of them finally seemed to come to an agreement, the man presented her with a large, purple scarf that glimmered bright green in the sun creeping in through the evenly spaced slats overhead. This she placed into Ella’s arms. It was surprisingly cool to the touch.

She spoke to her in the same throaty voice, gesturing to Ella and the red and gold scarf around her face. In a moment of supposed clarity, Ella draped herself in a similar fashion, fumbling with the fabric in a crude attempt to mimic the young girl's style. But the girl seemed satisfied, and continued on her way, Ella trailing dutifully behind her.

Before Ella knew it, night had fallen. Bugs dancing in the lamp light cast shadows across the dirt in front of the pair of girls, who sat on itchy, woven pillows and ate spiced meats and rice from their hand. In the distance, a stray cat skulked its way from doorway to doorway.

“I have had a wonderful time, but please, I need to find my heart. My mother is waiting for me,” Ella pleaded. The young girl nodded slowly, reached behind the cushion, and procured a tiny piece of Ella's heart, which Ella tucked safely into her chest. She tried to give the young girl back the purple scarf in exchange, but she didn't get the chance, because, immediately, the child sprang up, gave her one last look, then turned and followed the cat down the alley and into the shadows.

Ella was disappointed. Not just because her only friend had gone, but because she did not yet have enough of her heart to return home. She realized with a pang that she missed her mother. Ella determined she would set out at first light to find the rest of her heart, so that she could get back home.

The next morning, Ella's feet knew just where to go. She followed them to the sea, and obediently boarded a wooden ship. The journey was long, and the ship hugged the coast of Africa on the starboard side. Both the ocean and her stomach roiled as she lay below deck to avoid the sun and harsh salt spray. And every waking moment was spent

hoping to find the rest of her heart so that she could turn back home. Finally, after about a month, though it could easily have been years, the ship docked safely at shore.

Venice looked just like it did in all the postcards Ella had seen; though, after her long voyage, the tendrils of water were less idyllic than she had originally pictured when she first set out. She unwrapped the scarf from her head, stuffed it into her backpack, and surveyed the scene around her. Cramped houses clung desperately to their tiny patch of dry land, each threatening to push one another off into the canals below. Pigeons flew in flocks overhead, silently gossiping about where best to find their next meal. Up ahead, a fishnet made of old clothes hung out an open, third story window to dry. And all around, bridges stood above their reflections in the murky water, edges kissing to create a perfect circle. Long boats drifted lazily past, their wakes briefly separating the two halves before the lovers were reunited once more.

One such boat stopped in front of Ella, as she marveled at the distorted reflection of the fluffy white clouds above. Teetering on the ship's back edge stood a man of around thirty, grasping a long wooden pole. The top of the man's head was completely bald, probably because all of his thick, black hair had migrated onto his strong forearms.

"Excuse me," Ella said. "Do you know where I can find my heart? I need it so I can go home."

The man said nothing, but his eyes twinkled, bursting with a secret they desperately wanted to reveal. Ella was loath to get back into a boat, but she knew this would be the only way for her to find her heart and get back home. She sighed and clambered aboard.

Thankfully, this ship was nothing like the one she had just disembarked. The ride was smooth as silk as the bow cut deftly into the glassy water. Men and women walked lazily along the shore, arm in arm. Small children darted over bridges, feet pounding loudly, their fingers sticky with gelato. Some of the youngest paused and flattened themselves along the stone to reach into the water to wash off, finding themselves even more filthy after their hasty cleaning. The eldest would forgo bridges entirely, choosing instead to leap across the water where the channel was most narrow. Chattering filled the air as tourists snapped photos, purchased gaudy masks, and ate entire pizzas in corner cafes. All the while, the boatman ferried her around the island, humming above the clamor in a melodic tenor as he led her through the watery streets.

Just as the sun started to cast a pinkish hue over the grey waterways, the ferryman parked in front of a grey, stone building. He procured a simple beaded bracelet of tiny blue glass, which he slipped over Ella's wrist before helping her out of the boat. In his high voice, he muttered something unintelligible before reaching into her bag, pulling out her purple scarf, and wrapping it firmly around her shoulders. Then, he turned and entered through the simple, wooden doors; dutifully, Ella followed.

Ella gasped and she imagined that this must be what it would be like to walk into a geode. She would have never known from the plain stone outside that the sun would peek in through painted glass windows, casting glorious technicolor onto the wooden pews in front of her. At the front of the room stood a solitary table whose white tablecloth was now tie dyed with the rainbow light that filled the room. Huddled grey bodies kneeled before it, eyes planted firmly on the stone floor. Elbows braced upon the table, desperately trying to absorb some of its radiance. Their hands were clasped tightly shut,

as if they held some tiny fractal that they were terrified would slip from between the cracks of their fingers.

Inside, the air was utterly silent. All sounds of lapping waves, flapping wings, stomping children, and flashing cameras had been stopped by the door. Time stood still and it was as if the room itself was holding its breath. Ella meant to ask again for her heart, but the words caught in her throat, choking her. Thankfully, the man seemed to know what she was mute to ask. He ducked into a nearby pew and returned moments later with his little piece of her heart. Ella placed it within her chest, fitting it safely next to the segment the Qatari girl had given her. By the time she had finished this, the man had left. The wooden door swung silently shut behind him, only allowing a tiny glimmer of light to escape. When she had mustered up the strength to follow him, his boat was gone, and the wake had all but disappeared.

And, just like before, Ella's feet knew where she was going next.

Deciding that she had spent enough time on boats to last a lifetime, Ella boarded a northbound train. This journey was much more pleasant, and after a few days, she had arrived in Baden-Baden.

When Ella first saw the city, with its oldtown filled with cobbled streets, blue signposts and pastel houses, she was delighted. However, her feet had other plans for her, and marched her deep into the surrounding Black Forest. Here, the air was cold and dark. Birds shrieked in the distance, and the sounds of hidden brooks echoed their babbles from all sides. She wrapped her scarf tightly around her neck and fiddled with her smooth blue beads as she allowed herself to be led deeper along the leaf-meal path. The sun tried in

vain to break through the trees above and cast its feeble light upon the plush moss blanketing the rocks below. Now and then, a beam would break free, creating long shadows that seemed to reach for the lone wanderer. She hoped she would find her heart quickly and be done with it, if she could even find her way back out. Her feet had not once yet let her down, but here, all of the trees looked alike and, by day, it was impossible to tell which direction the sun was shining from. By night, all stars would be invisible. Never had she wanted to be home more, safe in her mother's arms.

When she first heard the noise, Ella thought it was a bird or a fox. It was only when it got closer, and two tall shadows reached for her, that she realized it was low speech. Frightened, but equally glad for some company, she hurried towards the couple.

They were both old enough to be her grandparents. Blueish veins were scattered between the woman's tan shorts and the white socks peering out above her boots. But despite this, she had a pleasant face. Kind eyes peeped out behind the crow's-feet that had accumulated after years of laughter. The man appeared more reserved. Where the woman had rushed out to meet Ella when she first saw her coming, he stayed behind, one hand looped in one strap of his backpack, the other gripping a wooden walking stick. His hat balanced over curly white hair, making him look even taller.

"I'm sorry to bother you," Ella said to the woman, loud enough for her husband to hear as well. "Do you know where to find my heart? I really need it so that I can get out of here and get back home." Ella didn't expect the woman to reply, and therefore was not surprised when the woman simply beckoned to her to follow, and then set off to rejoin her husband.

The three continued on for only a short time, before the couple stopped at a nearby clearing. From the rocks sprung a dribbling little fountain of water, and here the trees allowed the sun to pass completely unhindered. The man had taken off his pack, and Ella did the same as she settled down on the warm, cozy moss. While the man leaned against a nearby rock, he pulled out a pipe, and began lazily blowing rings. His wife procured from the pack a variety of meats and cheeses, some of which she graciously offered Ella. As the two ate, the husband whistled a merry tune, and suddenly the forest did not seem so scary.

Ella sat there contentedly for the rest of the afternoon, picking at small flowers that sprang up through the moss and attempting to mimic snatches of the man's tune. She even tried a puff of his pipe, but the second the smoke hit her lungs, Ella gagged. The couple laughed, and, once she had caught her breath, Ella did too. As the sun began to sink lower, the woman reached into the pack a second time, this time procuring a piece of Ella's heart. Once it had been safely snapped in place beside the other pieces, the man passed Ella his walking stick, before donning the bag once more, lacing his free hand into his wife's open palm and leading her back into the forest.

Ella looked down and noticed there was only one tiny piece of her heart missing still. Surely, she could turn back for home by now. She missed her mother, and this trip had already been so long. But Ella also realized how far she had come. It would be pointless to turn back now. Besides, there could only be one more piece left. Just one more slice and she could return home. So, Ella slipped her bag onto her shoulders, gripped her new walking stick, and followed her feet back out of the clearing.

To save time, Ella decided to take a plane the next morning, and, only a few hours later she had landed in Inverness. Unfortunately, her feet did not seem to share this same immediacy, and led her miles away from the city, until finally they reached a deep black lake nestled between rolling blue hills. Patches of purple heather lingered around the shore, and nearby stood the ruins of a crumbling stone castle. Surely her heart was to be found there, hidden among the lichen.

She had almost stepped on him by the time she saw him, napping despite the light drizzle that had started to fall. He looked about her age, with droplets of rain clung to his dark brown hair and eyelashes. She shook him awake, eager to get the rest of her heart and go home.

“Excuse me,” Ella said as his eyes snapped open. “Would you happen to know where my heart is?” Mentally, she had already prepared herself for the typical nonverbal answer, followed by a day of wandering, a small token, and then her ticket out of here. Not that she was ungrateful for the people she had met and the gifts that she had received thus far. But Ella was beginning to feel like a magpie, and nothing quelled the ache to go home.

“That’s the dumbest question I’ve ever heard,” the boy replied. “Do you always introduce yourself this way?”

She liked him instantly.

Ella had not realized how much she had missed conversation. So, the two sat and talked until the sun began to slip beneath the hills.

“Let me give you a ride back,” the boy said, nodding to a bike propped up against a stone wall.

“But what about my heart?” Ella asked.

He laughed. “Talk to me again tomorrow.”

But tomorrow she was on a plane home. Ella had found her final piece somewhere between his words and his tire spokes and placed it gently inside her chest, much to his dismay. Perhaps he had been trying to keep it for himself. But what did he need it for? He had his own. And that couple; surely they had their own, or each other’s. The gondolier, the child. And now her heart made six. Six lovely, beating hearts, happy and whole.

Her mother rushed to meet her at the exit, and pulled her into a warm, strong hug.

“I’m so happy you’re home” she said. “Did you get what you were looking for?”

Ella nodded. But just as soon as she did, she realized she was a liar. She didn’t have her whole heart; not really. She had left parts of it behind. A piece was with a little girl; another was with a humming ferryman. One was wandering the woods, and one more was sleeping peacefully beside a lake.

“I did. It’s good to be back.”

Ich Bin Kein Berliner

Hertzlich willkommen! A voice punctures,

Cold like the wind; grey like the clouds.

Black jackets zipped from knee to chin brush past, all syncopate to an inaudible drum.

Or perhaps the drum speaks his foreign pitch for only mother-tongued ears to hear. My own speech is rehearsed:

Entschuldigen Sie!

Wo ist der Bahnhoff?

Bitte langsam. Ich bin Amerikaner.

Bitte langsam! Ich kann kein Deutsch.

All lagging behind the steady beat of the drum, but still the drum beats on.

Rain to sleet to rain to sun.

Black shells are shed, but occupants still brush past, synchronized to the unheard drum.

Bike to work and home and back again.

Market on Wednesdays. Rest on Sundays. Measure the days in *Franzbrötchen* mornings and *Stammtisch* evenings.

Darf Ich mal vorbei?

Einen Augenblick, bitte! Ich kann den Bahnhof nicht finden.

Vielen Dank! Ich bin Amerikaner. Mein Deutsch ist nicht so gut.

The drum beats on.

Sun turns to rain to sleet; I don a long black coat and hurry along with the crowd.

Den Bahnhof? Gehen Sie geradeaus. Die erste Straße links.

Bin wirklich kein Deutsch—echt Amerikaner!

Doch, Ich bin kein Berliner.

But the drum keeps my time.

Bienvenue en Belgique! A voice purrs,

Ou est le métro?

Plus lentement, s'il vous plait! Je suis Américain

Plus lentement. Je ne parle pas français.

The drum changes tempo.

Welcome Home

The lavender car-jar immediately hit my nostrils. I had never much liked lavender, but anything was a welcome break from the cold, recirculated 737 air and the smell of 215 stale bodies pressed too close together. The polished flight attendant had smiled at me through clenched ruby lips as I disembarked, a blooming redness on her face and neck betraying the fact that she was holding her breath as passengers shuffled out, one by one.

“Where to?” a slow voice asked out of courtesy. He knew as well as I that I had plugged the address into the Uber app when ordering his white sedan.

“2301 North Elm Road,” I said. I could play along with his little game. “It’s up in Loveland.”

As the car sprung to life, I leafed through the little blue passport that had made its home in my pocket, counting the faded stamps. Vancouver was the oldest. It had been my first. The scruffy old man had carefully observed my smiling face in the picture and had compared it to my smiling face staring back at him. After he was satisfied that I was really me, he had pressed a lonely blue circle firmly on the crisp, empty page. It looked so sad there on its own that I just had to give it a friend. And soon after, another scruffy man in Nuuk had placed a red Greenland stamp next to my Canadian one.

And almost suddenly, I had gone from one to two to somewhere around one hundred stamps, all packed next to each other. Bali was nestled happily between Sydney and Reykjavik. Moscow was kissing Mumbai. And someone had stamped Lima over

Lisbon over Johannesburg. Whether I had traveled by plane, train, or automobile, I was always rewarded with another stamp to my ever-growing collection.

“So, where’re you from?” The voice asked, clearly uncomfortable by my prolonged silence in the backseat.

“You know, that’s the million-dollar question,” I said. Brown eyes stared at me through the rearview mirror, prompting me to continue. “I grew up in Tempe, born and raised. I had never left the state when I decided I wanted to go somewhere and see the northern lights. After that I guess I wanted to see a fjord, and then the pyramids, and then everything else. And, I don’t know, I guess I never stopped. Haven’t been back since.”

“Sheesh! Well then what the Sam heck brought you to Ohio?”

“You know, I don’t really know.” And it was the truth. I had been sitting on a corner café in Positano when I suddenly decided I had had enough of crowded trains and cheap hotel rooms. The cash I had earned doing odd jobs was only stretching as far as the next terminal. I suddenly realized the next place I wanted to see wasn’t a landmark, but a place to call my own. So, I stockpiled money from washing dishes, picking fruit, selling fish, and cooking and cleaning at various local hotels. As soon as I had enough, I opened my laptop and googled listings near the first US town I could think of: Cincinnati. After looking at price tags, however, I quickly learned I would have to settle for a nearby suburb. I picked the cheapest house I could find, and that was that. I had electronically signed the last of the paperwork on my layover in Frankfurt almost fourteen hours ago. Not that I wanted to tell him that; he’d think I was nuts. Even I was having a hard time explaining it to myself.

We drove in near silence along the outskirts of the city, the driver careful to avoid the bumper to bumper gridlock. Soon, the skyscrapers were set firmly in the back window, only to be hidden by trees as we traveled down I-275.

The landscape morphed again, this time, the trees separated into evenly spaced sentries standing guard along a quaint main street. White fences lined red brick homes; flowerboxes waved from the lower windows. Blades of grass shifted in the breeze; each one a perfect three inches tall. A mother shuffled her brood into a nearby shop. A young boy sped along on his bicycle, going nearly as fast as the uber driver along the sleepy street.

And then, we turned left.

The trees grew restless; grass became unruly, daring to reach higher and higher toward the sun. By the time we had crossed the train tracks, the landscape was in full rebellion. And amidst this chaos stood—or rather, leaned—a small grey house.

It was easy now to see why it was so affordable. Mildewed shingles lay exhausted upon peeling grey beams—many of which had been decorated by teenagers in a midnight attempt to play at being Banksy. In places, the roof had given up altogether, finding a more comfortable resting place in the tall weeds below. The windows were all either boarded up, dirty, or broken. Some of them were all three at once.

But none of this mattered; it was all mine. Besides, the spray paint looked like ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. The untamed landscape surrounding it reminded me of the forests of Indonesia. The twilight horns of passing trains may bring back fond memories

of nights spent hustling towards another adventure. And, until it can be patched, the roof will be perfect for viewing any northern lights remaining in my mind's eye.

“Welcome home,” my driver said sarcastically, nodding towards the house as he emptied his trunk of my one bag.

For now, I thought as he hurried off, and I made my way towards the crooked door.

CHAPTER TWO

Home as Physical Building

“To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul”

—Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Toward Mankind*

“I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to. But this isn't it.”

—Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*

Domino Steine

“An endless string of dominoes.” You said one day. “That’s essentially what home was for me. It wasn’t even home. Houses. That was it. Just houses. Houses, lined in neat little rows, falling, crashing one into the other. As they fell, they would each overlap its neighbor, becoming a single, ivory wave.

“At first, I’d like to think I could tell them apart. That I could hear the staccato of each individual tile crashing into the next. But, after a while, the sound turned legato, until it was only one single note. A continuous clack of plastic on the linoleum floor.

“Which one had the red door?’ I’d ask my mother. ‘What about the kitchen island with the black countertop? The white? Where were we when we had the tire swing? How about the apple tree?’ In my mind, they were all the same. In my mind, each house was just a room. And they all connected to form a shell.

“They were just houses. Domino houses falling one on top of the other. They didn’t matter.”

The way you said it tore my heart. Matter of fact. Your voice was hollow. You weren’t even sad; you didn’t mourn the loss. Perhaps because could never comprehend what you had missed.

I cried for you that night. I’d never tell you, of course. I waited until after you had left, but I did. It wasn’t when I had shut the door to the porch under which I had buried the butts of guilty cigarettes between my fifteenth and sixteenth summer. It wasn’t when I

had paced my way back into the kitchen where Mom had stood sentry in front of her favorite burner, and it wasn't when I remembered how at twelve, I still had to climb on the counter to reach the plates within the cupboard. It wasn't when I traced my fingers over the pencil marks in the doorframe, memorializing my growth. It wasn't when I crossed the dining room where I used to hide small mountains of vegetables beneath my napkin, confident that my four-and-three-quarters-year-old self had outsmarted Dad.

It was when I had reached the hallway. It was when I remembered how, before I could even walk, Mom would stack Legos in a row between the two of us, not dominoes. It was our own little rainbow. Then she would push them over and watch them fall and we would laugh and laugh.

I know the memory is not my own. It has to have been altered by old photographs and home movies. But I am so sure of the sound. The hollow beating of brick on brick buried beneath our laughter.

Pompeii

—it seems rather hollow
to look upon these ashen streets
trampled by tourists with flashing
cameras lined with grim monuments,
houses turned mausoleum, and wonder
how many towns lay crumbled and forgotten
beneath trampling feet hurrying towards
their own waiting homes.

Magnolia Plantation

The best houses are made of wood. It has to do with the roots, see? The trees remember that they are meant to burrow down, even after they have been cut and covered in insulation and siding, and what have you. They just burrow on down. That's what really keeps a house together: old wood, digging into old ground. That's what keeps a house standing.

And no house had been standing longer than old Magnolia Plantation.

It was already ancient when Mabel decided to uproot her daughter, moving the small family across country to the house in the woods. "Georgia is a wonderful place to settle down" she would repeatedly tell her, in attempt to quench both their fears. "Things are slower there, not like the hustle bustle of the busy roadways up here. And, Kennan, you can run around outside all day. And at night, you can catch lightning bugs in a jar and keep them by your bedside." And so, the family drove south, following the mountain-hills down to Georgia.

Mabel had always fantasized building a house of her own: searching out a plot of land and creating something out of nothing. There was something godlike about it, molding a space into something alive. Perhaps this is why she called herself a writer; it allowed her to keep for herself a slice of divinity, even if she so rarely put words to paper. So, when Mabel slammed the door shut in the long, gravelly driveway and peered up at the faded Corinthian columns, rotting wrap-around porch, and ivy-strewn gables, she was all smiles.

“Y’all must be the Bakers.” An old voice called out from behind the corner. A sturdy, portly man crept around a column and hobbled down the front stoop towards the family. In a greying suit, the man appeared almost a ghost. Kennan, at only eight, wrapped herself around her mother’s leg at his approach.

“We are,” Mabel said. “And you must be Mr. Clyde, the groundskeeper.” She stretched out her hand and was taken aback at the old man’s firm handshake.

“Call me Tom” the man said, scratching the peppery stubble clinging to his chin. “Welcome to good ol’ Magnolia. It’s been a long time since we’ve had company. We’ve cleaned her up nice and good for ya.” He stole a glance towards Kennan, making her bury her head in her mother’s waist.

In a flash, the man had the car unloaded. Between the two of them, they only had four suitcases in all. Half of the appeal of Magnolia Plantation had been the fact that it was furnished with the original furniture from the 1800s. The other half had been the price. Though funds were slowly trickling in from her last book, Mabel needed a home that was easier on the wallet than their old place in New York, and despite its square-footage, Magnolia Plantation fit the bill. However, Mabel mused that this was only due to the state of its decrepit exterior. Inside, the house was spotless. Sure, the wood floors creaked beneath their feet, but the rich, green wallpaper looked recently renovated, and the wrought-iron bannisters gleamed under the light of the crystal chandelier.

The first few weeks, Mabel slept soundly, though Kennan frequently climbed into her bed, claiming nightmares as her excuse. She had tried to keep fireflies by her bedside, but as the night went on, they dropped one by one to the bottom of the jar, light dimming,

then going out. At first, the fact that Kennan clung to her in her sleep never bothered Mabel, even as she carried the limp child back to her own room after a few hours. However, after a while, Mabel had to tell the timid child that she would have to spend the night in her own room for a while. This was for the best, the mother told herself. She needs to slowly learn to grow up. An eight-year old should be able to spend the night in her own room, and Mabel was afraid that she was coddling her too much, especially after the recent death of her husband. Mabel was desperate to make sure the child would grow up as normally as possible.

As the school year started up, the house seemed too empty. In the morning, the parlor was chaos: shoes flying, breakfasts half eaten, bags packed. But, once the bus came, Magnolia plantation was silent, save for the quiet creak of the floor beneath Mabel's feet.

She had rarely seen Tom since the family had arrived, over a month ago. Occasionally, he could be seen trimming the hedges, or hobbling towards his small cottage, just within the trees. During the first few days, Tom had continued cleaning the house, to Mabel's protests. "It's part of my process" she had convinced herself to tell the groundskeeper, five days after the family had moved in. "I like to clean the house, to help me get inspiration." Something about the man set her on edge, and, though she was glad that he had taken such care of the house, she was nervous to have him around her child. "It's best if you leave the housework to me." And Tom did. From then on, the bannisters were just a little dustier, the windows faintly streaked. But Tom respected her wishes, and for that, Mabel was thankful.

Having emptied the dishwasher, vacuumed the living room, and mopped the kitchen, Mabel finally decided to sit down on a red, velvet armchair, laptop open to a blank word document. For what seemed like hours, she stared at a blinking cursor, laughing at her from its snowy screen.

Then, from down the hall, she heard a scratching.

At first, it was so faint, Mabel wasn't sure if it was there. She tried to focus on the flashing black line on the screen in front of her. But then, she heard it again: the smallest whisper of nails on drywall. As she sat, it grew steadily louder, until, in one fluid motion, she snapped her laptop closed and leapt up to investigate. As if it knew she was listening, however, the walls were suddenly silent, and Mabel told herself it was only the wind.

The hall lay dormant for a long time after that. So much so, that Mabel had long since pushed the episode from her mind. It wasn't until she was lying in bed, a few weeks later, staring at the grey ceiling above, that she felt an itch of familiarity tickle the back of her mind. For a while, she could not pinpoint the culprit of this *deja-vu*. All at once however, she realized that the faint sound of scratching was drifting up the staircase from the hall below. "*It's just Kennan. Or Tom,*" she thought to herself, or maybe she said aloud. She ignored repetitive scratching and tried not to think about the distinct lack of creaking floorboards adding to the music.

"Mommy, can I have some juice?" Kennan's quiet voice asked from the kitchen. From her spot in the parlor, Mabel could hardly hear her. All she could focus on was the warmth of the computer searing her bare legs, the mocking cursor, and the scratching climbing up her spine.

“Mommy!” Kennan shouted, suddenly right in front of her.

“God damn it, Kennan!” Mabel snapped. The girl cowered, flinching, as if afraid of some impending punishment for disturbing her mother. “What? What could you possibly need?”

“I was wondering if I could please have some juice.” She focused on the ground, her bare toes sweeping lightly over the uneven crosshatched wood panels as she shifted her weight from one foot to the next.

“Get your own,” Mabel said, turning to look back at the blank page in front of her. “Mommy’s working.” She didn’t register her daughter slinking back to the kitchen, nor did she hear the bus as it pulled up in front of the house to ferry Kennan to school. She didn’t even notice the sound of scratching growing ever louder from down the hall.

Mabel began to settle into a familiar routine. Before dawn, she would wake up and settle into her red armchair. Tethered in her seat to by a chord, she saw nothing but the taunting cursor, the empty screen. Life bustled on by her: Kennan coming and going, dishes piling up, dust settling about the house, squeaking floors and silent rooms. Scratching echoing through her head. Sometimes, she would close the screen, unfurl herself from her seat, and trudge up to her room, to stare at the ceiling until sleep took her. More often, she stared ceaselessly at the blinking line, flashing in sync with the incessant scraping. “*If only I could drown out the noise, get something on the page,*” she thought. But the line kept time, and the scratching followed suit.

Soon, it became the only noise within the house. No morning chaos, no squeaking floors. Only the constant scratching, a sound which seemed to whisper, “Not enough.” And then, one day, the scratching stopped.

“Y’all must be the Crowleys,” An old voice called out from behind the corner. A sturdy, portly man crept around a column and hobbled down the front stoop towards the family. “Welcome to good ol’ Magnolia. It’s been a long time since we’ve had company, and we’ve cleaned her up nice and good for ya.”

Home Invasion

Rap Rap Rap

Polite tapping on my door.

Eye, pressed to periscope, greeted with warped grin.

Click Click Click

“You have the bluest eyes.

Would you please let me in?”

Clang Clang Clang

Your voice is kind

My hand hovers over the lock

Knock Knock Knock

Had I been so willing to let you in?

All it would have taken was one more knock.

Beat Beat Break

My door kicked in.

They always talk of fight or flight.

Why does no one mention freeze?

Creak creak crash

Your shoes eye-level

My floorboards smash.

Walls collapse, crumple around me.

Bang Bang Blast

Seize inheritance.

Straighten your tie.

And then you're gone

You're gone and I'm alone

With nothing but my bruised house

And the rapping reverberating in my ears.

Laminate and Little Squirrels

Where do you run to, when your feet are pounding upon the pavement, lungs screaming for oxygen, legs begging you to stop? Where do you run to? And where do you run from?

For me, it was always back home, only by route of the nearby woods. I would venture into my little patch of wilderness, but would always be tethered, anchored, to brick and mortar and buried insulation. Each day would take me another mile. But when my legs changed to lead and my arms became too heavy to swing, my bungee cord always snapped me violently back to rest. I could never truly escape civilization, no matter how much I wanted to.

I don't know when I started running. I would like to say it was in ninth grade, when I joined the school's cross-country team, desperate for friends. Caroline, walking sunshine encased in bronze, had taken pity on me during that first day, my shirt still crumpled after being released from its prison only this morning. It had been sentenced into a little brown box by the moving company, sardined with all my other belongings, and shipped halfway across the world. She must have noticed the creases in cotton—or the thinly-veiled look of fear in my eye—and guided me from math to history to PE to the lunchroom, where she introduced me to the rest of the girls. Most of them were only junior varsity, using their uniforms to buy them time enough for a cigarette or two between practice and the late bus that would ferry them home in the evenings. But the cohort was full of easy laughs and shared peach lip-gloss; they sat beneath a cloud of

flirtatious giggles aimed in the junior boys' direction and strategically placed vanilla perfume. By the end of lunch, I had texted my mother to dig out my pair of unworn, 2-year-old Nikes from the box labeled "Sarah's Room: Misc." By the end of the day, I had officially joined the team.

But in actuality, the need to run seems to have been born within me. Almost as if it was a piece of my DNA. Almost as if my telomeres were made of the tips of the shoelaces on my grey, battle-worn sneakers. I had been running long before high school. In sixth grade, back in Florida, I had outlasted all but Jonny Beauchamp in the pacer test. In third grade, I had run five kilometers across the National Mall in just under thirty minutes. In first grade, I had chased the neighborhood boys away from my ramshackle roly-poly sanctuary, nestled within the long shadow of Mount Saint Helens. And, even before I can remember, photo evidence proves that I teetered behind our balding black cat in my attempt at a premature trot.

It seems like I've also been running back to this house every time. Even before I knew it.

I had chosen it for the woods. And because of the price range; it's hard to find a house for rent on a recent-college-graduate-making-entry-level-salary budget. The house itself wasn't anything special: two bed, one and a half bath, laminate flooring, a birch and granite island, and a tiny window-seat in the corner of the living room. The fireplace must have been beautiful once, but it was so beautiful that a family of squirrels decided to set up residence, and they refused to be evicted, no matter how many Orkin men tramp through my house and theirs.

But surrounding it was over seventy miles of trails through the prettiest patch of Northern California forest, outside the mile-tall and half-mile-wide redwoods. Here, the pine trees stand together like the pillars of some organic cathedral, the trail a winding isle that leads to the never-ending knave. Every time I try to reach the altar at the end of the path, I am faced with a fork-like transept, and another, and another, and then my legs grow tired and I feel the familiar tug of that invisible cord tied behind the back of my belly button, pulling me back home. So, I turn and run from the elusive sanctuary, vowing that tomorrow, I will find it. I turn and run back to the laminate and the family of little squirrels.

On Writing

Do not drag me out to shore; I have set my hopes on higher ground.

True, the sea is history, but I shall make the mountain tops my future.

Build for myself a cabin, perched atop the highest stone.

Jut of rock shall be my garden and cliff-face my gate. Here

Where the air is feeble I shall perch; a peregrine

Falcon nested in safety.

Home at last. Untouchable.

Yet I know that I will die. Even a mile high

Death like a postman will come knocking.

Will they find my bones,

Those wintry rams who clamber ever upward, seeking the solace I call my own?

Termites will have made quick work of my timbers.

But shall foundation's ghost remain, forever haunting the glyphed rock?

Or will these too be eaten by lichen, buried beneath the years, screaming to be unearthed?

Perhaps they will hear the echoes of the words I have left behind.

Are you my ram?

Once, I formed my house upon the sand.

But the waves came and swept my foundation from beneath me.

I fought time

And again to rebuild my sandcastle. Clumps of muck

Thrown in haste; patching the holes in my memory.

I had wandered, but the sea's foamy fingers snatched my footprints while my back was turned.

The sea is greed. Yet I am pride.

I refuse to be erased.

Do not drag me out to shore; I have made my home on the mountain top.

From my oaky abode I croak my timber voice

Confident after I am gone; I now live as echo.

Is this not why we favor paper to sand, in the end?

Tabernacle

I shall not craft what is home.

I cannot force it into words

Brick by brittle brick

And build a fortress of the feeling

That is home.

Love is not stone or wood,

Something solid, to be molded

Into a brittle being that will one day

Crumble and rot.

It is a tent, a tarp

That may flap in the breeze

Yet still hold firm. Or else be

Carried off to shelter another.

While I am tabernacled here,

Yes, this is home. But don't you dare

Shackle me to walls or mortar.

CHAPTER THREE

Home as Family

“I am strangely glad to get back again to you: and wherever you are is my home—my only home.”

Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre*

“A home filled with nothing but yourself. It’s heavy, that lightness. It’s crushing, that emptiness.”

Margaret Atwood, *The Tent*

Little Shack

The little shack slumps there, upon the hill.

Her eye-like windows droop; they have no gleams.

Walls are weary and from here it seems

Her broken Cheshire shingles wince for chill.

She is ashamed of her appearance ill--

As am I, in unsoled shoes and tired seams.

My soul is weary; spine weak like rotting beams

With mold spread to each bone and outward still.

Yet through her tired eyes I can now see

Ma's grin, in spite of outward squalor;

The children squeal and tease in easy glee.

She spies my approach, and rings out a holler

"Look who's come home!" Three pairs of eyes find me

And as they dash out, (I swear) my shack grew taller.

The Wind and The Tree

Zephyr's bare feet absentmindedly dug themselves into the soft morning dew. She let out a burst of musical laughter as a warm breeze reached out and played with her delicate blonde curls. Suddenly, the breeze turned violent, whipping at her clothes and pelting her bare skin with tiny pebbles. Her laughter died out as a strong gust wrapped itself around Zephyr's waist and plucked her from the emerald meadow, into the air. Hoisted haphazardly into the sky, she was powerless against the current that was dragging her along.

Even after a thousand years of being toted about, she was still surprised every time. A wind would come, uproot her, and carry her to some foreign land, only to drop her headfirst into a new life. As soon as she became too settled, too comfortable, it would come again. At first, she viewed this as a gift. She had always wanted to see the world; it was filled with new and interesting people to meet. Zephyr would listen to their exciting customs and strange desires, and she would fall in love. Not with the people themselves, but with their land, their culture, their language. And every time the wind would come to whisk her away without warning, without a chance at goodbye. As soon as her feet were placed on new soil, she would try to drown her sorrows within the excitement of this novel territory. Sometimes it worked, for a bit.

Soon, however, Zephyr realized that every corner of the world looked the same. Everywhere there was hot sunshine and sharp rain. The warm cinnamon of the South was

not too different from the icy smell of Northern pines. Each land was filled with the same war over some small variation of the same dispute. Everywhere, the same people with the same face rearranged in a slightly different pattern told the same tales in a slightly different order.

But even realizing this could not stop the pain of leaving.

And so, many years ago, Zephyr abandoned friendship, because it's impossible to have when, at any moment, it can be wrenched away by the fingers of the wind.

Alder woke up with the dawn, like he did every day. Every moment of his life passed him by like clockwork. His every subtle movement was calculated. As soon as the first light appeared on the flat horizon, Alder would open his eyes and take in the world around him. Just like yesterday, he was rooted at the top of a craggy hill overlooking the ocean. Just like last week, the smell of the sea filled his nostrils. Just like last month, the waves crashed against the bottom of his cliffs. Just like last year, these waves found the stone unmovable.

Alder could not remember how he got to this cliff. Perhaps he had been wandering alone one day and stopped to admire the view, only to have his feet grow roots and plant him firmly in his tracks. Perhaps he had always been here, and the cliffs and the seas had grown around him. Either way, it didn't matter. Alder was comfortable. Every moment was predictable, nothing happened that had not happened before, and would not happen again.

Yesterday, Alder woke up, stretched his arms about him, and watched the waves glitter along the horizon, reflecting the sun's golden light until it sank beneath them. Tomorrow, Alder knew he would wake up, stretch his arms about him, and watch the ocean. Sometime around noon today, and tomorrow, a robin would flit through the trees in the forest behind his back. He has never seen these oak trees, but he knows them by the leaves they shed every fall, like clockwork.

Every so often, Alder would get the urge to pull himself from this vista and turn to face the trees. But, every time, he decided against it. Somehow, it wouldn't be right. Maybe, if he turned around, the waves would suddenly still. Perhaps the cliffs would crumble. No, it was always best to leave things as they were. Everything has its proper place, and to mess with this order would be to defy nature herself.

And so, Alder opened his eyes with the dawn, stretched his arms about him, and watched the waves, like he always had, and was convinced he always would.

Carried on her wind, Zephyr watched as the world changed around her. Leaving behind the meadow she had isolated herself in, she was pulled into a light forest. She whizzed past fragile aspen and was toted around stony boulders. Carried further still, the trees grew scarce and the grey rocks overpowered the grassy knolls. These rocks hoisted themselves up into icy mountains. The air around them grew thin and cold. Goosebumps covered her arms and Zephyr attempted in vain to wrap herself into a ball to trap in warmth.

And still, the wind took her. It dragged her over the mountain ranges until at last, the rocks turned to pebbles, which turned to sand. There, the ground met with a glittering blue sea. Its salt filled her nose and it spat cold mist onto her face. Here, the wind carried her lower, and she was stretched above the waves. Zephyr peered down at her reflection in the glassy waters below. Her hair was flattened against her forehead, and it her green dress was becoming more soaked by the second. Despite all this, Zephyr was shocked to see herself smiling. With a carefree pale hand, she touched the waves beneath her, creating a foamy wake that fanned out behind her. Her grin dissolved into laughter. The pain of leaving doesn't always eclipse the thrill of adventure.

At first, Alder thought it was whitecap on the horizon. Like yesterday, he had been watching the waves, when he noticed a speck along the water that did not disappear. As the speck grew closer, he thought it was a seagull, dancing above the waves. But this was impossible; yesterday there had been no seagull.

Alder rubbed his eyes and focused on the speck. It had to be a seagull—its wings were outstretched, and it flew mere inches above the water. Yet, while its wings were white, its body was green. Surely a seagull can't be green.

As the shape grew closer, Alder realized it was a girl. She looked maybe thirteen or fourteen. As she flew, she pressed herself against the water, almost kissing it. Sometimes, it seemed a wave would engulf her, but she drifted serenely out of danger,

either unafraid or completely unaware. Her dress was soaked against her skin, as was her hair. She drifted closer and closer his cliff.

All at once, she was hidden by the rockface. Terrified she would crash into the wall of jagged stone, Alder tried to run to the edge of the cliff and call out to her. This little girl was hurtling towards almost-certain death, yet she remained ignorant to her own peril. But, just like yesterday, Alder could not move from his spot. His feet were planted in their position, and Alder was unable to do anything but wait for the sound of her body hitting the rock below.

Zephyr was so taken with imagining dolphins in the blue below that she did not notice the rugged scarp until the wind hoisted her above the crashing waves and up its side. Her stomach dropped as the gust fought against gravity, and she felt a white-hot pain up her arm where it hit a crag that jutted into her path. Heavy tears welled up in her eyes and fell down her cheeks, but they were hidden by the salt water that had soaked her through.

With her eyes blurred by tears, Zephyr did not notice the soft grass on the top of the grey cliff face. The searing pain in her arm distracted her from noticing the row of solid oak trees lined like soldiers atop the bluff and the robin that flitted just above the trees. She was too battered and wind-beaten to notice the middle-aged man, standing like a sentry in the center of her path until the gust finally disappeared and dropped her, in a heap, at his feet.

When Zephyr had wiped her face with her good arm, she noticed two long legs emerging from the ground. They were hidden behind slate grey trousers whose hemlines barely brushed the ground. This was because the legs had no feet. Instead, they seemed to reach into the dark earth. Zephyr imagined they went down, down, down, only stopping just before they poked out the other side. She wracked her brain, trying to remember if in any of her travels she had seen a pair of shoes protruding from the ground.

Happily, however, the long limbs did end, because on top of them was a lean torso, covered by a plaid button-down. Two long arms grew from broad shoulders, atop of which sat a rather amiable face. Crinkled brown eyes rested comfortably above sunburned cheeks. Covering the lower part of his face was a chestnut beard that was peppered with grey and obscured his mouth entirely from view. Most remarkable, though, was his prominent nose, that jutted out much like the rocks along the cliff. It was twisted to the left just slightly, as if it had grown too long and had been bent over by its own weight. It was the same face Zephyr had seen a hundred times, only slightly rearranged.

The stranger plucked her up much like the wind had and set her on her feet. He stared at her quizzically, as if trying to work out who she was and why she had come here. When no rational explanation could be reached, the stranger finally spoke.

“Uhh, hi.” His beard wiggled slightly, but Zephyr was unable to discern quite where his mouth was. “My name’s Alder.”

“I don’t really care,” she replied, her pale eyes cold as ice. “I won’t be here for long, anyway.”

Alder was taken aback as she turned on her heel and walked out of his view. For a few moments, he thought the little girl had disappeared into the trees behind him, but then he heard quiet sobs not four feet away.

The days passed relatively unchanged for Alder. Each morning he woke with the dawn and stretched and looked out over the lapis sea. At times, it seemed as if nothing had happened, that he had dreamed a little girl had flown across the water and landed in front of him, cradling her arm. Every once in a while, however, he would hear her shuffling around behind him, crying quietly, or munching on some berries, and he would know something was amiss.

Zephyr made a point of not speaking to the tall man. She kept her distance. For some reason, he never turned around, but that was fine with her. She knew she wasn’t going to be here long, and that it was better not to get too attached, even if she was curious about his feet.

Instead, Zephyr busied herself in tending to her arm and searching for food in the trees around her. She always found something edible and knew that, if she didn’t, the wind would take her away before she went too hungry. She never saw the man eat. In fact, she never saw him move at all, except to lie down at sunset—knees bent so as to keep his feet still in the ground—and to stand back up again when it rose, stretching as he did so.

Days passed, and nights grew colder. The edges of the oak leaves betrayed hints of gold, then painted themselves bronze, before dropping one by one, like clockwork. Though he could not see them falling, Alder knew that soon a light breeze would cause them to drift lazily past him, and leap over the edge of the cliff into the waters below. Despite the change in temperature, he stood firm and unmoving. He knew his young companion was not as impervious to cold, however, and could periodically hear her teeth chattering as she slept.

One night, as the sun started to set, Alder sat. But before he could lie down, the little girl leaned up behind him. He could feel her shivering against his back, and the two fell asleep, each leaning on the other.

“I’m Zephyr.” He awoke to her voice vibrating against his back. He was still resting against her and her against him.

The sun had just started to peak above the horizon. Instead of getting up right away, however, Alder waited until he felt Zephyr peel away from him before he rose to stretch his tired limbs. The rest of the day, she remained out of sight, as she always did. At night, however, she curled up against his back, and the two used each other for warmth and support.

As the days grew shorter and the snow started to fall, Zephyr became more and more frustrated that the wind hadn’t taken her away. Surely it should have come by now; her arm was fully healed, and it became harder and harder to find berries and nuts. While venturing into the forest, she noticed a town nearby. Though she was too far away to see

houses, she could hear the happy chatter, and noticed a trail of smoke drifting above the trees. At times, she contemplated going into the town and asking for some food, but to do so would mean interacting with people, and if she interacted with people, she could grow to love them. It was bad enough to have to lean on Alder. The fewer people she knew, the better.

But while the hunger was easy to ignore, her many questions about her steady companion grew restless. She didn't know whether it was out of boredom or curiosity, but Zephyr trudged through the light snow and turned to face the bearded man.

Alder had been looking out over the water, as he did each day. He was shocked, when, out of the corner of his eye, he saw little golden curls. Zephyr stood directly in front of him. He noticed her green dress was tattered and faded. While he had originally estimated her to be in her early teens, Alder now realized that she could be scarcely more than eight or ten. Except, while her face was young and cheery, her eyes were far too old. Not old in the sense that they were cloudy or lined, but they were sad. Zephyr's eyes were weary; they had seen far more sorrow than could ever fit into ten years. Her old eyes pointed themselves at his ankles.

“What, never seen someone growing out of the ground before?” He laughed at his own joke, and as he chuckled, his beard twitched, hiding his mouth from view.

“No, actually.” Her voice was timid. “And I've seen everything.”

“Well, I've never exactly seen someone fly before. But what do I know?”

“I can’t fly,” Zephyr said. “Not quite” Here she hesitated, careful not to get too attached. But surely telling him about the wind would be harmless. “It’s not really flying because I can’t control when it happens or where I go. Whenever I’ve been somewhere too long, I get carried off to a new place for a while. And then I move again. I’ve been wandering for years and years, and I still haven’t figured out how or why it happens. Sometimes I’m in a place for a day, other times its weeks or months. But one thing’s for sure: I always leave.” Her pale eyes rested on Alder’s legs, again. “But I’ve never seen someone poking out of the ground like that.”

“Neither have I, but I’ve never seen much of nothing.”

Zephyr tried to hold her questions in, but curiosity got the better of her, and it had been so long since she had talked to anyone. “How long have you been like this? Does it hurt? Did you used to live in the town? Don’t you get bored?”

The man laughed, the lines around his eyes growing deeper as his leathery face lit up. “I don’t know,” he said. “I guess I’ve been this way forever. Sometimes my arms get a little stiff and my feet get cold in the winter when the ground freezes all up. But overall, it’s not too bad.” Alder thought back to all the times he’s wanted to rip out his roots and run through the trees behind him, how he’s often wanted to see for himself the robins and the town and even the whole country. “Everyone gets bored, but it’s better than being the opposite. It’s better to be comfortable. Nothing here ever changes. And if nothing changes, nothing can hurt you.”

“Nothing can hurt you if you keep moving on, either. As long as you keep moving, you can outrun any of the changes. If you make all of the changes yourself, they can never keep up with you. You just have to get out fast enough.”

“Sounds exhausting.” Alder looked as if he had run a mile just listening to her. “Don’t you get tired of all that running?”

Zephyr didn’t answer. One look at her eyes told him all he needed to know.

As the snows melted and the days grew warmer, Zephyr thought less and less about the wind coming to take her away. She and Alder spent their days talking, and at night, they still leaned on each other, despite no longer needing to for warmth. Sometimes, she caught herself dreaming that, as she slept, her feet started to burrow into the ground, ever so slowly. First her toes would dig tiny little holes, slowly covering themselves with dirt. She could feel herself stretching, reaching deeper and deeper, until only her ankles remained above the ground. But when she woke up, she would look down at her bare feet in disappointment, wondering what it would be like to be planted here, with Alder, forever.

Though he would never admit it, Alder too grew used to having his little companion by his side. Sure, she was unpredictable—he never knew when she would leave for the forest to find food, or when she would be back—but he found he enjoyed these little breaks in routine. Some mornings, she would be grumpy; other days, she

would sing little snatches of foreign tunes or make daisy chains. Her hair never curled the exact same way twice.

Alder also noticed that sometimes, his toes would wiggle ever so slightly. The weight of the ground around them seemed to grow lighter, at times. But these moments faded as quickly as they came, and Alder was not entirely sure if he had imagined them.

Zephyr wasn't sure what had possessed her to venture into the woods that day. She had recently eaten a handful of nuts and berries, and Alder had been standing at his usual post, an ever-willing conversationalist. But, on this sunny autumn day, she felt called to the golden forest. Despite the warm sun, the air still bit at her nose, and her fingers felt comfortably cold. She knew she was drawing near to the town, but the thought of company was not as daunting, anymore. Zephyr continued on her way, marveling at the sturdy oak trees. They reminded her of Alder: strong, unmoving, and fatherly. She realized with a pang that he was her family, or as close to a family as she had ever allowed herself to have. Suddenly, she felt herself stopped in her tracks, and then she felt a light breeze pick up.

Alder was standing guard in front of the forest, looking out over the waves. Zephyr had been gone for quite a while, and a warning picked at the back of his brain. He told himself that any second, he would see her little blonde curls bouncing in his peripheral vision. She would dance up to him, golden leaves tangled in her hair, and give

him a hug remarkably strong for someone so young. He was sure he would be able to see her coming towards him, if he could only turn around and look. He craned his neck, but to no avail.

Alder wasn't sure when he had become so protective of his little girl, but she was the closest thing to a daughter he had ever had. He had watched as, over the months, her eyes grew younger, less weary. Every day, she seemed to get lighter and more joyful. Alder found himself becoming lighter too. He knew he would do anything in his power to keep her from reverting back into the sad, cold little girl he met. He would give anything to keep her away from harm's way.

And that's when he felt the breeze pick up.

It's a strange feeling, being lifted into the air. One moment, your feet are planted firmly on the floor, and the next, an invisible hand plucks you by the waist and pulls you into the air. With nothing to ground you, you are towed about, head first. You are powerless; you have no control over where you are going, and you don't know where you will end up. The feeling is daunting for even the most experienced of flyers, even those who have been flying off and on their whole life.

So, imagine Alder's surprise when he suddenly felt himself being hoisted into the air, his feet uprooted from their comfortable plot of earth.

At first, Alder was too shocked to know what to do. His body went rigid as he was carried higher and higher into the air. His beard whipped back and forth in the breeze, revealing a mouth petrified in a small “O.” The wind turned his body from its usual position facing the glittering waves. For the first time, Alder saw the golden boughs standing tall, stealing their color from the sun above. He noticed the robin flitting back and forth, flying from branch to branch. He could smell the smoke rising from the chimneys that just barely poked above the trees in a faraway clearing.

Alder wasn't sure how long he lingered in the air, taking in the view. Past the town was a shallow teal pond, surrounded by bushes dotted with red berries. Extending beyond this were black roads that slithered along the ground like snakes. Further still, hazy purple mountains lay partially hidden by a blanket of clouds that looked as if they were trying to keep the peaks warm in the crisp fall air. And beyond the mountains was the world, just waiting to be seen.

The wind tightened its grip and pulled Alder towards the forest, the surprised passenger laughing as he glided above the trees.

In shock, Zephyr felt the light October breeze pass her by. She let out a sigh of relief and continued along her way. Or she would have, if her feet hadn't been buried into the ground, planting her firmly into the leafy forest floor.

Frustrated, Zephyr tried again to pull her ankles out of the dirt, but to no avail. Panic slowly crept up from within her belly. She could feel its icy fingers constrict

around her throat, closing her airway. She tried to scream, but her voice died away before leaving her diaphragm. Zephyr felt hot tears welling up inside her, and she had no energy to hold them back.

Instead of crying, however, Zephyr felt herself laughing. A wave of relief rushed over her like a warm gust of wind. The deep earth hugged her ankles, and she knew she was safe and secure. Zephyr found herself growing familiar with her surroundings. She could count every fallen leaf, each one, like her, in its proper place. She breathed in the sweet smell of sap mingled with the faint salt from the nearby ocean. An earthworm tickled her toes beneath her. Instead of being repulsed however, this caused her to laugh even harder. She had a place all her own; a place to belong.

It was finally growing dark by the time she stopped laughing and decided to rest on the forest floor. Though she eventually was able to sleep, it was uncomfortable to have to go without feeling Alder's rhythmic breathing as the two of them drifted off together.

Alder spent the day whooping and hollering as the sights all around him changed before his eyes. He crossed over a frozen tundra where the ice clung to his eyelashes and made his very bones quake. He watched as the ice melted into grass, which then dried up into hot sand that whipped against his skin, stinging Alder as it, too, was picked up by the wind. He was carried over babbling brooks and roaring waterfalls. Over the sound of the rushing wind he heard the cries of unknown animals and garbled voices speaking

incoherent sentences. Alder rushed over sleepy pastures, bustling villages, crowded market places, and glittering towers.

"Zephyr! Look at them skyscrapers!"

It was only when he turned his head that he remembered he had left his little companion behind. The ache of emptiness slowly filled his body. This loneliness seemed to taunt Alder, goading that travel is only truly delightful when one has a family to share it with. By the time the sun started to set, Alder had barely noticed the wind changing course.

Zephyr woke up just as the sunrise had cast its pale pink backdrop behind the lemon-drop leaves. She hardly had the time to stand up and stretch small arms when suddenly, a gust of wind hit her squarely in the back. While she was able to keep her balance against the current of air, she was completely unprepared for Alder to knock into her, at full speed. As if slammed with a thousand bricks, she felt the air squeezed out of her lungs. The force was such a distraction that she almost didn't notice the sudden release of the earthen shackles around her ankles. She was pushed off her feet and the two of them landed hard onto the forest floor.

Brushing leaves out of her hair, Zephyr noticed a pair of brown shoes poking out from underneath Alder's grey pants. He, in turn, gaped at his daughter's bare feet, which were covered in dirt. He could have sworn that, just before impact, he had seen her

standing tall, like the oak trees around her, rooted into the forest floor. Though, he might have been imagining it.

With tentative steps, Alder felt his wobbly knees attempted to balance his bodyweight between them. He shifted right, then left, then right again. He wiggled his toes, rolled his ankles, then began jumping and leaping, giggling like a small child as he dashed between the trees. Zephyr soon found his laugh was contagious and chased after him. They frolicked between the solid oaks, chasing the birds that were fluttering just overhead. Breathless, each in turn waited for a strong finger of wind to pluck them even closer to the robins, aiding them in their chase, but such a wind never came.

The shadows grew longer on the forest floor, and the temperature began to drop. Laughter died out, but smiles lay plastered upon faces, despite aching cheeks. Zephyr flopped onto the leave-strewn floor, and Alder flowed suit. For a time, the two lay still, watching their foggy breath reach up into the darkening clouds above.

“Let’s go home.”

Neither of them knew who thought it first, or who had actually spoken aloud.

Without a second thought, though, the man took her small, pale hand in his rough, leathery one, and pulled her up to her feet. Then, the two of them walked side by side towards the trail of chimney smoke drifting above the village nearby.

No News is Good News

Without you this house is no longer a home

But a prison, a torture chamber standing in memoriam

With lifeless photos of your life-filled face; snapshots

Of a past when you were here:

Here smiling daughters pin gilded eagles onto your wingspan,

There a frozen shriek of glee as you scoop one in the air.

Both framed upon the wall, suspended. Inside they trap a man strong and alive.

I hope they are still your likeness, but as the months tick past it's hard to tell.

Where you go I cannot follow, so I stay behind, trudging through my days

As if nothing has changed. Hoping nothing has changed.

Yet panic rises with each new sun without a word from you

And it refuses to set with the dusk. As night falls, I prepare myself to dream

Of you, either in murky flightsuit or radiant blues.

I shut my door, as if to trap you in, but dare not shut my window blinds

Lest, oceans away, you shut yours too.

Shoes Ripe for the Tripping

Some people wander the world in perpetuum, claiming that they are searching for the meaning of life. Frankly, that sounds like a load of crap, because I found my meaning nineteen years ago. Her name was Alice.

I had always assumed I would name her something whimsical—like Calliope, or Arabella, or Guinevere. Something with far too many vowels or a smattering of silent letters. But the minute I felt her growing inside of me, I knew: she was always going to be an Alice. And the second I laid eyes on her only confirmed my suspicions.

People are always talking about the miracle of childbirth, but whoever made that up was either lying or a sadist. In actuality, there was nothing miraculous or beautiful about it. Instead, it was hours of agony marked only with the humiliation of lying spread-eagle, exposed in front of thousands of strangers. Jack stood there, like some terrified saint, unable to remember any of the techniques he had read in his volumes of birthing books and instead clutching my own hand as if he was the one in pain. Through it all, the only thought that has the power to break the mental mantra of “Oh dear God, please don’t let me defecate in front of all these people” was an incredibly poignant and ever-present “Ow!”

Then, suddenly, as a squalling, purple lump was plopped into my arms, still wriggling, the horror of it all melted away. The bleeding and the tearing were well worth the beautiful tufts of matted blonde hair plastered upon her tiny wrinkled forehead. As the

nurses pulled her away for closer inspection, a single balled fist reached back towards me. It was that moment that I knew Alice was what I had been searching for my entire life.

The hard part was constantly reminding myself of this fact through the sleepless nights. And then through the all-too-public Target tantrums. And then again when the principal's office called to inform me that my six-year-old cherub had been caught forging my signature that she had, in fact, read aloud her prescribed Dr. Seuss homework. (Despite my anger, I had been rather impressed with this last feat; I had no idea that Jack and I had been raising a criminal mastermind with exceptionally advanced penmanship. But then again, that was our Alice: always advanced in everything). As she grew in both size and mischief, I clung to the image of her swaddled in a tiny pink towel, lying peacefully in a bassinet.

Imagine my surprise when one day I was rather rudely awoken, not by a miniature baby, but by a full-fledged teenage woman yelling at me in perfect rendition of her former two-year-old self that she absolutely *had* to have a cellphone because *everyone* else had one. Her once straw-yellow hair had darkened somewhat to a lustrous goldenrod, which fell effortlessly across her slowly reddening face. As she droned on, I was suddenly aware of just how much she had stolen from me. While her hair cascaded in radiance, my own hung limply and was now streaked with patches of ever-lightening grey. Her face was supple and firm as granite; mine, on the other hand, was creased with trenches that were dug by Time or Alice's perfectly manicured fingernails. We stood eye-to-eye, but Alice had overshadowed me, and it was with an alarming amount of spite that

I exercised my own maternally granted power in denying her request—only to cave after a brief conversation with Jack and buy her the oh-so coveted flip-phone the very next week.

Those few years when Alice was fourteen to sixteen were marked with tedious conflict. It always began simply. I would parry with a surge of anger that had welled up due to her neglect to defrost the chicken for dinner while I was at the grocery store. What typically followed was some snappy Alician retort about having to do *everything* around here. This, in fact, was a tragic exaggeration, as my entire day had been spent picking up the tattered Saucony tennis shoes she had left lying around the house, dusting the living room, vacuuming veritable mountains of dog-hair, and then running her forgotten lunch up to the school so that she could focus in class and later have enough energy for her Cross-Country practice. However, informing her of this little fact would always end in a yelling match that involved her slamming her door to her room and me threatening that I hoped she grew up and had a daughter exactly like her. As she would sulk in her bedroom and I in my kitchen, I often found myself ruminating on some parallel life. I would fantasize I had never left my job in real estate, that Jack and I had never tried for a baby. In this life, I was still a flirty size four who still had time for a social life—drinks with friends, date nights with my husband, weekend hikes with the dog. In this life, I was happier.

But would that really have been the case? Sooner or later, I would have packed on the pounds (not to toot my own horn, but I'm honestly too good of a chef not to. Besides, Jack didn't have to push out an eight-pound four-ounce infant, and even he had gained a

happy layer of pudge in our years of marriage). I probably wouldn't have had as much free time, either. Even back in my twenties, I rarely took the time to go out with my friends more than once a week. Besides, date nights are expensive, and Jack always takes care to come home in time to have dinner with his family every night and would probably continue to do so, even in a world without Alice. Without her, there would be one less person to help walk Buster when the pouring rain is just a little too unpleasant or if I had left my shoes upstairs. No matter how many chores I berated her for neglecting or how hard she had yelled that she hated me, I always came to the same conclusion: life would be far worse without Alice. And sometimes this epiphany was hurried along by her sudden materialization into the kitchen, chalk-full of apologies and a bashful request to visit her friend's house that coming weekend.

Luckily, Alice matured, and, by her senior year, she had become a surprisingly good friend who was now set to move half-way across the country to Chicago in only a few short months. Just in time for her departure, she had somehow morphed from a contrary child to a well-rounded adult, and, dare I say it, even a peer. As Alice prepared for her future life, she and I had swapped recipes, spent hours researching all the best restaurants within walking distance from campus, shared candid advice about what marriage-material men are like, and even gotten a little wine-drunk on that last Christmas dinner together.

And, just as it seemed I had finally gotten to meet her, she was gone.

She was forming her new life in the big city. The texts that started out as frequent as once every few hours had piddled down to once every few days. Walking through the

halls, I can't help but look back on all the moments I almost missed before. As I clutched too tightly to her newborn image, I had barely noticed her first teetering steps towards our glittering Christmas tree. I had blinked and missed the time she crawled into bed with me, knowing I would chase away any monsters from inside her closet. I had ignored that time she stuffed bread into her overall pockets at the beach and shrieked as the gulls skulked after her. I was too busy complaining about her constant forgetfulness to remember how she lit up when she had told me that she had made captain of the Track team. Now, as I stand here vacuuming ever-present fur that carpets the hard-wood floors, I find myself wishing I would get a frantic phone call that Alice needed me to ferry some forgotten French assignment up to the high school. Sometimes, every now and again, I wish I still had those ratty grey sneakers to trip on.

The Divergence of the Twain

To the happiest family

There once was born a near silent baby

Who spent even her earliest hours in contemplativity.

They meant well, this loving pair

When they looked upon their daughter dear

And soon brought home for her a playmate, a sister fair.

The eldest tottered to the crib

And watched the wailing's trembling lips

With a surge of anger—why must she share her house with this little pip?

These Newtonian youths were

From the start as distant as lamp and star.

Though likely equals, at any task neither could to the other quite compare.

The elder dark retreated

Into her books and oft conceded

To travel endless worlds whilst in her room she seated.

The golden angel rather

Preferred instead to master

The art of social graces over reading written blabber.

In learning the first excelled,

But never reached the confidence modelled

By the younger who too kept her quiet contempt bottled.

And as the sisters each grew

In stature and both their skills accrued

Each felt shackled by a standard they could not break through.

It is not clear who first cried enough

But each realized the nest was too small for both
And they derived a happy solution thereof.

“I’ll to the East” the eldest said.

“Travel the world, then make homestead
At whichever far off corner I feel led.”

And off she dashed to find her little nook.
The fairer freedom felt; she too began to look
For her own slice of heaven beside some raging brook.

Thus they lived out their years
Across oceans, continents, hemispheres,
And slowly realized it was not hate they felt,
But fear.

CHAPTER FOUR

Home as Heaven

“How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, yes fairs for the courts of the Lord; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God. Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God. Blessed are those who dwell in your house, ever singing your praise!”

—Psalm 84:1-4 ESV

“For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”

—2 Corinthians 5:1 ESV

La Divina

Heaven must be a kitchen:

They paint it all covered in white,

But that's just an inch of flour

Caked on countertops.

Asparagus baptized in warm butter

Red peppers cracked with the sound of Sauvignon laughter

Stale pastawater bursting to bubbles at an open flame.

The crunch of salt, the sprig of parsley, the basil that bites your nose.

Anything else just wouldn't be sacred.

Lamentations

America, your streets are bare, devoid of the love that once paved them in gold.

Bereft are you of all pity. Bitterly she weeps for her stolen child yet her

Cries fall on deaf ears and brick walls and cold gunmetal triggers.

Dead litter the streets in three-piece suits as they cram themselves into bustling subways
and cars ferried by strangers

Entertaining the idea that their paycheck will bring them life. Meanwhile,

Friends lay huddled under flimsy plastic as a classmate's threatening footsteps linger just
outside the plywood door, shouting "If only you had listened. If only you had loved me."

If only

Giants were made small, some say. "Liberté, égalité, humanité." Guillotine the statues
and the

Heads of corporations. Hell is empty, and all the devils are near:

Iudices rapiant.

Judges seize.

Kindness is replaced with jealousy and safe spaces to Kevlar our soft underbellies. We
the people hoard goods and gold yet spend accusations and oppressions as if they cost
nothing at all.

Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.

Make no move to protect the rights of others. Mine are what counts. Mine and myself and me.

Newscasters broadcast violence with each ticking second, both sides blaming thier Opponent with never a look at the wake left by the violences of their own making. Pointing fingers screech in tantrum, demanding only the justice that serves to adorn themselves in rings of gold; victims lie

Quiet. Perhaps for fear of retaliation. Perhaps because scalpels have scraped their only chance at life.

Riots and rallies and the rattle of rifles pierce the air, singing their song of Lamentation for the

Streets that were once so full of promise and freedom and Revelation.

This is not how we were. But it is how we will remain

Until we all put down our slings and arrows and cry out for

Veritas. Truth. And realize that *veritas* means to truly look and to see: Look how the Waves of wheat turn their heads in humiliation, see that from sea to shining sea are Xenophobic slurs sprayed scarlet down alleyways dripping vermilion, like lifeblood draining from ashen bodies of concrete.

You, wretched among women, cast down in shame and turmoil,

Zion watches from her hill and weeps for you.

The Waiting Room; or Conversations with Cato

--I'm sorry

--What for?

--I didn't see you come in.

--I've been here a while.

--Oh.

I'm sorry.

--What for?

--I should have known. You seem like you have it all figured out. I'm sorry. I don't want to insinuate that you seem new. You probably know more than I do.

I'm sorry.

--What for?

--I don't really know what I'm doing here. Or how I got here. I don't think this is where I belong. I can't remember walking through the door.

I'm sorry.

--What for?

--For being a burden. For not understanding. For dumping all my problems on you. I don't even know who you are. I'm sorry.

--It happens with everyone, and I've been here a while.

--I'm sorry.

--What for?

--That you've just been sitting here. Waiting. Answering strings of questions from strangers.

I'm sorry.

--What for?

--For never asking your name. For staying a stranger. For not treating you like a person.

I'm sorry.

--What for?

--For never treating anyone like a person. I don't know if I can find a way out. I can't see a door.

I'm sorry.

--What for?

--For what I did. For all of it.

I'm sorry.

--What for?

--For the crickets. I don't think that makes sense.

I'm sorry.

--What for?

--For the crickets in the lobby. For how I never thought to get rid of them. Until it was too late.

I'm sorry.

--What for?

--For how, when it was just one, I could ignore it. I looked at it and was disgusted and walked on by, into the lobby and down the hall.

I'm sorry.

--What for?

--For how, after a while, they grew and grew. There were more of them. And I kept on walking. Until they were piles of crunchy bodies and squelches underneath my sneakers.

I'm sorry.

--What for?

--For how they would crawl—some missing limbs, others only heads, thoraxes—down the hall.

How they would leave yellow trails of slime as they pressed onwards.

I'm sorry.

--What for?

--For how I liked it. The crunch. The squelch. The smear of the shoe.

I'm sorry.

--What for?

--For how I used to think I was the cricket. But now I think I might be the shoe.

I'm sorry.

--What for?

--For how I liked it. I'm sorry.

--I forgive you.

The Doctor will see you now.

Laughter

No colorhueshapetext:

you cannot grasp with fingers or gasp in words

But you feel it in the bellyache and hear it in gasps

and rings of bells and chittering intakeallinonebreath.

It reverberates up whitewashed halls and down barren walls

and decorates The Home with memories

and decorates The Home with Joy.

Love. Peace. Kindness. Goodness.

with Gentle chuckles, Patient inhales,

with snorts stifled by Self Control--

and released to echo

about

The Room

and

into

22 Pockets of Heaven

1:

December. North Dakota. The blizzard beats down outside our windows, rattling the panes. It's an unwelcome change from my native, sunny Texas. Mama sits nearby in a cushy, plaid chair. She cradles her swollen tummy. "Your sister is in there" she says almost every day. Dada isn't here: he's driving home from work. I'm sitting near Mama's feet. A red balloon hangs limply in the air. Mama had bought it a week ago for my first birthday. It had come untied and zipped to the ceiling, where it watched, waiting. Waiting for what? I had waited, watching.

As the days passed, the balloon began to sink, bit by bit. Its skin grew looser, wrinkled. Down it came, closer and closer. Today, its iridescent tail curls just above my reach. I grip Mama's knees and pull myself into a stand. One hand clinging for dear life, I twist and lean and reach and reach. My hand is level with the shimmery tail, but it floats further away, taunting me. Its pruney body slips off in triumph. It jeers at me, floating ghostlike above the floor.

I won't let it beat me.

I let go of Mama and take one shaky step. My toes curl into the carpet below, gripping for dear life. My knees sing in relief, thankful to be spared rugburn. I extend my arms out for balance and take another step. And another. The red balloon cowers in fear. In a mighty swoop, I tumble to the floor, catching the string in the crook of my elbow, pulling my prey down with me. I drag the carcass across the floor. I notice Mama watching me for the first time. Her eyes are big as saucers and a grin splits her face. She gets up and waddles to the phone. Surely, I walked better than her.

2:

The violin lilts across the room, filling the air with music. It vibrates around me. Sunshine pours in through the windows, creating a glare across the TV that plays Vivaldi's Four Seasons. This time, it's Spring. My tutu scratches my legs and the plastic tiara is knotted in my hair. Bear, already fading from white to grey after being dragged behind me everywhere I go, is clenched firmly in one fist. The other arm is extended gracefully in front of me. I bob along to the steady cello harmony and sway through crescendos. Round and round I pace, like a panther locked in too small a cage. The notes catch in my tutu like breeze. Lauren sits on the armchair as the black cat glares darkly at her from the armrest.

I tremble in time with the violas and dip with the minor melodies. Mommy stands behind the couch with the video camera. I pull Lauren to her feet and she bounds along with me, her stuffed Ducky tucked in her armpit. The two of us smile and spin and swirl and swing, giggling over the concerto.

3:

On TV, Daddy sits on the same armchair that Lauren and I cram together in. For now, he only lives in the TV. "He'll be back soon," Mommy says. "Until then, he will read you a bedtime story every night."

Lauren and I crush next to each other, matching pajamas clinging to our waists. The taste of toothpaste still lingers in my mouth. My eyes are heavy.

“‘Stand back,’ said the elephant. ‘I’m going to sneeze!’” TV Daddy reads aloud. His voice croons out over the speakers. I wonder where Deployed is and when real-life Daddy will be back. Still, I’m happy TV Daddy can still read to me every night, until he comes home.

“Goodnight, Lauren. Goodnight, Julia,” TV Daddy calls. “I love you.”

Goodnight, TV Daddy. I love you too.

4:

My skin tightens here, and the curls of my toepads are cracked and bleeding. Still, I love visiting Pèpère and Grandma Arizona. Pèpère isn’t really French, but he *is* Canadian. He likes to sing us “*Frère Jacques*” and tell us not to touch the cactus-ouch-boo-boos in their front yard.

“Frère Jacques, Frère Jacques!”

Today, Grandma Arizona is going to her painting group. She takes me along with her. Just Grandma Arizona and me. I zip up my light blue sweater and off we go. The ladies at her painting group all look like her: short cropped hair, glasses, smile wrinkles around their eyes. Wrinkle-wrinkles as well. Grandma Arizona pulls out her watercolors and sets up her easel. There's a small piece of paper and a palette for me, too.

“Dormez Vous? Dormez Vous?”

I dip my brush in the paint but get bored quickly. The ladies all sit in a circle, looking serious. Their eyes are focused too hard on empty papers. They get frustrated when they put down too much water and the colors start to bleed together into a muddy brown.

“Sunny Lima Tina’s! Sunny Lima Tina’s!”

I have an idea. Slowly, I slide from my chair and start to pace around the room. I make sure my zipper is pulled up tight. All the way up up up to my chin. I walk over to Grandma Arizona.

“Grandma,” I whisper. “Wanna know a secret?”

She murmurs back, keeping one eye on her half-started painting.

With a loud *zwiiiiik*, I unzip my hoodie and point to the airplane sticker Daddy had stuck on me earlier. Grandma Arizona laughs a musical laugh. I beam and zip myself back up, dashing over to the lady next to her.

“Hey,” I whisper, already laughing at my own joke. “Wanna know a secret?”

“What is it?” she asks, throwing an amused look Grandma’s way.

Zwiiiiiiiiik. Down comes the zipper, out comes the airplane, flying fearlessly on top of my red striped shirt.

The ladies all laugh. One by one I flit down the line. “Wanna know a secret?” “I have a secret.” “Wanna know my secret?” By the time I’m done everyone is clutching their bellies and wiping tears from their tanned faces.

“Ding Dang Dong! Ding Dang Dong!”

5:

The pink Barbie fishing pole is clenched in my hands. The crisp mountain air is cold, even through my hoodie. It’s summertime, but the Rocky Mountains are snowcapped, and the Colorado lake is freezing. It’s still morning and but the sun is climbing high in the sky. We’ve been out here fishing since five o’clock: me and Lauren

and Daddy and Uncle Phil and Uncle Davy and Grandpa and *Great* Grandpa. “I’m not their Grandpa,” he would always tell the waitresses at dinner. “I’m their *Great* Grandpa.” He would wink and everyone would laugh.

Mommy and Grammy are back at the cabin. They’ll cook all the fish that we catch. Uncle Phil will clean them. Lauren will help. I think it’s gross, but she doesn’t mind fish guts and fish blood. She wants to be a doctor when she grows up. Only four years old but she knows her future. She wants to have five kids and she wants to be a doctor.

Grandpa’s always pulling Lauren onto his knee. “Dr. Pantleo’s office,” he says, holding one hand to his ear, fingers splayed out to make a telephone. “I’m sorry. She’s not in today. She’s gone fishing. You call back tomorrow.” Lauren would laugh and laugh and laugh.

Lauren wants to be a doctor, but I don’t know what I want to be. I might be a paleontologist. Or a biologist. Or a police officer. Or an actress. Today, though, I’m a fisherman. The best fisherman there is.

We all sit by the lake as the sun makes its way back down the sky. We eat sandwiches and drink soda pop and roll sparkly bait on the end of barren hooks. By the time we pack up, the men haven’t caught anything. Lauren and I have caught two fish each with our pink Barbie fishing poles.

6:

The crowd roars applause and I bow. The fuzzy red jumpsuit is riding up and my fake tail has fallen off. I have even accidentally wiped off the black monkey-nose the

director-lady had painted on me before the show. But none of that matters. The audience loved me.

Mom gets up from the cold, metal chair and walk across the school gym that has been converted to a fabulous opera house for this Missoula Children's Theatre rendition of *The Jungle Book*. I, of course, had the most important role: Monkey #3. Lauren played Monkey #2 and she just had to come out on stage and cover her mouth. But Monkey #3 got to come out ooh-oo-ing and ah-ah-ing and covering her eyes. The sound effects were artistic license, but every character—even monkey—needs a backstory.

Mom gives us both a big hug after our long week of hard work. Personally, I think that plays are the best part of summer vacations. Some of the other kids get flowers, but Mom is empty handed. Why don't we get flowers? Mom takes us home and asks us all about it. She makes sure to tell us over and over again how proud she is of her little Monkeys. If she was so proud of us, then why didn't she get us roses like Kathy's mom or daisies like Sarah's?

We pull up to the house and Mom ushers Lauren and I into the bathroom to wash off our monkeyfaces. When we come back out, there in the hallway is Mom, Mom with a tiny grey kitten in her hands. Lauren and I squeal.

"Be careful," Mom says. "Her name is Cassie, like the Cascade Mountain Range."

As I pet the kitten, I swear in my mind that I'll never ask for roses or daisies ever again.

7:

The Puget Sound spits saltwater into my face as the rain mists down in short bursts. It's our second-grade field trip and the whole class gets to spend the afternoon at the beach. Mom is one of the chaperones, but I try to keep my distance. I'm a big kid now. I scramble over rocks and toss a pebble at Phillip's feet. He likes to pull my curls sometimes, and he always says I'm blocking his way on the monkey bars. Tori says it's because he likes me and that boys are always mean to the girls they like. I guess I'm supposed to be mean back.

"Hey!" Phillip calls after me as I bound away. I run towards the teacher, where she and the marine biologist lady are holding out starfish for us to all see. The thing in her palm is sprawled out like a hand trying to hold the air. Little bitty tentacles, like pinpricks, stand out from the orange arms. They grasp at the drops of rainwater, as if trying to collect enough water to create a whole ocean to disappear into. The marine biologist tells us all about the starfish and how it eats, but I'm not paying attention. I'm too busy watching the creature stand stiff in her hands, as if we won't be able to see it if it doesn't move.

"Is anybody brave enough to touch it?" The lady asks. This piques my attention. Of course, I'm the bravest in the class. I'm the only girl who is willing to turn over rocks at recess and look at the worms and the rollie-pollies writhing and scurrying in the dirt. My hand shoots straight up and the marine biologist holds the terrified creature towards me, belly up. Gently, I take one finger and poke it in its gooey belly. Surprisingly, though the arms are rigid, its abdomen is soft. I squeak and pull my hand away before the belly can bite me. I'm giddy, but as the lady passes the starfish around, I feel the fingers in my stomach. The poor thing is passed from hand to greedy hand. The feeling doesn't go

away until the starfish is placed back into the water. As the students trickle back to play in the surf, I stand there watching the place where the animal disappeared. Silently, I apologize to the starfish on behalf of all of us and rejoin my class.

8:

I'm standing in front of the class, stomach tied up in knots. My knees are like jelly and sweat drips down my back in beads. Even still, I know I can't show fear. In Dad's suit jacket, my hands fumble with the plastic Target bag holding boxes of Cracker Jacks. As I call out, I throw them into the air at my classmates. Today, I'm not a third-grade student giving a class presentation. Today, I'm not the kid who's about to move all the way across the country to Washington DC in only a week. Today, I'm Billy Sunday, and Billy Sunday never gets nervous.

By the end of my presentation, the whole class is standing on their feet, applauding. Though Billy Sunday wasn't as cool as Sarah's Audrey Hepburn or Mitchel's Walt Disney, I was the only student who gave the required research presentation as a skit. And I was the only person who brought food. As the teacher handed me a sheet of paper with a red A at the top, he said he would miss having me in class in January. Mikayla wishes me well done after everyone has presented, and the two of us run outside along the snow-dusted trail to the swing set.

9:

A giant elephant towers over me, trunk extended. The deep grey is dead and threatening against the pale marble columns that loom behind the taxidermized beast.

This is homeschooling: Mom edition. She's taken us to almost every Smithsonian, but the National Museum of Natural History is by far my favorite.

The three of us jettison back through time. Together, we outlive the dinosaurs and walk amongst the trilobites. Encased in boxes of glass are glistening jewels and glittering spearheads. In only a few steps I can travel from Africa to Asia. Bones decorate entire walls. Some are small and fragile; others are three times taller than me. A dead leopard sits lazily in a tree, glassy eyes staring down at me. Nearby a gazelle hangs like a limp, red balloon. In another room, hissing cockroaches and furry spiders are placed in my eager hands. The shiny roach flicks back its hard, caramel shell to reveal glistening wings, more beautiful than any Hope Diamond. The fluffy grey spider shakes eight skinny legs and looks up at me with eight tear-drop eyes. I fight the urge to cup my hands and dart away, releasing the tarantula back into its native habitat of the Japanese Cherry Trees outside.

Museums are here to bring dead things back to life eternal. Living creatures have no place here, except on the other side of the glass. As I leave, I say a silent prayer that someday I will end up back here, preserved in lights and silent awe. But only if I'm already long gone.

10:

Hamburg, Germany: home of the hamburger. Sadly, I've yet to eat a burger here. I've been too busy eating *spatzle* and *frickadeller* and *knodel* and *kartofelpuffer* and *schnitzel*. The bedroom is dark; my stomach is full. The fragile dragon kite hangs above

my head and casts shadows across the swirling sheets. Though some people might call the dragon *schrecklich*, terrifying, I find him *tröstlich*: trustworthy, comforting.

A familiar rap sounds on my door and a Lauren-shaped silhouette appears against the hallway light. Instinctively, I lift the corner of my sheet and she crawls into bed with me. Almost instantly, she falls asleep. She's a living furnace. Heat radiates from her lifeless body and her blonde hair is plastered, brown and sweaty, against her forehead. She breathes deeply, in and out, as if keeping rhythm with some unheard music.

Come morning, I will chastise her for climbing into my room. I will complain to my parents that I am too old for this, and that it's time for us to grow up. At nine years old, she should be okay sleeping in her own, perfectly good bedroom. For now, however, I kick my legs out from underneath the boiling sheet and think about the book tucked in shame underneath my bed.

"You'll be an adult soon," my parents had said uncomfortably as they handed it to me. "You'll learn more about it in school this year, but read this and ask us if you have any questions." The look in their eyes told me that they definitely did not want me asking questions. I resolved not to have any, despite the strange vocabulary, cartoonish doodles, and horrifyingly calm descriptions of bleeding for days at a time, as if it were as commonplace as a cloudy day.

For now, I pushed thoughts of adulthood and change out of my mind and fell asleep to the rhythm of Lauren's carefree breathing. I put my arm around her at night, in an attempt to cling to some semblance of childhood forever.

11:

The air smells different here. Older. The Danish wind whips my hair as the four of us stand among boulders, laid out in the shape of an ancient boat. I stand at the bow, where a tall stone bursts forth from the green grass like a shovel in a sandbox. Carved into the stone are chips and chunks, arranged to form letters. Lichen clings for dear life, trying to find a foothold in the ancient text.

Noticing my mother standing near me, I focus hard on the letters. In my fifth-grade class, this year, we learned to pronounce some of the ancient letters. Elena and I passed secret notes to each other using the script, forgetting that everyone in the class—including the teacher—had also gone through the same training. I sound out a few recognizable letters, convincing my mother that I am fluent in this Viking Dialect. Staring holes into the words, I try to force myself into the history. If I concentrate hard enough, I am sure I can read what some wizened mind had preserved. In my mind, I could reach back to him through the stones.

Was this a burial site? I had heard of how Vikings used to burn the bodies of great warriors in ships heavy with goods and servants and women. The image seemed violent. Even after death, the men caused wailing and destruction. Feeling the green earth with my converse, I decided it couldn't be. This ship was in a pasture. Cows and sheep fed nearby and trees sprouted out, carefree. Surely if this was a scene of some ancestral evil, nature would retaliate.

I decided the rock was not a tombstone, but the romantic story of some Viking Odysseus, who, after years at sea, married his sweetheart at this very spot. The ceremony was so beautiful and the tale so moving that a local scribe recounted the entire history for

me to find. A cow flicked his tail in agreement, and I thanked the historian for his wonderful story.

12:

The glue leaves a ring of lint around my calf, even after I peel my socks from my leg and roll them toward my ankles. I have finally finished the jigs, only the reel left in my *ghillies*, and then I move on to hardshoe. But first: Wendy's. I have Jackie unzip my competition dress and I tie the sleeves of it around my waist, exposing my sweaty tank top and my sweaty arms to a much-needed Kansas breeze. I unzip hers in turn, and together, Sandy, Jackie, and I leave the *feis* in search of fries.

In line, Sandy scratches at her wig, glaring at me. I can feel the accusation in her eyes: *You're so lucky you have curly hair.*

"It's not my fault the costume comes with curls," I huff.

"I bet the judges will give you higher marks for being natural," Jackie says. "But my kicks are still higher," she adds with a wink.

The three of us take our bags of food and rejoin the rest of the Corry Irish Dance Academy girls in the dance hall. Giggling, we pull on each other's ringlets and toss fries into open mouths. The talk shifts from turnouts to Holly's fake eyelashes to updates on the ever-changing list of crushes.

The buzzer sounds. Fifteen minutes. I scarf down a handful of remaining fries and Sandy passes me the sock glue. I roll the cold plastic across my calves and realign my quilted white sock in place. The dress is slipped back onto my shoulders and the gold sash is pinned in place. I reach up and readjust Sandy's misshapen hairpiece. Black

ghillies are laced to perfection, and the three of us join seven other strangers on stage. In pairs, two emerge from the sea of girls lining the stage. The music swells and curls begin to bounce as dancers soar in front of the judges.

When it's my turn, I step into the spotlight, my black and gold dress looking simple against the rival school's orange rhinestones and ruffles. But when the fiddles sound, the thought slips from my mind. Beneath my feet, the notes turn the air into water, and I glide into leaps and spins. I kick my leg up, even above my springing curls. I don't have to turn around to know Jackie is beaming behind me.

13:

Water muffles my ears as the blue swirls around me. The Pacific Ocean is warm and bright. Coral reaches to the surface like spires, and a congregation of colorful fish swim around me. The snorkel fits uncomfortably against my teeth, and every now and then I get a mouthful of water. Salt licks the back of my throat, reminding me that I am out of my element. I don't belong. Even still, the fish let me follow them through their homes. A sea turtle drifts lazily past, haughty as a bishop. Angelfish sing from a choir loft of purple kelp.

I had never heard of Hunama Bay, though, when I was still a little girl, my Dad took my Mom here for vacation. If I had known Hawaii was like this, I would have crawled into their suitcase and spent all my time in flippers while the two lovebirds toured the island.

A fear of sharks tickles the back of my mind but is quickly forgotten amongst the quiet coral. This entire underwater oasis is so peaceful and serene. In the distance, the

ocean stretches out, a deep blue haze. Armed with my flippers and my mask, I am sure I can join a school and explore the furthest reaches. In my mind, I am diving into the Ring of Fire, down to the dark, sea floor. My dad swims past me, pointing out an almost luminous fish. Above my head, the sunlight breaks through the water like God pouring in through a stain glass window.

14:

Oleg sits in front of me in the Green Room, his cowboy hat looking ridiculous perched atop a swirl of deep red hair. The mole on his lip wiggles as he breaks into a grin at the sight of his cards. He's trying to teach me a game from his hometown, somewhere in the middle of Ukraine. As the only two cast members—though, at times it seemed like the only two in all of Spokane—who could speak German, we've turned it into our own, private language. Just as he's about to lay down his cards and steal the victory, his cue carries across the feeble loudspeaker and he launches into action. I watch as Oleg drains from his face and is replaced by Curly. He bounds out of the room to serenade his Laurey and woo her with a surrey with a fringe on top.

He reappears shortly on the small television that hangs in the corner of the Green Room. No one would ever guess he's an understudy. As he performs, the scene beneath the stage changes as teens half-dressed in lace and frills parade past, powdering their noses and double-checking their mics aren't hot.

“Are we playing Butterscotch?” Allie asks with the PG version of her favorite game, for my benefit. The cards are reshuffled, and we play to Oleg's singing until my cue is broadcast over the loudspeaker.

15:

I hadn't imagined ice would be so blue. On the balcony of the ship, I pull the plaid blanket tightly around me to fight against the cold. Lauren, Mom, Dad and I all huddle together to block the wind. During our final few days in the states for the foreseeable future, my parents had decided on a trip to Alaska. I was thrilled. In just a few days I would be kayaking in a glacial lake, surrounded by wild salmon. Every day, I had wished that time would fast forward to the excursion. This was the first time I wished time would freeze.

The sound of breaking ice fills the air with the crack of a whip. In chunks, brilliant blue plummets with a deadly crash into the bay below. The air is thin and cold, and my breath hangs in clouds around me, obscuring my view. I watch as ice eons old leaps from its shelf and is buried under the freezing water, never to be seen again. I tried to imagine the mammoths and sabre tooth tigers and early peoples who used to cross this valley of ice, their footprints melting into the blackness of the sea.

Occasionally, a hunk of blue would reemerge, gasping for breath, reaching a hand to our boat as if begging for a life raft. More often, however, the poor victim would sink and be lost among the waves. This bay is sacred. A graveyard. We as passengers are privy to the glacier's dying moments. Its last words are shouted in a language I can't understand but long to write down. I stand there and watch until my nose drips with a candelabra of snot and the pain in my fingers grows too much to bear. Then I turn and walk back into the interior of the ship.

16:

My head still aches from crying as I peer over the math test, my dad's disappointed words ringing in my ears. Just one stupid test. One failing grade. And now, when I should be running four laps in a circle, I'm stuck inside. It was just one test. I had been invited to the European Championships. The wildcard, they called me. I was one second away from qualifying, and in an act of grace, they had extended me an invitation. I could be running the mile, lungs bursting, passing teammates and competitors. The wildcard blitzing past.

Until my parents saw the B in Algebra II. I hadn't been making up my homework from away-meets. School comes before athletics.

"I'm already in an advanced class. I'm two years ahead of my classmates." I said.

"Act like it, then."

My dad's words bruised even when his hand was lightly placed on my shoulder, holding me in one spot while he delivered my sentence: No Europeans. And I would beg for a revision of the test. And I would have to turn in every assignment from now until eternity or I would be pulled from the track team.

Tears well in my eyes as I stare at my finished exam and turn it in to the teacher.

I open the door and Zach is outside, holding a bouquet of flowers. He had heard. Of course, he had. I had told Ginevra and Ginevra had told him, and now here he was, skipping his lunch to wait outside my classroom with a bouquet of flowers and a sad smile. I fold myself into his arms and he guides me out of the building.

Two-hour lunches in the middle of the school day: one of many blessings of the Belgian School System. At the Rendezvous, he purchases my favorite lunchtime meal. A

crisp, warm baguette with a hunk of melted butter and piles of ham. The perfect blend to prep for an afternoon of running. We settle in on the bleachers next to the school's baseball pitch. Zach lets me cry in awkward silence before changing the topic to wrestling and his history test and Karl's latest joke. Anything but math and the race taking place a country away.

As our time draws to a close and the school day prepares to resume, the air around us grows tense. He looks at me, expectant. Of course, he does. The flowers, the lunch, the conversation. He did it to be nice, yes. He did it because I had had the worst day and he wanted to fix it. This wasn't true love; it was high school. Still, my heart is beating faster than after any thirty-two-hundred-meter race. He places one hand beneath my chin, and I'm not sure if I'm feeling his pulse racing or if he's feeling mine. Either way, our nervous lips meet, awkward and briefly, before pulling away. Either way, I'm pretty sure we're both walking on clouds when we trudge back to the school, flowers left forgotten on the bleachers.

17:

She's been crying. I can hear it in Faith's voice over the phone. It was a boy, as it always was junior year. She had told him she loved him, and he had gotten spooked.

"Can you come over?"

"I'm already on my way."

Hair still dripping from my post-run shower, I pull on my heavy coat and set off into the wintery Pennsylvania air. On my way over, I shoot my mom a quick text explaining where I'm going. Perks of living on the Military Base. All your friends live

nearby, and your parents didn't mind if you left the house, as long as you give them a clear account of where you are, and you promise to stay inside the barbed wire.

Faith opens her back door before I have even knocked, and she ushers me upstairs into her bedroom. Kate and Holland are already there, perched on a perfectly made bed. No doubt Idaliz is close behind. She lives two doors down. In the light, Faith's eyes are rimmed with red and her nose has been irritated by the many tissues piling on the floor. The room is somber.

She looks up at me and bursts into laughter. Great guffaws knock her onto the ground and even more tears leak from her eyes.

At first, I think she is in shock, until the other girls join in.

Idaliz bursts into the scene. "Girl, what in the hell happened to your hair?"

I reach up and feel the solid ice that had once been a dripping mop. I can't help but laugh, too.

It was Kate who decides on the music. All of us dissolve into giggling and dancing and boys are forgotten. For the moment, we are filled with more than enough love from each other.

18:

Only five miles in and my lungs are bursting. Twenty-one more to go. My dad keeps pace next to me. He has run these before. This is my race. I can't help but think he's slowing down for me.

Miles tick off under my feet. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten. We pass water stations and guzzle the liquid down. I feel terrible about leaving the paper cone on the ground. Until mile nine. Then, I'm too exhausted to care. And not even halfway there.

At mile thirteen, we round the bend past the familiar Hamburg mall. I tell people I picked this marathon because I used to live here. Old stomping grounds. Ramstein is only a few hours away, so it is an easy drive to the start line; a trip down memory lane.

I really picked this marathon because it's flat.

A familiar voice rings out over the sea of sweaty heads and tired eyes. "Run, Julia, Run!" My mother's voice rings out like a banshee, and for a moment I wonder if I am being chased by some unknown mass murderer. Lauren doesn't say anything, but I'm sure that next to her, she is rolling her eyes.

Still, the miles tick by. My legs start to fall into a familiar rhythm, acting on muscle memory when I know they long to give up and give out. I time my breath with my cadence to quench any cramps. In-two-three. Out-two-three-four. In-two-three.

A man nearby slows to my pace, clearly exhausted. I had seen his balding head in front of me for the past few miles. He looks over at me and reveals kind grey eyes and a salt-and-pepper goatee. He laughs, which slows him down at first, but then seems to spur him on, as if one look at a crazy teenager running a marathon in lederhosen is exactly what he needed.

I hadn't planned the get-up, before the race. But, during check in yesterday, a vender was selling Germany-inspired race gear. I had found the lederhosen with a matching Bayerisch-flag tech shirt and I knew I had to wear it. Throughout the race, strangers had called after me, yelling "*Bayern!*" and "*Zicke zacke, zicke zacke, hoi, hoi,*

hoi!” There’s something magical about the German language’s capacity for bolstering downcast spirits.

By mile twenty, I’m in a solid rhythm. Only six and change left to go. My legs are in agony and my lungs are screaming, but my head can keep them quelled, as long as I keep moving.

“I need to stop.” My dad’s words pull me out of my reverie. “At the next port-o-potty, I’ll just pop on in.”

I can’t stop. If I stop, I won’t be able to start up again. If I stop, I’ll die.

“I can’t,” I gasp.

Thank goodness he understands. He’s done this before. At mile twenty-one, we split up. There’s some hurt in his eyes. He wanted to be there to watch me finish my first marathon. He couldn’t be there for most of the training. Some days I wouldn’t get home from theatre rehearsals until after ten o’clock. I would start my mileage while he was getting ready for bed. He had to be up for work early the next day. But he was there for the Sunday long runs. He was there when it counted.

The rest of the race is a blur. It’s empty without him breathing next to me. But still, I find my groove and keep my cadence steady. And suddenly, I’m at the finish line. Though I’m sure it’s at a snail’s pace, I force myself into a final kick of energy and propel across the red tape plastered onto the pavement. I catch a call of something about Bayern from the announcers. I don’t even have the energy to find my Mom and Lauren. I made it. Somehow, the pain melts away. I’m sure this is what dying feels like, in those final moments. I let the wave of people push me past Gatorade jugs and fruit and

electrolyte gels. Time seems to slow to a glacial crawl. Somehow, I end up next to my dad, Mom and Lauren in tow.

“I need a burger” are the first words out of my mouth.

19:

Grains of sand grind between my teeth. My legs are spread wide as the animal beneath me groans and sways. The wooden saddle bruises the inside of my thighs and the coarse red fabric is scratchy, even through my jeans.

Sand dunes roll in the distance as our small caravan of camels pushes through the hazy desert air. Bells dangle from the sides of the saddles in decoration, and they add music to the moans of the beasts and the “tut-tuts” of the men in white Thobes guiding them over the sand.

Lauren and Grammy cling to camels beside me. For us, it’s Christmas day. We ride through the sea of dust like wise men. In my mind, I am a great traveler, exploring vast, uncharted areas. I am fearless in the face of death, in search of a taste of something beyond. My grandmother, my sister, and I: a fellowship of women on a dangerous quest in some unknown land.

For most Qataris, it’s just another day. In the distance, I can hear the clicks of my mother’s camera. She hums Lawrence of Arabia, and the tune carries on the wind. My dad laughs next to her.

I’m not an explorer. I’m a tourist. I’m here to get a taste of the beautiful things of this foreign country. But then I will go home. Back to books and to learning. That’s the

real adventure in store for me. And I love it. My parents and sister will stay behind, and even then, only for a time.

The camel sways and our guide leads it into a violent kneel. I'm almost flung from its back and onto the sand below. I dismount and the beast rights itself into a proud position. I stroke its thick hair as my mother takes another photograph. The animal nuzzles against my neck, hot breath tickling my ears. And, only for a moment, the tourist melts away again, and I'm riding over a sea of endless dunes.

20:

The cold rushes into the wetsuit and forces the air from my lungs. I gasp and start to panic. For a December summer, I would have thought the ocean would be warmer. Slowly, the pain doesn't seem all that bad. The other divers would tell me it was because my body heat warmed up the water trapped within the suit. I'm pretty sure I just went numb. In a burst of courage, I fit the mask over my eyes and plunge my face, the last warm, dry square inches of my body, into the water.

Their brown bodies twist and writhe to an underwater music. Eyes bulging, they suddenly appear from the depths, swim up toward me, then pivot at the last second, and dive back into the abyss. Yellow kelp reaches icy fingers up towards my fins, and I float, watching the primitive dance beneath me.

Cape fur seals. Air bubbles cling to slick, blubbery bodies as they dive and spin. They leap from nearby rocks into the water below.

"This is their breeding ground," the boatman had told us in a musical South African accent. "The rocks keep out the sharks, so they can safely raise their young."

We don't see any smaller pups in the water. "Good thing. The parents can get aggressive. Even still, make sure you don't get too close to any of the seals. And stay away from the rocks."

The seals are more curious about us than we are about them. As I float on my stomach, taking in the scene, a seal swims up with cartoonish eyes. Suddenly, he bursts out of the water, and reemerges on my other side. From the corner of my eye, I see Lauren diving fully underwater, snorkel and all, to get a better look. She's just finished her first semester of nursing school, and now she needs to look at everything up close.

One playful seal shows off in spins and maneuvers, bubbles trailing in her wake. Instantly, we become friends. The two of us dance and twirl together, so close I could have reached out and touched her. In some strange way, we understand each other. I let her show me her world, an interested observer. She flits past her favorite pieces of kelp and guides me close to the rocks, almost daring her to join her in the ocean beyond. When I turn back and swim to the boat, she follows me. I swear she waved a flipper goodbye as I exit the water and am greeted by the cool African breeze.

21:

Dead leaves crush beneath my feet. The pain in my back spreads hot across my shoulder blades. I'm forced to lean forward into a bow under my heavy pack as I climb the mountain, just to keep my center of balance. My dad climbs behind me, and I can hear his breathing. His load is even heavier than mine. For a while, the world is filled with only four sounds. Crunching, breathing, tweeting, clanging.

The clang becomes a running joke on the trail. For aesthetic purposes, I carabiner my metal coffee mug to the outside of my pack. Something about it just feels right, feels wild. Unfortunately, this right wildness also makes a lot of noise. With every step, the clang can be heard echoing throughout the forest. Apparently, it can even be heard by other hikers around me. “There goes Swiss Miss.” “Swiss Miss is catching up.” “Wow, we must be going really slow today! I don’t hear Swiss Miss.” Every hiker is rechristened on the Appalachian Trail. My new name slides warmly down my throat and makes me smile.

Despite these simple pleasures, the trail is deadly hard. And I'm only hiking part of it. Only a week. Just for a Spring Break. During this steady climb, I can't fathom why anyone would give up six months of their life to this. To the mountains. To the trail. To the trail.

I can imagine blisters forming in between my toes. Every step feels like I've lost a toenail. In my mind, I can almost feel it jostling around in my sock. I'm sure that the wetness is more blood than sweat. I make a mental note to change into open-toed shoes as soon as we pitch camp for the night. In the evening, Dad and I will talk about everything under the stars. Books. How to change a tire. Old memories. Bad jokes. What makes a good husband. How to know if a salmon is fully cooked. For now, though, we fall silent.

The climb is brutal. I know I have fallen out of shape since coming to college. My mileage petered down from eight miles a day to two. To one. A month. If I have time after homework. Dorm food has given me a layer of pudg that now sits squished beneath the waistband of the heavy pack. I almost say a silent prayer promising that, if I make it

through this week, I swear I'll work out more, but I stop myself. I don't want to lie to God.

The trees blend together and block out the sky. The forest seems to extend upwards forever. Behind each tree lurks an unseen danger: a hidden rockface, a fallen log, a hungry bear just emerging from hibernation with her cubs in tow. Onward and into eternity these trees and dangers climb. And so do I.

Always, without fail, just when I'm about to give up, the trail rounds out to a summit. The trees part. Through the branches, blue gradient waves extend into the sky. Mist clings to the base of nearby mountains. For a time, the world stands still, holding its breath while I catch mine. The trail promises a Manifest Destiny that lies just a few miles further. "Drink in the beauty," she says. "Rest. Then pick up your feet and carry on." And so, I do, clanging echoing through the mountains.

22:

Typing within the coffee shop, a cacophony of clicks from keypads. Maya, Ryann, and I sit huddled over drinks as varied as our personalities, working in silence. Maya sprawls against the marble wall, hair tied into a messy ponytail. A dog at her feet, she brings the latte to her lips. House sweetener. Two pumps. She edits and reedits her essay, fighting against her dyslexia, daring it to stop her.

Ryann chews on the end of her straw. Give her anything. Caffeine. Make it strong. Make it cold. Make it milky. She has sacrificed her need for a specific order long ago, and Law School applications demand an endless supply of liquid energy.

For me, it's whatever I haven't tried before. "What do you recommend?"
Anything to keep from making another decision. I'm juggling PhD applications and job applications and an undergraduate thesis. The last thing I can add to the list is choosing another option from another endless list. Please, someone, choose for me.

Professor Pantleo, the two of them already call me. Outwardly, I chastise them, I knock on wood, I tell them they've jinxed me and now I'll never be accepted into grad school. Inwardly, I'm dreaming about the day, six or seven years from now, when my grandpa calls me and hears my voicemail. "Hello. Dr. Pantleo's phone. I'm sorry. I'm not in today. I've gone fishing. You call back tomorrow."

The clacking feels like drowning. All the deadlines. All the research. The networking. Keeping up with grades. Finding time to study. Making sure to enjoy these last few days of undergrad. Sometimes, it all just seems like too much. Like this is the end. Like I have already peaked. Like I should just give up.

After hours of work in near quiet, save for quick questions double-checking an obscure grammar rule, the three of us slam our laptops shut. Enough for today. It's Sunday, supposedly a day of rest. I walk back to my car and head to my weekly meeting.

I swing by dorms on the way and he slides easily into the seat next to me. He's smiling. I feel terrible. He doesn't know what's coming.

It all bursts out in a wave: "You're my best guy friend
but I really need to set up some emotional boundaries because I'm starting to develop feelings.
And I know you're not in a place where you can handle that so we need to spend time apart. Please,"
I add. An afterthought.

I go through the motions for the rest of the evening. The meeting washes over me. I'm careful to avoid eye contact. Then, when the coast is clear, I call Maya. "Can I come over?"

"Ryann's already on her way."

In her apartment, chai is placed in my hands. It burns as it hits my throat. Probably because of the splash of fireball. Just enough to go down like a warm hug and to sterilize the mouth from the harsh truths of the day. I don't cry. I've grown up. Instead, we sit in a puddle on the couch and discuss the plots to our favorite books and take online quizzes to predict what we will be when we grow up. "Friends," the computer promises.

We laugh and, for a moment, everything dissipates. The assignments. The applications. The boys. The future. For a moment, we haven't grown up at all.

An Elegy for Myself

Earth does not weep. You trod down her surface and took
Her life and gave nothing back. She does not see
You with pity in her eyes nor deign even to send a look.

You did nothing. You toiled in vain when you could just be.
Neglectful steward, your plight was for naught
And yet you expect gratitude for a life of ruin and debris?

No! These days have passed, as well they ought:
I shed my me, shroud that it is, and follow the crook
To where earth is pure, and work has yet been wrought.

Sailor's Song Part II

Yet my eyes lift down

The waves and upwards.

To the deck. Slick, wet, brown.

To the people, faces twisted and strained

Like the ropes bent taught between anguished palms.

To the sky, luminescent grey broken by golden fingertips

Reaching down to graze my head, my shoulders. To anoint me with oil.

I set my bearings to the heavens and follow, to where the waves meet the sky.

Conclusion

Forgive me, dear Reader, for I have sinned.

Here, I have laid for you several puzzles. Each one falls neatly apart. Nationalities may be rejected. Buildings may collapse. Families drift apart. Yet one Home stands: accepting, eternal, whole.

Still, I must confess that I am a thief. I dress this truth up in pretty words and petty turns of phrase, but I am a thief, nonetheless. All my life I have coveted space within a shelf, an empty void that, what? Maybe one day I will fill?

I have stolen. Ripped culture from its bearer to wear it like a cloak—to be hemmed, shed, and woven with other pretty stolen things, so that I may name them mine.

I have kidnapped words: ideas thrust into the world in pain and suffering hours of agony. I have adopted them and called them my own, to be praised for my sleight of hand at the toil of others.

In trying on another's skin, I think I find myself. By wearing their lives and speaking their words, I understand more about who I am, who I'm not, and who I hope to be.

I barter and trade each as it suits me. They are just things: space, joy, culture, words. All stuff. All replaceable. All part-way fillable within dead pages and spilled ink.

Some years ago—though it feels longer—I stole something that had already been freely given. Is that still stealing, if someone selects it and pays for it and lays it at your feet? Is it still stealing if you bend over, pick it up, and slip the heavy thing lightly into your pocket?

Yes, I am a thief, with this ream of paper brimming with stolen words, but the cross I keep around my neck on this silver chain feels nothing like an albatross.

Somehow that lets me rest easy, in whatever home I decide to lay my head.
Somehow that helps me sleep at night.

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