This dissertation titled
The Last Chance Texaco

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Abstract

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*The Last Chance Texaco* is a coming-of-age novella about a fifteen-year-old girl.

The novella is told in prose and verse poems, and is in two parts. It is introduced by a critical piece that discusses narrative strategies in coming-of-age novels.

Approved: ______________________________________________________________________

Mark Halliday

Professor of English
Dedication

To my best friend, Offa

and to Sara Jane
Acknowledgments

My gratitude to Mark Halliday, for his persistent voice of healthy dissent. To Darrell Spencer, for opening everything up. To Sherrie Gradin, for introducing me to an academic voice that says yes. And to Barb Grueser, without whom we would all be lost.

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Thanks to my sister Meredith, who this whole project is for.

And finally, thank you, Teddy. I couldn’t have done it without you.
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PART ONE:

“Who Could Know But Us?”: Strategies of Voice and Narration in Novels about People under Eighteen
I am obsessed by the idea of narrative voice. In the same way that I make eye contact with people far too often and too openly, I approach everybody with the secret and yearning desire to be spoken to. It’s true. And as a result, the stories and poems and novels and movies and works of art I turn to always seem to be saturated with *persona,* with the illusion of a living, breathing, speaking being who is not, it turns out, constructing the language, but rather is *being constructed by* the language. I love the way a two-dimensional surface covered with words can make me feel the very physical discomfort of a pressing question. Sometimes a voice in a book can sound so desperate or so alone that it makes me look around the room for someone to console. Isn’t this what we all show up for? The idea that we’re all made of language and we all make language, and that the murky, slippery substance of words both connects and divides us. It muddies the waters between us, so to speak, even as we call out each other’s names in the dark.

But voice. The idea that it isn’t what’s being said, but the way it’s being said. Don’t give me a moral, give me music. Don’t give me your job title, tell me what you had for lunch. Like in *The Little Prince,* when I ask you about your best friend, I want to hear the exact pitch of his voice; I don’t want to know how much money his family has. Or to paraphrase Amy Hempel, when I ask you what kind of dog you have, don’t say a dachshund, say what he’s like. In any case, a work that favors voice over story favors the act of telling over whatever there might be to tell.

The novels discussed in the following pages all concern themselves with young people, and they all favor the act of telling to the story being told. The strength in these novels largely arises from their sometimes threadbare, sometimes heartbreaking,
sometimes embarrassing voices, the authentic voices of people making their first attempts
at articulating the loneliness and alienation and joy and frustration of what will come to
be the rest of adult life. I think, in the end, what draws us repeatedly to books about
young people—about puberty and coming of age—is the idea of the threshold. There are
certain things you can’t say anymore once you’ve crossed out of your teens, and maybe
sometimes we’d still like to adopt that open, wide-eyed perspective of youth. Maybe.

‘To crave and to have’

I have read Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping* at least a half dozen times, and
yet whenever I strive to recall the book’s plot when recommending it to someone else, I
find myself at a loss. I mention two young girls growing up, a variety of female relatives
who act in a variety of capacities, a strange and eccentric aunt, a flood, a fire. It’s true the
story is simple and familiar: two orphaned girls growing up and experiencing the pain
that results when one sister grows up a little bit faster than the other. When I realize this
doesn’t much recommend the book, I begin to try to explain the (literal) train that runs
through the book—or rather, derails again and again throughout its pages. I recall the
dark, enormous, seemingly haunted lake that curses the town of Fingerbone to floods and
perpetual dampness, and that seems to house the souls of all of its deceased inhabitants. I
say something like, Oh, but the house itself, the house that needs keeping—it fills up with
the overgrowth of the past, and begins to be consumed! At this point, I have nearly
always lost my audience, and have again failed to convince anyone that the book is just about the most beautiful thing I have ever read.

Unless I remember to talk first and exclusively about the book’s narration. Then I remember what draws me back to it again and again: the way the narrator is simultaneously both a young and an adult version of the book’s protagonist, Ruth, who is able to access the most tender feelings of youth while still looking back at those same feelings with a wiser, more seasoned, more broadly sweeping perspective. Furthermore, the narrator acts eerily and often as a sort of collective voice, that has access to the innermost thoughts and feelings of all the book’s central female characters and, it seems by extension, to all the townspeople of Fingerbone, past and present, distant and close. These three perspectives are brilliantly interwoven to give the narration a sense of facelessness—I can’t seem to pin down exactly which “consciousness” is speaking at any given moment—while maintaining what I can only call a strong sense of personality, of voice, of authority.

Given the first lines of the book, there should be no question as to who acts as our narrator: “My name is Ruth. I grew up with my younger sister, Lucille, under the care of my grandmother, Mrs. Sylvia Foster, and when she died, of her sisters-in-law, Misses Lily and Nona Foster, and when they fled, of her daughter, Mrs. Sylvia Fisher” (3). The book seems, from the forefront, to insist on the importance of genealogy, of knowing exactly who’s who. Thus, given the introduction, we can assume that the following will be reported to us by this very same Ruth Fisher, and we might intuit by the simplicity of these lines, and by the very particular outlining of the narrator’s upbringing, that our
subject matter will be this narrator’s youth. We would be right and we would be wrong. While the subject is ostensibly Ruth’s childhood, the voice recalling that childhood is decidedly, elegantly unchildlike. This is a voice whose turns of phrase are smooth when read in context, but set apart they reveal a deft intricacy, such as, “gleaming rainbows in the rarer light,” or, my personal favorite, to describe an imagined grandfather, “he was youngish and high-pocketed” (91, 96).

Though unchildlike, this voice, in all its ornate precision, is able to clearly articulate the feelings of youth. Ruth and Lucille, sisters who have been thrice abandoned, who walk through the strange town of Fingerbone unmoored and unmissed, one winter spend every afternoon ice skating on the lake until they reach a point of bone-cold and anxiety. The narrator outlines the desperate emptiness at the center of these girls’ lives as they return from the frozen lake as such, “If every house in Fingerbone were to fall before our eyes, snuffing every light, the event would touch our senses as softly as a shifting among embers, and then the bitter darkness would step nearer” (35). This sentiment expresses a kind of terrified yet resigned smallness and sense of abandon felt most keenly during one’s youth, when one is powerless to change one’s surroundings. Yet the tone of the language indicates a marked distance from youth.

The narration offers moments of contrast that even more strikingly reveal the distance between the voice itself—its language and tone—and the owner of the feelings and thoughts the narration strives to express. In these moments, I am met both with a sense of irony and a sense of vertigo. For example, when Ruth and Lucille’s newly arrived aunt Sylvie asks the girls where they’d like to go on a train trip, Ruth’s response
is as follows: “I saw the three of us posed in all the open doors of an endless train of
freight cars—innumerable, rapid, identical images that produced a flickering illusion of
both movement and stasis, as the pictures in a kinetoscope do. The hot and dangerous
winds of our passing tattered the Queen Anne’s lace, and yet, for all the noise and clatter
and headlong speed, we flickered there at the foot of the garden while the train roared on
and on. ‘Spokane,’ I said” (68). The tenor of this image is one of terror and instability;
Ruth’s imagination reveals a fear of the speed and danger of trains, and also their
relationship to transience and homelessness, particularly mortifying to an orphaned child.
Her childish response to the question, strikingly less articulate than the previous image, is
to suggest a trip to a nearby town. The response? She is immediately chided by her aunt
for being uninvetive. This sequence sharply demonstrates all that it’s impossible to say
to adults when you’re just a child, in part because once one is an adult, one has
presumably forgotten what children need to say, indicating that the narrator is
simultaneously young Ruth and adult Ruth.

A close reading is required to clearly see Ruth’s hand everywhere throughout the
text. Though *Housekeeping* is colored by Ruth’s particular preoccupations and biases and
longings and anxieties, the moments in which they are revealed are subtle and sparse. The
rest of the time the narrator seems to know everything there is to know about nearly
everyone, and to express all the characters’ feelings with the same even and measured
tone. For example, Ruth describes, in detail, the youthful experiences of her mother and
her aunts. Regarding her grandmother’s mothering style, she says, “Her love for them
was utter and equal, her government of them generous and absolute. She was constant as
daylight, and she would be unremarked as daylight, just to watch the calm inwardness of their faces. What was it like” (19). Ruth’s mother is characterized as stoic, endlessly silent, and, at the time of Ruth’s early childhood, estranged from her grandmother, therefore it’s unlikely that Ruth was ever privy to any details of her mother’s youth. Yet the narrator remarks, in detail, on the subject of that youth, indicating the narrator’s power to assume the emotional and mental space of many of its characters. However, the small flourish that ends the description, “what was it like,” phrased not even as a question but rather as a statement, clearly reveals the bias of Ruth, who experiences a total of five preoccupied, absent, or otherwise disinterested mother-figures, and who clearly envies and longs for the kind of mothering her own mother received. But how faint, how small, how downplayed Ruth’s voice becomes here, amidst the lush and lovely description of her grandmother’s behavior. It’s as though the powerful narrative voice itself swallows and subsumes Ruth’s small, personal voice.

Further evidence of the narrator’s wider knowledge is found in more descriptions of the upbringing of Ruth and Lucille’s mother and aunts. Describing their childhood after their father dies, the narrator says, “Their lives spun off the tilting world like thread off a spindle, breakfast time, suppertime, lilac time, apple time. If heaven was to be this world purged of disaster and nuisance, if immortality was to be this life held in poise and arrest, and if this world purged and this life unconsuming could be thought of as world and life restored to their proper natures, it is no wonder that five serene, eventless years lulled my grandmother into forgetting what she should never have forgotten” (13). Thus the narrator assumes knowledge of the innermost feelings of her grandmother during a
time in which she presumably wasn’t even close to being alive. The overarching effect of the narrator’s broad knowledge of her relatives’ feelings is the sense of all the generations of women in the family being folded into each other; it provides a sense that kinship erases personal identity to create an overall voice in which experiences are permeable and universal. The narrator remarks that on certain evenings her grandmother would “feel that sharp loneliness she had felt every long evening since she was a child. It was the kind of loneliness that made clocks seem slow and loud and made voices sound like voices across water. Old women she had known, first her grandmother and then her mother, rocked on their porches in the evenings and sang sad songs, and did not wish to be spoken to” (18).

In this way, the loneliness of Sylvia Foster becomes the loneliness of Ruth becomes the loneliness of generations of old women past and yet to come.

In fact, the narrator is consistency preoccupied with the slipperiness of individuality. Throughout the novel, Ruth tries to establish a likeness between herself and her aunt Sylvie, herself and her mother, Sylvie and her mother, her grandmother and her mother, even herself and the aunt whom she has never met. Understandably, an orphaned child, who even before losing her mother felt estranged from her, would seek to draw familiarity between herself and her living relatives. However, as much as the narrator insists on sameness, again and again she asserts too that similarity is arbitrary, that our memories latch onto fragments and moments, and in the long run nothing substantial differentiates us from anyone else. When musing on her mother’s decision to destroy a letter from Ruth’s father and in so doing never provide him with any information regarding the girls’ whereabouts, Ruth acknowledges that her corresponding indignation
was slow, developed over the course of many years. But even as she acknowledges the strong feelings she must have felt for her mother, she collapses her mother’s identity into Sylvie’s, and erases her own identity entirely:

It occurs to me sometimes that as I grow older I am increasingly able to present to her gaze (Ruth’s mother’s) the face she seemed to expect. But of course she was looking into a face I do not remember—no more like mine than Sylvie’s is like hers. Less like, perhaps, because, as I watched Sylvie, she reminded me of my mother more and more. There was such similarity, in fact, in the structure of cheek and chin, and the texture of hair, that Sylvie began to blur the memory of my mother, and then to displace it. Soon it was Sylvie who would look up startled, regarding me from a vantage of memory in which she had no place. And it was increasingly to this remembered Sylvie that I presented my look of conscious inquiry, knowing as I did so that Sylvie could know nothing of that letter (53).

While it might seem logical that aunt Sylvie, who has stepped, however precariously, into the role of mother, could easily replace memories of Ruth’s absentee mother, the narrator further exacerbates the concept of individual identity by suggesting repeatedly that identity is determined by memory, which is inconclusive and inconsistent, made entirely of fragments of experience and bits of time.

For example, the narrator describes an experience Ruth and her sister shared, in which they followed the passenger train through Fingerbone as far as they could before it crawled up the bridge and slipped out of their sphere of access. As they followed along, they noticed and kept their gaze upon a young woman who was neatly dressed and who was reading a magazine. At the end of her recollection, the narrator describes the experience as follows: “So she was gone. Yet I remember her neither less nor differently than I remember others I have known better, and indeed I dream of her, and the dream is
very like the event itself, except that in the dream the bridge pilings do not tremble so perilously under the weight of the train” (55). Throughout the novel, the narrator melds memory and dream, drawing a relationship between them as the places where those people who have departed from our lives reappear, animate and whole. However, when these people appear to us, they are subject to the nature of dream and memory. So one’s memory can house a stranger on a train just as wholly and passionately as it can a loved one.

The narrator suggests that even the landscape and the weather in Fingerbone strive to erase identity. A flood overtakes the town, and Ruth, Lucille, and Sylvie find themselves stranded in their house without electricity, water filling the first floor. Repeatedly throughout the novel, the narrator calls to mind Noah in regards to both the flood and the lake in Fingerbone, suggesting that the water that soaks the town has the secret motivation to erase them all. During the flood, when Sylvie and the girls venture to the downstairs to collect necessities, the narrator describes the scene: “When we did not move or speak, there was no proof that we were there at all. The wind and the water brought sounds intact from any imaginable distance. Deprived of all perspective and horizon, I found myself reduced to an intuition, and my sister and my aunt to something less than that. I was afraid to put out my hand, for fear it would touch nothing, or to speak, for fear no one would answer” (70). The narrator and her companions, without their immediate sensory experience, are rendered nothing more than an impulse of the mind. This description demonstrates the way that identity, for this narrator, is determined by sensory experience, by everyday objects, by the dailiness of life. As the narrator says,
in a moment of characteristically sweeping rhetoric, “Every spirit passing through the
world fingers the tangible and mars the mutable, and finally has come to look and not to
buy. So shoes are worn and hassocks are sat upon, and finally everything is left where it
is and the spirit passes on” (73).

There is something oddly ethereal about the narrator of Housekeeping, whose
“identity” slips between the reader’s fingers repeatedly, even as the reader learns the
story of Ruth’s childhood and eventual maturity. Perhaps the most interesting effect of
this narrative voice is the way it gives strength and depth to Ruth’s otherwise rather
passive and amorphous character. We come to know Ruth at a moment in her growth at
which she is most without an identity, and she is passive and listless. When asked a
question, she likely doesn’t have an answer. When her younger sister answers for her,
and she’s told she’ll soon need to start thinking for herself, she is nonplussed. Ruth is
unable to both express her emotions and to develop her own sense of agency. However,
the narrator’s voice, as it accumulates the strength of the whole Fisher family’s females,
Ruth’s adult perspective, and presumably the sensibility of Sylvie and Ruth’s deceased
mother, gives strength to Ruth herself. The narrative style provides a voice for a character
who otherwise can’t find voice for herself, and in that way we’re able to see beyond
Ruth’s crippling passivity into an emotional legacy that spans across three generations
and presumably encompasses the entire town of Fingerbone.
‘When somebody laughs on the street late at night’

Many of us were asked to read Catcher in the Rye as high school students, and most of us, upon meeting Holden Caulfield for the first time, regarded him the way we would one of our classmates. Those of us of a certain temperament found him to be perhaps somewhat whiny, irritating, crude. Others of us found him to be relatable, to be a kindred spirit, to be the kind of character who, to use Holden’s words, “you wish ... was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him on the phone whenever you felt like it” (25). Still others of us, like myself, had mixed feelings about Holden; we loved him and empathized with him, on the one hand, for noticing all the same little details about other people that we noticed, but on the other hand, we yearned for him to be perhaps a little nicer, a little less self-absorbed, a little stronger. We let Holden off the hook, though, because we harbored the same secret wishes for self-improvement for ourselves.

Regardless of how we felt about him, we felt about him; Holden tends to illicit a strong reaction in readers. Just to offer a slice of an example, from the comments that follow an NPR write-up about Catcher in the Rye, readers say the following: hmbscully writes, “I read it in high school and I hated it. I LOATHED Holden. LOATHED him. I've never understood how anyone liked that book or identified with him. But then again I realize that I generally dislike teenagers, especially when I was one and had to be surrounded by them and their lack of self-awareness.” Directly preceding this comment, dimmers writes, “It was the first book that I felt spoke to me personally and the first time that I thought that an adult not only
understood the alienation of youth but had created an entire character around it.” Just a short scroll upward, and people are actually fighting about the book. One writer proclaims that *Catcher in the Rye* is the same kind of stupidly revered pop culture crap as The Beatles. So, yes, feelings.

Returning to the book as an adult, I, and I assume at least a handful of others, find a more balanced view of Holden as a rather smart and sensitive high school student who doesn’t have the language to express his feelings. Precisely the kind of statement that would wildly frustrate Holden himself, were someone to express it to him. Holden is observant, and essentially kindhearted, deeply depressed, and hungry for moments of pure, unadulterated joy. Holden is sixteen, and he’s begging cab drivers to stop and have a cocktail with him. He’s getting kind of furious when they refuse. He’s clumsy and inarticulate and jealous and insecure and angry and moody and edgy and squeamish about other people’s smallest behaviors and afraid and wild and lonely. But most importantly, for all of Holden’s posturing and verbal assertiveness and endless pronouncements (“I’d never yell ‘Good luck!’ at anyone. It sounds terrible if you think about it” (21).), he’s easy to see through. Or rather (and I apologize in advance to young people everywhere for the stereotyping), the narrator Salinger constructs in *Catcher in the Rye* is such a convincingly voiced young person that he seems authentic to a high school audience, yet ironically flawed and tragic to an adult audience.

While the narrative voice of Ruth in *Housekeeping* warps and shifts to incorporate a breadth of characters’ feelings and thoughts, the narrator in *Catcher in the Rye* is relentlessly first-person, relentlessly Holden Caulfield. There isn’t a moment within the
book when we aren’t locked in to the biases and preoccupations and insecurities of
Holden. Every event that takes place is filtered through the lens of Holden’s perspective,
every conversation that takes place is translated by Holden’s jealousies and prejudices,
and every other character is (often quite ruthlessly) linked inextricably to Holden’s
judgment. And Holden makes us privy to a plethora of his secret idiosyncrasies. For
example, Holden “doesn’t really like to see old guys in their pajamas too much” (11).
Twice he elaborately makes known his hatred for the word “grand.” Regarding gift-
giving, Holden observes, “Almost every time somebody gives me a present, it makes me
sad” (67). And were you to attend the theater with Holden, he would draw you aside and
whisper, “In the first place, I hate actors. They never act like people” (152). Clearly, the
voice constructed by the narrative is distinct, often gratingly distinct. Every line in the
book is awash with Holden’s “personality.”

One of the narrative strategies that makes Holden’s such an authentic voice is his
casual, conversational style; he immediately makes himself the reader’s familiar. *Catcher*
begins in the manner of an epistolary, though it’s unclear at the outset what the occasion
for Holden’s correspondence is. This style of direct address immediately draws the reader
into Holden’s world, and the reader is implicated as Holden makes assumptions about the
reader’s thoughts and ideas. After Holden sees a jazz pianist play at a bar, he allows that
the music was good, but suggests, “You should’ve heard the crowd, though, when he was
done. You would have puked” (110). Throughout the book, Holden assumes the reader
shares his worldview. As the narrative progresses, Holden’s narration becomes more and
more comfortable with the reader, and Holden begins to reveal the more intimate details
of his history. He tells the reader about his brother Allie: “He’s dead now. He got leukemia and died when we were up in Maine, on July 18, 1946. You’d have liked him. He was two years younger than I was, but he was about fifty times as intelligent” (49). As we’re spoken to more directly, we’re better able to cue into Holden’s quirks and vulnerabilities, and in this way perhaps we come to love him; we see him as self-effacing, and we watch as he celebrates wholeheartedly those who he loves. Regardless of how we respond to Holden, the act of his playing up to the reader behaves the same way an arm slung around the shoulder does. The reader is drawn, willingly or not, in.

Because we are so close to the consciousness of Holden’s character, the narrative voice gradually teaches us how to read it. At first, we may take the reportage at face value, believing the story to be unfiltered or “realistic.” But we come to see that Holden’s insecurities color his every statement. Soon, we know to read that Holden is jealous as he observes his date meeting and greeting an acquaintance she hasn’t seen in some time, and that’s why he judges her behavior so harshly. Holden describes the encounter as follows: “You should’ve seen the way they said hello. You’d have thought they hadn’t seen each other in twenty years. You’d have thought they’d taken baths in the same bathtub or something when they were little kids. Old buddyroos. It was nauseating” (165). We come to feel that more often than not, we should read Holden’s rather cynical impulse to judge as a mask for other, more tender feelings. This duality of character that the voice constructs is a duality we can identify in ourselves and others, and it serves to bring Holden more dynamically to life. If an omniscient narrator were to step in and tell us that Holden is vulnerable, that his emotions are more complex than one might suspect at first
glance, it wouldn’t have nearly the same effect as the process by which we come to understand his complexity via the “sound” of his very particular narrative voice.

Further evidence of Holden’s vulnerability is found in the narrator’s use of the second person. Often, when Holden is describing a moment or a memory of particularly intense emotion, he shifts into the second person, diffusing the intensity of the emotion by allowing the reader claim to it; the second person works to simultaneously distance the narrator from the event and draw the reader closer to it. Holden uses this strategy for all uncomfortable emotions, whether happy or sad. When discussing his relationship with Jane, Holden says, “You never even worried, with Jane, whether your hand was sweaty or not. All you knew was, you were happy. You really were” (103). While it’s clear that Holden feels deeply attached to Jane, this is revealed to us by his need to shift to second person to describe his happiness. Similarly, when Holden has reached his limit and is nervous and anxious to flee the whole scene, he tries to express his loneliness and sense of loss at seeing obscene graffiti on the side of a school building, but the only way he’s able to express it is as follows: “That’s the whole trouble. You can’t ever find a place that’s nice and peaceful, because there isn’t any. You may think there is, but once you get there, when you’re not looking, somebody’ll sneak up and write ‘Fuck you’ right under your nose” (264).

All of these particularities of narrative voice work to construct a vivid sense of Holden’s character; he is someone we can imagine ourselves hearing and seeing and talking with. In fact, after reading *Catcher in the Rye*, it’s difficult not to slip into Holden’s vocal tics, his “goddams” and “that kills me’s.” I notice, even as I write about
the narration of *Catcher*, that it’s difficult not to call Holden by name. While the narrative voice in *Housekeeping* seeks to distance the reader from a stable sense of character, the narrative voice in *Catcher in the Rye* does the opposite—it links the reader inextricably with the voice. However, thematically, both books have in common the idea of a sudden and painful loss of identity—just as Ruth seems to melt away at moments, into the landscape and into the instability of memory, Holden too has anxieties that his identity is slipping away. Despite the fact that Holden Caulfield’s narrative voice is infectious and nearly impossible to shake, Holden feels that he is slipping away, disappearing, losing his grip.

The narrator begins with typical Holden posturing. Taking the opposite impulse from the narrator of *Housekeeping*, who seeks in the first few lines to establish a family tree, Holden shrugs off the idea of history and genealogy. He says, “If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you’ll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap” (3). Clearly, establishing his own identity is unimportant to Holden Caulfield. One has the sense that Holden thinks his voice is strong enough that he doesn’t need to bother with introductions. He hasn’t time for it. In fact, we don’t even learn Holden’s name until the very end of the first chapter, and he doesn’t even tell it to us directly. Rather, we learn it when the dean’s wife opens the door and greets him.

However, as the narrative progresses, we find Holden more and more threatened by the idea of losing his identity. He seems desperate to hold onto a sense of stability in a
world that, to him, is wildly mutable. Holden has changed schools four times by the time we meet him, and furthermore he seems to be increasingly more unstable as reality threatens him with depression more and more. When Holden visits the Natural History Museum, where he used to take field trips as a school kid, he outlines his philosophy about change. He tells us that what he loves most about the museum is its unchangeability; no matter how long you’re gone for, the exhibits will always be in their places behind glass. He says,

Nobody’d be different. The only thing that would be different would be you. Not that you’d be so much older or anything. ... You’d just be different, that’s all. You’d have an overcoat on this time. ... Or you’d heard your mother and father having a terrific fight in the bathroom. Or you’d just passed by one of those puddles in the street with gasoline rainbows in them. I mean you’d be different in some way—I can’t explain what I mean. And even if I could, I’m not sure I’d feel like it. (158)

This idea of an ever-shifting, inconsistent sense of identity, akin to the old adage about stepping into the river, seems to preoccupy and even frighten Holden. His fear is indicated by his rhetorical move toward defensiveness; in his frustration to express himself, he claims that he can’t communicate his thoughts and then, in a Holden fashion, he dismisses them entirely by saying he doesn’t even feel like telling us anyway. This sudden cold shoulder to the reader, at this point in the novel, acts as a flag communicating that Holden is certainly sensitive about the subject.

The idea of the instability of identity returns elsewhere in the novel. Twice as Holden is walking through New York he finds himself feeling a sudden sense of fear and vertigo, and it’s marked by the sensation of disappearing. He says, “After I got across the road, I felt like I was sort of disappearing. It was that kind of a crazy afternoon,
terrifically cold, and no sun out or anything, and you felt like you were disappearing
every time you crossed a road” (8). Note once again the use of the second person here, as
Holden describes a particularly intense and vulnerable feeling. Note also the sense of
loneliness and loss lodged behind the language. Again, later in the narrative, Holden says,
“all of a sudden, something very spooky started happening. Every time I came to the end
of a block and stepped off the goddam curb, I had this feeling that I’d never get to the
other side of the street. I thought I’d just go down, down, down, and nobody’d ever see
me again” (256). Holden expresses the same sentiment here as above, but with a stronger
sense of paranoia and terror. Instead of disappearing, now Holden feels as though he’s
likely to, at any moment, fall into an abyss. At this point, too, Holden is reporting his
feelings to us directly, which adds to the sense of vulnerability present in Holden’s
thoughts. Like Ruth, Holden seems to feel that his hold on reality is unstable, and that his
presence in the world is slight and subject to sudden shifts in gravity.

In the end, *Catcher in the Rye’s* success as a novel is entirely wrapped up in
Salinger’s style of narration. If the reader had even the slightest hint of an inauthentic
hand behind the voice of Holden Caulfield, if Holden’s voice wavered in even a single
sentence, the reader would feel betrayed and the novel would become as “phony” as all
the world’s phonies, who betray and trouble Holden.
‘They build their own cages’

Paul Zindel’s 1968 novel *The Pigman*, billed as young adult and housed in the children’s section, employs a number of similar narrative nuances to *Housekeeping* and *Catcher in the Rye*. Thematically, the three books are linked: *The Pigman* is a “memorial epic” told in tandem by the narrators John Conlan and Lorraine Jensen, recounting the events immediately preceding and following the two teenagers’ befriending of an eccentric and troubled older man named Angelo Pignati. John and Lorraine seem like the kind of high school seniors who would probably be wary friends of Holden Caulfield. Angelo Pignati seems like just the kind of outcast loner who would get along well with Ruth Fisher. And thematically, all three books concern themselves with the alienation, terror, and sense of placelessness one feels during his or her youth. However, the largest similarity that can be drawn between *Pigman* and the other two books is its narrative strategy; while the book purports to be a simple back and forth between two friends, the style of its telling reveals more about each character than could be revealed with a straightforward or omniscient narrative. Both characters employ a sense of familiarity with the reader, much like Holden Caulfield. Through the viewpoint of each character, we’re better able to see his or her counterpart. And the back and forth nature of the narrative leads both characters to see their own sense of alienation, fear, and loss of identity.

Like Holden Caulfield, both John and Lorraine have distinct and authentic narrative voices. John is described by both himself and Lorraine as quite handsome and
confident, yet he’s set apart from others because of his unique view of the world. Ignored and dismissed by his family, he strives to be noticed by whatever means necessary, including but not limited to bombing the high school bathroom upward of twenty times, and laughing loudly to himself like a self-proclaimed “lunatic” in public places. John is likely to go for shock value, to use a colorful phrase, and more than anything else to rile Lorraine up. John will describe his mother, for example, as follows: “I could tell she just got back from the beauty parlor because her hair was frizzed like she had just rammed her fingers into an electric socket” (34). He’s fond of verbal flourish as well; when he’s describing a game he liked to play in which he encouraged his classmates to buy apples at lunchtime and then roll them down the aisles of their classrooms, causing a noise like stampeding buffalo, he described the apples as “sick, undernourished, antique apples” (2). John has some of the same melancholy preoccupations as Holden Caulfield; for example, even though John and Lorraine hang out in a graveyard, John still gets sad and says, “There’s nothing worse than a freshly dug grave with snow falling on it” (125). He judges people similarly to Holden, saying, “I really hate it when a teacher has to show that she isn’t behind the times by using some expression which sounds so up-to-date you know for sure she’s behind the times” (17). John is charming and witty and nerved up, and his character is clear in his narrative voice.

Lorraine, on the other hand, is the more serious of the two. She is self-described as a “dreamboat with a leak,” the “type who the boss’s wife would hire as his secretary” (55). She has a preoccupation with psychobabble that borders on certifiable, and she is constantly analyzing those around her with textbook psychology. She is fond of big
words and phrases like “prevaricate” and “cultural lag.” Lorraine, too, has quirks and preoccupations that reveal her sense of the world. For example, when John, Lorraine, and Mr. Pignati go to the zoo, Lorraine expresses her frustration with the zookeepers. She says, “The thing that made me stop going to the zoo a few years ago was the way one attendant fed the sea lions. He climbed up on the big diving platform in the middle of the pool and unimaginatively just dropped the fish into the water. I mean, if you’re going to feed the sea lions, you’re not supposed to plop the food into the tank” (56). Lorraine, underneath her fretting and insecurity, has a strong sense of the joy of life.

However, we can learn more about these individual characters by their assessments of each other. As the novel begins and each character takes a chapter, they also respond to each other’s thoughts and words, as though they’re composing the work over each other’s shoulders. Initially, we learn from Lorraine that John is handsome, and that he has piercing, powerful eyes. John suggests at the end of his first chapter that Lorraine was dying to burst in and correct what he’d said, and Lorraine responds by saying, “I should never have let John write the first chapter because he always has to twist things subliminally. I am not panting, and I’m not about to have a thrombosis” (7). At this point in chapter two, the narrative voice establishes that it will be constantly working backwards and correcting what’s come before it, and the reader is always anticipating the other character’s commentary. John mentions in the first chapter that he’s a miserable curser, and he tells us Lorraine has disallowed him from cursing in the text, so he’s only allowed to use a symbol “@^&#*” to express his feelings. However, as the narrative progresses, we see that John seldom resorts to the symbol.
What quickly becomes clear is that the two characters love and understand each other better than they understand themselves. Whenever John behaves irresponsibly or wildly, Lorraine understands and tries to support him, because, as she says, “All John was doing was opening his arms and in his own way saying: ‘Look at me, world! Look at my life and energy and how glad I am to be alive!’” (152). John, on the other hand, sees and appreciates that Lorraine’s mother bullies and belittles her, and he consistently corrects her impulses to be self-effacing. As we read through the “memorial epic,” in which John and Lorraine are attempting, through writing, to grieve the death of their friend Angelo Pignati, and also to deal with their guilt over their perception that they played a part in his death, we see the two friends argue and, as the novel progresses, work toward a more thorough understanding of each other. As we near the end, the arguments cease, and John and Lorraine simply and open-heartedly admit to their emotional reactions to the situation.

What Mr. Pignati’s death reveals to John and Lorraine is a sense of alienation and loneliness. John, reflecting upon the death, remembers that Lorraine once accused him of smoking and drinking because he had a death wish. He says, “‘You must want to die,’ she had said once, and maybe that was true. Maybe I would rather be dead than to turn into the kind of grown-up people I knew. What was so hot about living anyway if people think you’re a disturbing influence just because you think about God and Death and the Universe and Love. My poor mother and father—I wanted to tell them that they no longer wonder what they’re doing in the world while I stand here going out of my mind” (179). Lorraine, after Mr. Pignati’s death, begins to find an omen of death in everything, and
becomes paranoid and afraid for her own mortality. Both characters are altered by their experiences, and both narrative voices end with a deeper sense of maturity and wisdom, coupled with a deeper sense of despair and cynicism.

Though the types of voices in the preceding novels vary, each is inhabited by the consciousness of a young person, and each expresses a worldview laden with a sense of authenticity, open-heartedness, and sincerity. The stories we tell again and again, of our youths, of bicycles and swimming pools and kisses on playground equipment and summertime and bare feet, these stories themselves are so bland as to be universal. Yet the way we tell them, these novels demonstrate, is what makes us tell them again and again, feeling the flavor of lost emotion on our tongues. So these narratives succeed by making us believe the voice that’s speaking to us, however naïve and short-sighted we might imagine the experiences being recounted are.
Works Cited


PART TWO:

The Last Chance Texaco
Prologue

Two boys took their regular spot behind us on the bus. They poked their fingers through a hole in the seat. We felt them jabbing at our backs through the sweaty green plastic. They said those things. Sometimes loud. It was worse when they whispered. But the laugh was low like sand in their throats, the laugh was high like when you whistle grass between your thumbs. It was both. We didn’t know what they said. But we knew by the heat in our cheeks what the laugh meant.

That was when we learned how to know. The story of a laugh like that is old.
The Last Chance Texaco

Me and Sara Jane don’t care if our palms are sweaty. On the hood of her blue Cavalier, we touch our shoetips too, in the parking lot of the gutted station across the street from Midway. We haven’t let go for an hour, even with both our arms stiff from being held so still. We came to watch the planes. We smoke Camels from the pack on my chest with our free hands. She doesn’t, usually, but it’s been a bad day. I do either way. One-handed, I tip out and light another. Hold it to her mouth to look at her smile from the side.

We’d be fucked if anyone knew where we were. Sixty-third and Central, hardly a crime scene, Sara Jane would say. Even though her next door neighbor knifed his wife and tried for his kid, the one in our grade. But he got away. You think it’s all a joke, Sara’s dad would say. He’s Chicago PD, and sometimes he’d be at their dining room table holding his face and nobody in there eating or playing cards or anything. The first time I ever saw a man about to cry was him.

I guess he’s seen things. Sara Jane has too, but he doesn’t know it. She can only tell me, because our secrets are the same. That’s how we met. It was me and Jim, and then it was Sara and Jim, and now it’s just me and Sara, and sometimes Jim calls and lets it ring until we start to feel sick. Can you say you’ve seen a thing if it was happening to you?

Fuck, Sara Jane would say, now you sound like one of those specials on TV.

A plane goes overhead and Sara says, “What?” when she sees me looking at her instead. “Nothing.” I’m just watching you be quiet. Sara’s watch reads 11:16. We have school in the morning. “Let’s go for coffee at Huck Finn’s,” I say, and Sara Jane says okay.
Section 1
Where I Grew Up

Somebody put cyanide in the Tylenol. Somebody put razor blades in the Halloween candy. Somebody saved Baby Jessica from the well. Somebody killed seven people at a Brown’s Chicken. Somebody stole this seven-year-old girl from her front yard, and when they found her it was two weeks later and she was dead. Somebody sent Christa McAuliffe into space. Somebody put a bomb in the parking garage at the World Trade Center.

Somebody killed Hillary Chase. We know who and we know how. He was found cleaning blood out of the car in the middle of the day. She was eighty pounds. She was in seventh, my grade. He was in high school. He dumped her out behind Suffield Woods, where they’d cleared the trees but hadn’t built the houses yet. He did it with a hunting knife. She went to a party in the woods. He didn’t take her home. The car was his mom’s. Years later he killed his brother and raped his sister. Later they’d say, “He was always that way.” Whatever the hell that’s supposed to mean. Later they’d say, “What was she doing out all night, anyway?”

They’ll say anything like they know everything.

Later that summer two men followed Sheilah Donovan home from the hospital where she worked nights as a nurse. They followed her into her subdivision, into the cul de sac. They followed her into her garage and made her get into her trunk. They shot her in the back of the head and left. Her family inside sleeping. They followed her because they wanted to steal the hood off her Camry. But they didn’t end up taking it.

Everybody thought, Isn’t the reason we live here so that these things don’t happen to us?
Abby:

Probably if you’ve ever been a girl you have a story to tell. Maybe you’ve kept it to yourself because you’re afraid they’d say, *what’s the big deal.* You were probably right.

*What’s the big deal?* If you slice a violence small enough, it disappears.

It’s funny, the different ways you can look. The way you’ll touch your own hand to your own throat while you watch the tendons in the movie heroine’s neck. But later in the mirror you find the girl who always says, *No.* The one who frowns all the time. The one with circles under her eyes.

She’s afraid to get caught. She falls asleep first. She gets her panties frozen. Were you ever that girl? Who asked to go home early?

That girl? I sent her out for smokes. Because I want to tell you like it’s the truth. Because it’s mine. Because it’s mine, I know it’s a lie.

All along somebody was telling me, *No. It didn’t happen that way at all.* And so even though I wrote it all down, I still don’t know.

Who knows? Maybe someone will kiss my temple as I tell it. Maybe they’ll hate me or say, *Me too.*

I’m saying please. Listen to me. I talk like a ragged fingernail on silk.
School

1. Coffee House

There wasn’t any coffee. It was just this thing after school. In some teacher’s hippie classroom, so there were beanbag chairs everywhere. Lame. But everybody brought a guitar or something they wrote or sometimes just something they liked in a book. And everyone took turns.

Abby went when she was a freshman, even though it was at the other high school, because it was Lorie’s school and it was a place they could meet up. Abby saw Lorie’s older brother Jim there plenty, which was weird, because he didn’t go to Lorie’s school either. He went to the all-boys Catholic school. But he never looked at Abby at Coffee House, not once.

Probably because she never read anything. Never even said anything. Jim did every time. His voice was loud and wild.

When Coffee House got cancelled in the winter because the teacher in charge said the extra hour made his drive home too long, Abby thought that was probably the last time she’d ever see Jim. Until that day in May. When he called.
2. Room 32

Doc has a life-sized guillotine in his classroom. A final project someone made, he says, but Darrell says he wonders. If you do something good in Doc’s class, he writes your last name in calligraphy pen on a square of toilet paper. He writes it really nice—he starts over if he goofs. Then he hangs them in a ring around the top of the room. The Honor Roll.

Darrell says, “This year sophomore honors is going to make it around twice.”
That’s what Abby and Darrell are. Sophomores.
Doc says, “I dare you.”

Doc has dried black flowers in a vase on the bookshelf. If someone falls asleep in class he holds them under the person’s nose and shouts, “Wake up and smell the roses!” He knows all about what the names mean in Shakespeare. Horatio is the orator. Ophelia is a world of feeling. Gertrude is both spear and dear.

Mornings, Doc lets them hang out in his room during zero hour. It’s always cold and the walls are cinder blocks, no windows, but Doc has a hundred records and a record player. At first it’s just Abby and Darrell, and Darrell always picks Yellow Brick Road, but then Bob starts to come too. He picks The Beatles or The Who. Abby always wants Doc to play his guitar, and sometimes he does, making like he’s Bob Dylan. Then it’s everybody’s chins resting on their knees. Even Darrell’s.

When the bell rings, the best part of the day is already over.
“Until sixth period,” Doc says, “when you come back to listen to me.”

Doc stops Abby on her way out and hands her a doodle of three stick people he made on a napkin. The stick figures are all holding coffee mugs.
She says, “Who’s this?”
Doc says, “What, you can’t tell? That’s me, and that’s you,” he points, “and that’s Allen Ginsberg.”
“Six more hours is a long time,” she says as she leaves.
3. Emily G

was her name in the bottom right corner of her big yellow drawing of the big yellow house she moved into on Harold when they were all in second grade. Mrs. McDermott hung it in the Artists’ Corner right away. Emily G. had two long braids that she sometimes bit the ends of.

But now she goes by what it sounds like when you spell yourself out loud: m.e.

M. & Abby calls her Em. Ehem. Emily G. Abby knows her middle name, it’s Marie. They listen to the same songs, but sometimes Em laughs after and says, “Abby, why are you always so sad?” And some days Abby thinks, Why are you so damn happy? but mostly she just wonders, what’s wrong with me?

m.e. A stupid award for TV.

Em got a red Dodge Shadow just about the second she turned 16 because her mom dates Mr. Bullard, who makes everyone call him Paul. He teaches History, sophomores, juniors, and seniors.

But wait, it’s not what you think. Mrs. G looks just like everyone else’s mom, and Paul’s bald, and he wears the same brown pants every day. Even the weekends, Em says. The sleeves of his sweaters hang down over his hands.

Once during class Paul made a mistake. He said, “While I was having dinner with Emily and her mother last night—”

Em got up and left. She didn’t come back for two days. She gets away with everything.

Em picks Abby up for school at 7:58, which Abby’s mom says is pushing it. Suzy’s always shotgun. Abby pulls her scarf up to the bottoms of her ears and tries to hear what they’re saying over the backseat speakers. Until she gives up and looks out the window.


“Abby, you’re so quiet.”

“Abby, you’re so sad.”

She laughs from the back. But they don’t hear it.


_Abby:_

Do you know what kind of person I am?
I’m always the break in the line.
I’m the type whose face says, “Sure. Here’s the spot. Cut right on through.”

I mean, think about it. What am I going to do?
Body like a Charlie Brown Christmas tree in a paper sack.
My breasts are so small I don’t even think they count.
You should see me in a swimsuit!

I’m the kind who smiles anyway. Even angry.
The kind who can’t stand to be rude.

Oh, but it’s worse than that. These men who are my dad’s age,
sometimes they say, “Honey. Why so serious?”

I wish I could say Fuck You.
If you could hear inside my head, you’d think I was nuts.
Always yelling, Look at me! Always yelling, Go away!
And nobody ever hearing anything, either way.

You know what kind I am?
I want to smash all their wine bottles on the driveway
so everybody driving by turns their heads in Slo Mo as they pass.
So everybody’s tires go flat.
Home

1. Mr. Manning

Everyone watched his house burn down from behind their dark windows.

The fire made itself known. First it was a slow commotion, strange enough to pull you out of sleep. But Abby wasn’t sleeping. She didn’t see the light in the room change color, but she noticed the smell just before the fire trucks came. And from her bedroom window she saw Mr. Manning alone and shirtless in his front yard, staring at his ruined house.

Why wasn’t there anybody to put a hand on his shoulder? Abby thinks it’s because of Ed. Who isn’t just his friend, even though nobody will say it. Abby’s dad tried to say Ed was Mr. Manning’s nephew when Abby’s sister Maren asked, but how dumb does he think they are. Ed lives with Mr. M, and they drink beer out of cans in lawn chairs in their front yard. “Why can’t they just go out back like everybody else does?” Maren would say, and mom would say, “It’s none of your business,” but it’s still what everybody was wishing. When it came to Ed and Mr. Manning, it seemed like everybody was always whispering.

But when the house caught fire, nobody was there. Not even Ed. And it seemed to take forever before the fire trucks came.

Mr. Manning left after that. A new house was built that was bigger, blue with pink trim, and a family moved in with two kids. The husband of the family would always talk your ear off about his lawn or his car or his daughter’s good looks or his son’s smarts (but it turns out he had those last ones backwards). It would be many years later when he would jump out in front of a semi truck, causing Abby’s dad to hiss, “selfish prick” every time his name was mentioned.

“I bet he didn’t even think about the driver,” Abby’s dad would shake his head. “The driver has to live with it anyway, whether the guy he killed was a jerk or not.”
May 25

Jim. It’s Lorie’s older brother Jim. On the phone. She has to think about who it is. He doesn’t even say hello. He says, “I wrote you something.” He says, “You can hang up on me if you want to.” And then he just reads it.

Abby remembers Jim’s eyes: Like hit crystal. Splintered, like the light went right through. A blue so pale they must have hurt to look through.

Whenever they’d had sleepovers at Lorie’s, Jim would let them into his room to listen to the radio. Holly and Jenny sitting on their feet in pajamas, and, “Abby, you sit like a pretzel,” Jim had said. She didn’t say anything. Lorie would sit on the stairs and say, “You guys, this is boring.” Between songs, the man on the radio talked about how the world was ending. He didn’t sound so old that he should know. The guitar in the songs sounded thin and angry. The singer was a girl, and so did she.

That was the same year Lorie and Holly and Jenny and Abby had worn black instead of costumes on Halloween and walked around the neighborhood after dark. But they didn’t use the shaving cream they hid in their bags. Instead they linked arms and sang loud, walking the drainage ditch that split the neighborhood.

This was before Lorie and Abby went to different high schools. Lorie liked the same books, so Abby gave her a stack of her own poems at middle school graduation. “It’s no big deal,” Abby said.

And Jim had read them. He says, “I saw them on Lore’s desk, and I stole them.”

Abby can’t make herself talk. Later Jim will say it was a full minute. She listens to him breathe.

He says, “Abby, I was always watching you.”

He says, “I’m sorry. I guess I shouldn’t have called.”

Abby takes a breath. Abby says, “No.” She says, “Wait.”
2. Company

Abby can’t sleep when no one’s home. She walks through the rooms lighting all the lights. She turns pages until she can’t see. She makes tea and counts, 10:00, 10:42, 11:16. She picks up and listens to the dial tone, just checking. She carries the cat from room to room until he scratches. After midnight she won’t pass a window.

It was the same when she was little. When the sound of the TV ended and the feet had gone up the stairs, she’d sneak the light on and lie still as dead on her side, watching the crack in the door for an angry face. She’d listen to the front door so hard it spoke itself open. Everything ticked. When she’d made herself brave, she’d take her pillow up the dark staircase to the floor outside her parents’ bedroom. There she could close her eyes and sleep to the sound of their breathing.

But now she’s not small and ever since Maren turned nine and got serious about the swim team, everyone but Abby is away at swim meets most weekends. If Abby can make herself brave, she stomachs the clatter of the car keys and locks the door behind her. She drives into the dark east, a car here and there. She only has a learner’s permit, and she knows she’s not supposed to, but she thinks, to hell with it. At least one streetlight always burns out right as she passes. What does that mean?

If she can make herself brave, she drives to the Olympic Star in Tinley Park. She wants the big corner booth, the green leather and the neon, the smoke and Rita bringing coffee enough to make her insides hum. She’s never the only one.

Will’s been saying all year that things with Gina are getting to be no good. “Maybe it’s time you guys called it quits,” we all say, and “Yeah,” Will says, looking into his coffee cup like it’s some wild abyss. John dumps sugar packets onto the table and makes pictures in it with his finger. Nobody has someplace they have to go. Sometimes Danny shows and waits for someone to offer him a cheese stick. Danny won’t look at Abby when he makes jokes, but he’s glad when she laughs.

No, Abby’s not the only one, but she’s always the last. Abby can’t stand to go home until daylight makes itself known.
Ravine

Abby wore her yellow dress, the one with flowers. She sat on the front porch waiting for him. No one had asked who she would be out with, but she still knew it was a kind of lying. Mrs. Frazer waved from her driveway across the street, then called for Pip to get out of the flowers. She didn’t know how long she’d been waiting, but it didn’t matter. It was the first time all year she’d noticed the light out late. Hello, Spring!

A bundle of yellow buttercups tied with blue string on the front passenger seat. “Perfect,” he said, touching her sleeve.

All the windows were down, she couldn’t keep the hair out of her face. Where are we going? she didn’t ask. Instead she said, “Yes.” And, “uh-huh, mm-hm.”

He said, “You sure don’t say much, do you?”

“But it’s okay,” he said, when she looked at her hands. “I like that about you. I can tell you’re always thinking.”

It was the place everyone talked about in seventh, the woods with the tire swing, off 95th, where the high school kids went drinking. He looked at her like he was answering a question. “How will we find our way back,” Abby asked, looking up at the sky getting dark. He laughed like she was joking. “Come on,” he said, “I want to show you something.”

The hill was steep, and he went down first, running to keep from falling. “Wait,” he said, turning back. “Hold still,” he said. He held his fingers like a picture. She was at the top of the hill. “You’re so beautiful,” he said, with his arms out to her. She was more afraid to run than she was to slip. She walked down with her feet sideways, slow. She didn’t want to look to see if he was laughing or mad.

“This is my favorite place,” he said. When she leaned back against the flat rock, the leaves looked like the hands of elves fretting over the last of the light.

Everything that came next was a surprise.

Until flashlight beams nosing between the trees and a voice shouting: “The park closes at 10! You have five minutes to leave!”
Love Song

What if I bled, what if it’s on the back of my dress, what if he sees. What if they’re awake. What will I say. “I love you,” he says in her ear. Maybe it’s thank you she says. She gets out and runs, looking up at the windows. She waves toward the dark street before she closes the front door. I’m sorry I didn’t mean to. She wants someone to say this to. She goes to bed with her fingernails dirty. Too scared to run the sink. She remembers a scene from a movie. Or maybe it’s the news. A girl fell down a well and the angry birds startle up around her. Beating at her knees her sides her back her ears. It doesn’t feel like a dream. In the morning a crust of dead leaves on her pillow. Her mouth in the mirror is a clown’s. I’m sorry I didn’t mean to. She wants someone to say this to.
3. Mom

Abby’s mom says *pin* when she means *pen*. She’s from a town in Indiana called Kokomo. When the Beach Boys came out with that dumb song in the ’80s, Abby’s mom just laughed and said, “That’s not about where I grew up.”

Where Abby’s mom grew up was across a field from a General Motors plant. When the family visits her grandparents, Abby stares at the flat blue box of it from out her aunt’s old bedroom window. It’s where both of Abby’s grandparents worked until they retired. Abby can’t imagine living there. All night long semi trucks hum past on Dixon Road.

Abby’s mom wanted to be a doctor but a high school guidance counselor told her she’d better be a nurse instead. She didn’t do that either. She works in hematology at the hospital. Sometimes she draws blood and sometimes Abby visits her at the hospital. Abby’s mom is good at finding the vein. If anyone in the family needs a blood test, Abby’s mom sneaks into their room and takes a couple vials in the early morning before she goes to work. Because of this, Abby will never develop a fear of needles.

Abby’s mom put up the wallpaper in Abby’s bedroom, with its border of cats sitting inside wicker baskets full of apples. They’d chosen it together, but now Abby thinks the cats look sticky sicky sweet. Her room makes her feel like a baby child. She keeps the door closed.

Abby’s mom loves to watch *The Wizard of Oz* on TV when they play it on Thanksgiving. She likes *The Sound of Music* on Easter. She says, “It’ll be a nice thing we can all do together.” Abby will still watch, okay, but when Abby’s mom tries to touch her hair, Abby pulls away.
Abby:

The things that make me so sad I couldn’t tell you even though I want to.
I try to explain, but it’s like the way a picture takes the gasp out of a landscape.
Watching Maren do her fake ballet in the driveway.
When I walk down the street and hear some kid practicing French horn.
People who go out to eat together and just stare off in opposite ways.
Ellie Price’s dried paper skin, and how she keeps forgetting everything.

It’s like Mr. Walker today, out on his porch, leaning on his cane.
I said, “Nice day,” and he said, “Every day we wake up in the morning is.”
I don’t know why, but I couldn’t stop crying.

When my dad stands up and his knees are stiff and he gets embarrassed.
When I make my mom so mad she can’t think what to say next.

Then I go outside and smoke a cigarette by myself in the cold
because there’s something you can trust about the way the stars make you feel alone.

Because it’s the kind of sad that makes me feel like I was just made.
Like some skinny-limbed sapling trying to hold up the snow.

See. It sounds so stupid when I say it.
soulmate
she should have:

little freckles
short hair (dark or dyed)
thrift-store clothes, hippie punk rock fuckall
heart of gold with an attitude, can’t bother to give half a shit about anyone but me
skinny twiggy hipbones
cutoff shorts in the summer skinned-up knees
and short dresses in summer, too
gorgeous sexy cute the kind of beautiful that isn’t trying
tall and thin (in stockings)
piercings: eyebrow or nose, no lips

she should know how to talk about everything:
kerouac & marx, castro, guevara, whitman, neitzsche
knows what’s GOING ON
and not afraid to be LOUD about it
she’s read more than me (dostoyevsky, zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance, joyce)
... even philosophy

an artist—poet, or singer
she should play the bass or violin
maybe trumpet, or a painter

she should feel the pull of the wild hot Arizona desert want to drive through
it shirtless and unafraid but also knows the hills of Ireland (in her soul)
and would go with me to africa and japan

holds my hand at shows then drags me into the pit
will go with me to shows, even jesus lizard

my Buddha, my exhibitionist ... a spiritual striptease
not afraid to let me touch her anytime anywhere
in the bedroom car garage kitchen restaurant bathroom coffee house
on the stage at Sandburg, in the wings
in our parents’ houses everywhere
and it’s her idea more than half the time, it should be
Love Song

1. Life Story

Jim’s dad got cancer and died when Jim was only six. It was in his lips and mouth, in his throat. He was only 29.
Jim says, “He could have had surgery, but he didn’t want to screw up his perfect face.”

Jim’s eyes can sometimes flare up wild. Then Abby doesn’t know what to say.

Jim says, “Lorie was only four. He as good as threw us away.”
Abby says, “What did your mom think?
Jim says, “She thought he should go fuck himself. But she thought that even before he got cancer.”

Lorie’s mom has always made Abby nervous, and it’s even worse now. Her every word sounds like it’s angry and winged, perched waiting just above you. Ready. She has blue eyes like Jim’s, but they flash flatter, like a mean blade catching the sun. So far, she doesn’t really like Abby.

Jim takes Abby to the cemetery where his dad is buried. It’s the same cemetery on Archer where everybody sees the ghost of Resurrection Mary. Mary was hitchhiking home from a dance at the Willowbrook way back in the 1930s, and she was killed by a hit-and-run driver. People see her ghost walking up and down the road, and some people even claim to have picked her up. It’s like some silly song from the ’50s. Adults make her into some stupid lesson to girls to never go anywhere alone, and high school kids use her as an excuse to drive someplace with their dates.

At the cemetery gate, Jim hugs Abby so hard she can’t breathe. He kneels in front of the grave and asks Abby to kneel beside him. He holds her hand and bows his head.

Jim says, “Dad? This is Abby. I wanted you to meet her because I’m in love with her.”
Jim’s eyes are too wide. He says, “I’m sorry. I guess I haven’t been here in a while.”
Abby doesn’t know what to say, so she kisses Jim hard. He sits back on his heels and hides his face in his hands, still holding onto Abby’s. His shoulders start to shake.
2. Just Like a Dream

Jim takes off all of Abby’s clothes and stands her up beside the bed where he sits. His eyes are like hands. Her skin explodes in goose bumps. Abby laughs. She tries to sit back down beside him, but Jim, still in his jeans, says, “No.” Jim says, “Look at you.” His hands cup her waist and slide down to palm her hips. Abby laughs and crosses her arms across her chest. She turns to the side. Jim takes both of her arms and turns her to face him. His eyes are like hands on her face. Jim says, “Abby. Look at you.” She laughs and looks at the floor. Jim lifts her head by the chin and says, “Look at me. I know this feels weird. It shouldn’t. I want you to see what I see when I look at you. To feel what I see.” Abby leans down to kiss Jim but he stops her with his hands on her shoulders. Jim says, “Look at me. Keep looking.” Abby holds still. She starts to feel cold. She starts to cry. Jim says, “Your body is on fire. Listen to me.” He stands up and when she looks into his face she sees he’s crying too. He kisses her eyes, then closes them with his palm. Jim says, “Feel what I see.” Then she feels his lips on her collarbone.
3. Mill Creek

Jim’s family’s house has the same layout as the one in the same spot on the next block over. Probably the same as the block after that. Jim’s is on Mill Road, its twin on Surrey, and another and another, Courts and Lanes and Cul de Sacs. You find the kitchen down a small hallway off the foyer, and up a mini-set of three stairs. Off the back of the kitchen is a sliding glass door and a two-level deck and a fenced back yard, though nobody around here has a dog. Then there’s the room with the TV and the wraparound couch, and the dining room, which nobody uses, and upstairs are the four bedrooms. Except for Jim’s, who took the basement to live in.

One of the upstairs rooms is Lorie’s. Abby used to sleep over in it. Now they barely say hey. Even when sometimes Abby comes over for dinner, which isn’t very often.

Jim has a separate notebook he takes to his Psych class. In it, he records Abby’s symptoms. Jim showed the notebook to his mom.

Whenever Abby goes over to Jim’s, she’s careful about what she says, which usually means she doesn’t say anything. Dinner always ends with everyone getting into a screaming match.

Like:
Jim says, “You guys are full of shit. Curfews are fascistic.”
And Jim keeps saying that kind of stuff until Jim’s step-dad halfway stands up and halfway squats over his chair. He holds up the back of his hand in a way that looks like he’s never once used it like that. His face purples.
And Jim’s mom shrieks and squeals and says, “Terrence, no!”
And Jim laughs his maniac laugh.
And Lorie gets up and says, “You guys are a fucking shit show.” Then she stomps up the stairs.

Only Jim’s little sister is still. She chews her food and holds it in her cheeks like a squirrel. No matter what kind of dance you do, she won’t swallow it.

In Abby’s family nobody ever shouts. They just slam doors and hide in their rooms.
Abby:

Do you know how it gets when you open your mouth but everything you had to say gets jammed? That happens to me a lot.

That’s part of why I write things down. Even though everyone hates it. The minute I get a pen in my hand everyone’s got questions. “What are you putting in your book there, little miss?”

I don’t know why. Maybe they’re worried I’m taking down the stupid shit they say. Like they’ll end up on Oprah or something.

Some things I don’t want to write down but I have to. Like, if I write them down then I’ll have to remember them but if I don’t, I’ll never forget.

Like tonight at home, around the dinner table, when I screwed up the stupid shrimp cocktail. It’s the way they stare at me. Like I’m not really there. It just makes me want to leave. Or like I’ve got some secret plot to hurt everybody just by being. Jesus.

So I left the room. And later I overheard mom: “I’m sure nothing I ever said ended up in that book of hers.” And dad said: “Maybe you’re her hero, Gail.” And she laughed through her nose. And she said: “I sincerely doubt that.”
Love Song

1. June, 1995: Today when the sun broke the rain

sun sun sun here it comes

(But yesterday when Abby had to stay in
Jim climbed the tree outside her window
to leave his red hat where she could see it)

Jim came over and her dad said ok
so they went where they went the first time
to those woods

there was sun and rain both
Jim said it’s a special occasion

Jim sang, “Why don’t we do it in the road?”
the smiles returning to their faces
It’s a song she doesn’t know

Jim said, “Let’s take off our clothes.”
and she did

but she didn’t know
because you could hear the cars on the highway close by

Jim said, “Spontaneous.”
it’s alright
She ran in the grass in bare feet
little darlin
it felt like the sixties or something
here comes the sun

But then she felt so dumb

Jim said, “Go down on me”
And she’s so stupid she didn’t know what that meant
He said, “Let me show you.”

and then he did his hand
his hand tight on the back of her neck
little darlin
until she kept gagging
she didn’t know she was crying

(neither did Jim she thought)

She feels so dumb (she wouldn’t tell this to anyone)
but she was glad
it’s alright
when the cop came

She ran to the picnic shelter and hid
She got on most of her clothes

Jim started into the woods but the cop yelled, “Come back!”

The cop gave her a funny look
He said, “How old are you?”
She didn’t say anything
He said, “My daughter’s probably your age”
She started crying
She always does

He said, “Do I need to escort you home?”
She said, “No,”
He told Jim to go start the car

The cop touched Abby’s shoulder once then stopped
kept looking at her
said, “Did he make you do anything?”

She said, “No.”

He put her in Jim’s car and said through the window,
“I’m gonna follow you so I know she got home

and if I see you kids again
you better be sure
I’ll take you in.”
2. Haircut

Jim’s cousins watch from opposite corners of the room. They have huge eyes and stuck-out stomachs and their hands clasped behind their backs. Jim stands in the middle, his legs spread like king of the mountain, as his aunt lays a sheet of plastic underneath her red barbershop chair. She has a special sink, too, but no mirror on the wall, only the kind you hold in your hand.

Jim’s aunt is named Sue.
She opened the door this afternoon, and Jim said, “This is my girlfriend, Abby. She wants you to cut her hair.”
It was the first time Abby had met her. Sue didn’t say anything, just gave Jim the same look Jim’s mom sometimes gives. It’s either they’re mad and trying to laugh, or laughing and trying to be mad. Abby can’t tell which.
Sue said, “Come on in.”
Abby tried to say something like I’m sorry when she walked past, but no words came.

Sue pulls Abby’s hair out from under the cape and says, “What is it you’re wanting? A trim?”
Jim holds out a picture. He says, “She wants it to look like this.”
Jim’s picture is of Mia Farrow in Rosemary’s Baby.
Sue looks at Jim. “You’re an idiot. You don’t even know who this is.”
Sue kneels down and puts her hands on Abby’s knees. She says, “That’s an awful big change. Are you sure?”
Abby says, “Yes. I’ve never tried short hair before.”

Sue stands up and wipes her hands on her jeans.
She pulls all of Abby’s hair into a ponytail and says, “Okay.”
When she makes the first cut, the girls gasp from their corners.
Sue points Abby’s head to look at the floor. She and Jim start talking about Richard Butler, but Abby doesn’t know who that is so she stops listening.
Instead, she watches the pieces fall around her.
3. Thrift

He kneels in front of her with the scissors. She holds up the jeans to keep them from falling.
He puts his face under her T-shirt, bites the skin above her hip, sticks his hands in the back of these new pants, that used to be someone else’s. She thinks of someone’s mom tucking in their shirt, but he doesn’t mean it like that. She pushes his head away, but he pushes back.
The pants are new and old. He found them at the Salvation Army, he had said, thought they’d be perfect, he had said. So he brought them over. They smell like those places. He pulls on her, his face against her, his nose poking into her belly button.
“They’re supposed to be,” he says. He pulls off his own belt and slips it through the loops. “See?”
He sits back on his feet and looks up. “Meu querido little hippie.”
She lifts each foot, lets the pant legs hang.
He comes back onto his knees with the scissors, pinches the denim at the tops of her thighs, and snips quick on each side. She breathes in.
“Encontrado o lugar,” ele diz. “Isso não foi doente.”
He sticks the scissors through the holes and cuts circles around her thighs, slow. The metal is cold. She watches the ceiling fan and thinks, what if my dad comes home? They are in the kitchen.
“They’ll look better after you wash them,” he says.
The bottoms of the pockets peek out a little.
“Now you can take them off,” he says, putting down the scissors.
Abby:

I always had this fantasy about a sideways kiss

or about a kind of kissing where in the middle of it
if I remembered something I wanted to tell you
I could make it all stop by saying,
“Wait! Listen to this!”

or anyway a kind of kissing
that would make me forget to notice
the airplane overhead or the sound of the rain

but jesus. it isn’t, like you say, that I don’t like it.
I like it too much.
there are days when I am nothing but this mouthless hunger

it just makes me angry
your hands are all fists and thumbs
it makes me scared
your face completely gone
it makes me small and stupid and wild and careless and
all the fuck alone
Friends

1. Bitch

“So you’re not one of these Catholic school kids,” Lynn had asked Abby the first night when they all met.

Jim had wanted Abby to know his friends, who thought it would be funny to meet at White Castle. It was Maya, and Maya’s girlfriend Lynn, and Karma, who is Maya’s sister, and Laura, who was almost Jim’s girlfriend once. And Milo and Liam, who are gay, but they don’t like each other.

Milo is like a statue of some old chiseled Roman, and he doesn’t say much, just watches everyone through a half-squint. Liam is loud and round-faced with a shaved head and a mesh shirt. He’s too funny for Abby to keep up with, but she can tell he likes it that she laughs at everything. Karma has big lips and big eyelashes and a low cut shirt and her arm slung around Milo’s neck. Seems like all she does is play dumb.

But Maya. Abby can’t stop watching her. Has her hair cut to her chin and it’s China red, like her licked lips and her ripped-up fishnets. She sits on Jim’s lap and says, “Hey, baby.” She gets up and swipes a fistful of drinking straws, rips off the wrappers and starts building a statue. She shouts out how much she loves this Prince song and starts dancing on her chair.

Lynn tries to pull her down. She whispers to Abby, “She’s not usually like this.” Maya straddles Lynn and bites her neck. She takes Lynn’s hand and pulls her toward the bathroom, keeping her eyes on Abby.

A while later, the girl who’s working comes over. She looks like someone’s making her. She says, “If you guys aren’t going to buy something, you’re going to have to go.” Maya walks up to her slow and says, “You’re. An. Ugly. Bitch.” Lynn grabs her arm and steers her outside. Everyone follows before anyone can see what happens to the girl’s face.

In the parking lot, Lynn says, “So you’re not one of these Catholic school kids, huh?” Lynn nods in Jim’s and Maya’s direction. “Me neither.” Maya won’t stop screaming. Lynn steers her toward the car.

Maya shouts out the car window to Abby, “Stay away from my girlfriend, you little slut.”

As they leave, Jim laughs and says, “Isn’t she wild?”
2. Craig

Jim plays trumpet in the marching band, so Abby goes to a football game at his school. She picks a spot in the stands and opens her book. She jumps when this guy plunks up. “I like your hat,” he says.

Abby says, “Okay. Thanks.”

He holds out his hand. “Jim told me to come sit by you. I know him from school. I’m Craig.” Craig has short curly hair and thick black-framed glasses and a lopsided smile. Craig and Abby hang out together and watch the band.

After awhile Craig says, “Want to ditch this popsicle stand?”

They walk through an empty lot on the other side of the fence behind the stands until they get to a willow tree. Craig walks between the hanging branches and says, “Come on in. This is the best spot.” The ground under the canopy is littered with lunch debris: soda cans and plastic wrap and Doritos bags.

Abby sits against the tree trunk, shoulder to shoulder with Craig.

He says, “Tell me three things about you.”

Abby thinks about this. Then she says, “I like to write. And I like people.”

He says, “Which people?”

Abby says, “All of them.”

Craig laughs and says, “Even assholes, I guess, if you like Jim.”

Abby laughs too. Then she says, “Sometimes I feel like he doesn’t think I’m good enough for him.” She doesn’t know why she says it.

Craig says, “Well, so far I think you’re pretty cool.”

Abby and Craig exchange peanut jokes. “Two peanuts were walking down a dark, dark alley, and one was assaulted.” “Two peanuts walk into a bar and ask the bartender for two round-trip tickets to Paris. The bartender says, ‘What, are you guys nuts?’” “Did you hear the joke about the peanut butter? I can’t tell you. You might spread it!”

They are laughing so hard they don’t notice Jim calling them. He pokes his head in. He’s still wearing his marching band hat.

“What the fuck are you guys doing?” Jim says. Then he turns around and starts walking. Abby follows, but he won’t slow down. He turns around once and then takes off running. She keeps calling to him, but he gets in his car and drives. Abby stands at the edge of the parking lot and watches his car as the other kids stream past her.

After what feels like a long time, Craig comes up. He’s holding Jim’s trumpet. He stands next to her and kicks his foot up sideways to kick her butt.

“He forgot this,” Craig says. “But I don’t think he’s coming back.”

Abby says, “No.”

Craig says, “Do you want a ride, or something?”
3. Myself Away From Me

They’re three hobos out walking the tracks. Over there’s the river, then the highway past that. The water’s so high, you can’t see the road, and from here it makes the cars look like miracles, each with a spray of wet kicking up behind it. Abby says so and Lynn laughs. “Girl,” she says. She draws out the word. “You’re a piece of work.”
That’s what she always says.

Lynn hates Jjm.

Lynn looks good in blue. Whatever she does, she’s as soft as how hard she tries to act like a tough guy. But Lynn has a look that acts like it’s shy while it yanks you in. Whenever Abby and Lynn get together, they keep it a secret.

Tony’s Lynn’s best friend. His thumbs poke through his sleeves. He says, “You guys. I’m cold. Let’s go.”
Tony’s pretty. He is. People always think he’s a girl, which he sort of hates, though he won’t say so. Abby did too the first time she met him. His hair comes down to his chin, and it always covers his face. It’s perfect and black and bone straight, and so much softer than Abby’s. He has big lips that he pouts with. Lynn always says to Tony, “Aren’t you and me a pair?”

“Tony, you’re almost pretty enough to be my girlfriend,” Lynn says. “Fuck off,” Tony says, then he chews his thumbnail.
“Too bad,” Lynn says. She hooks her arm around Abby’s neck. “My heart’s already taken.”
**Abby:**

I have this dream where the four of us are crossing the street and my mother gets hit by a car. Even in the dream I think right away it should have been me. In this dream, I can’t seem to decide if I’m five or fifteen. My mother has a look that pushes so close to me sometimes it feels like actually being touched. I have to yell. In the dream she wouldn’t open her eyes. I said, *Wake up.* I said, *Say something.* All the usual stuff. I shook her hard and said, *Listen to me.* She wouldn’t wake up. I keep thinking about how whenever someone’s upset, we pat their back and say, *It’s ok. I’m here. I’m here.* As if our absence was always the threat. As if our presence could somehow erase it. Sometimes I wish my mother would climb into me, and I wish for her voice to come out of my mouth and say things for me. Say, “No.” Would she? She says, “You have this way of looking just above my head when I’m talking to you that makes me want to scream.” She’s so afraid to get angry. And I am nothing but mean. In the dream. She makes it so hard to decide if I’m five or fifteen. But sometimes it is her absence like we’ll never talk again just slamming the doors of this little house until neither of us is here.
School

1. Oklahoma!

Abby tried to try out for *The Crucible* but it didn’t work. So instead she signed up for Tech, which so far means she helps build sets.

Whenever it isn’t for that she’s staying after school, she stops by Doc’s room to see if he’s still there. If he is, he looks up from his papers and says, “Hey Shakespeare! Come on in.”

Her face gets red when she talks to Doc, just like it does with everybody else, but it isn’t the same. With him, she knows what she wants to say, and she doesn’t feel dumb if she has to talk slow.

On the Tuesdayest Tuesday, the worst of the worst, she hangs in the doorway. Doc gives her a long look and says, “Come sit. I’ll read your I Ching.” She says, “My what?” He says, “I Ching. Chinese fortune telling. The world in miniature. It’ll help you figure out,” he makes a gesture that sweeps over her, “whatever it is.” She doesn’t know how he knows.

Doc hands Abby three coins and says, “The idea is you’re always someplace between stability and chaos, and sometimes you’re looking to move in one or the other direction. I’ll tell you what the coins tell me, but it’s up to you to decide what they mean. Ok?” She says, “Yes.”

He draws the symbols that look like hash marks on the page. He says, “Like I said. I can’t tell you anything. You’re the only one who knows.” He says, “Take a minute. Just sit. Let it sink in.”
2. Darrell

Someone is always promising to beat Darrell up.
Often when you say his name, whoever you say it to says, “I can’t stand that asshole.”

Maybe it’s because he’s always saying, “It’s because I’m a Jew, isn’t it?” But he means it as a joke. Maybe it’s because he’s loud and sings Andrew Lloyd Webber songs as he walks down the hallways at school and quotes Monty Python even when it doesn’t make sense to. Maybe it’s because he’s weird and doesn’t have the sense to be quiet about it.

Abby likes his floppy walk, which looks like a marching noodle. She likes the way he gets worked up about every little thing, and sometimes even for real shakes his fist in frustration. Plus Darrell’s smart and likes to talk about books and plays. Abby and Darrell work together on tech for the shows.

Abby and Darrell are sitting in the hallway, taking a break from building a surrey (with the fringe on top). They’re sitting with their backs against opposite walls, and their legs are long enough that their feet touch.
Darrell says, “So do you walk or run when you’re going up stairs?”
Abby says, “One or the other. It varies. Why?”
Darrell says, “I always run. I have to. Also I always have to run my fingers over anything metal. Like, you know, the railing? It’s a compulsion.”
Abby says, “Well, right. But it’s what they’re for, isn’t it? I mean, railings?”
Darrell says, “You’d think, wouldn’t you? That they’d be safe, at least?”
Abby says, “I would.”
Darrell says, “But no. The other day, my fingers ran into someone’s filthy spit. Can you believe these people?”
Abby says, “I guess that’s just what you get.”
Darrell is astounded. His eyebrows spike. He says, “But you just said that’s what they’re for!”
Abby can’t stop laughing.
Darrell says, “No, really? Is this some kind of lesson you’re teaching me? Am I supposed to be learning something here?”
3. Starving, Hysterical, Naked

Doc talks about the “richness” of the lived life. The honey that runs thick in the poets’ throats. He talks about Wordsworth and the way that “experience triggers the transcendent moment” and how poets have to be willing to open themselves up to everything. He talks about Jack Kerouac and *On the Road*.

Abby doesn’t know about this. She thinks it might be bullshit. She’s watching Rachel, two seats over in the back row. Abby hasn’t ever spoken to her, because every time she tries, awkwardness frogs her throat. Some people’s jeans are torn at the knees because they meant them to be; Rachel is embarrassed at hers, dirty and patched. “Fuck off,” she’d probably say, if she ever said anything.

Rachel keeps her feet up on the desk, and teachers learn not to call on her, because she never answers. Sometimes she has black eyes. Sometimes she doesn’t show up for a week.

“Fuck off,” she’d probably say, if she ever said anything. “Get obsessed with somebody else’s life story.”

There are a whole bunch of kids like that, who don’t want to be seen, but they’re everywhere, once you start looking.

Anyway, Abby wants to know, is what we’re doing called “living rich?” Cause I’m cool, Abby thinks, to skip whatever “transcendent moment.”
Sometimes I don’t even care, whatever I do can be as loud as I want it to. Today I wait for the hallway to empty, just so I can touch each locker with my boot. I say to the classrooms as I pass, *Hey, I’ll see you when I see you.*

Today I’m as out loud and ugly as this yellow sweater. I’m like biting into an apple in a full and silent room. It’s never quiet. In the lunchroom, Jeff Matula stopped me and said, “I heard you like to fuck girls.” He had his pack of dicks behind him, but something in his face was really asking. So I said, “Sometimes I do.”

Everyone wants to make making sense of you an easy thing to do. Sometimes they let just looking at you be their best answer. So much we think we know without even asking. So I guess it’s good somebody finally did.

But sometimes it’s too much. It works to pull my hat down low. Then nobody asks, because I am dangerous and angry. *Her mouth is full of bees,* they think. They could be right. This same face I’m making whether I’m mad or breaking.


Because the bite of the apple is louder with your hat down low. It’s only in your head.)
Home

1. Commonwealth Edison

It takes awhile, but Abby finds her little sister sitting on the floor in her bedroom closet crying. Her nose tucked between her knees.
Abby says, “What is it?”
But Maren won’t say. Abby pushes aside the skirts on hangers and sits down across the way.
Maren says, “You don’t fit. Go away.”
Abby says, “Okay.”
But she doesn’t move. Instead she starts to dig her toes under Maren’s feet.
“What are you doing?” Maren asks.
Abby stops digging but she keeps her feet there. She says, “I don’t know.”

After a minute Maren lifts her head. She says, “They cut the heads off my trees.”
Abby says, “Which ones?”
Maren gets up and they kneel together on her bed to look out the window at the pine trees that edge the backyard. What Maren said is true.
Abby says, “They had to make room for the power lines.”
Maren sucks up a sniffle. She says, “I hate power lines.”
Abby says, “Me too.”
2. 50 Free

Maren’s on the swim team. Not only that, but butterfly’s her stroke. That’s because Maren is tough. She’s only nine, but she could kill even most of the ten year olds.

On the weekends, mom and dad take Maren to meets all over the place in Illinois. Even Indiana and Iowa. Sometimes Abby goes.

Abby feels strange with her sleeves over her hands and her too-long pants and her too-short hair, but she likes the hard bleachers and the echo. Likes the wet, thick air and the way the parents talk so serious. She likes when her dad puts his arm around her.

And she likes to watch Maren down the pool talking with the other girls before the next heat. Their ears are tucked under their caps and they chew on their fingers, which are always up around their mouths. Abby wonders what they say, wonders if it’s nice or mean. Wonders if they’re cold or nervous or both.

Maren comes up to the stands with her best friend Beth. Beth’s lip is between her teeth and she won’t look up. She didn’t make the time she needed. Beth came with Maren; her parents are at home.

“Honey, don’t worry. You’ll make it next time,” mom says.

Beth drops her head and starts to sob. Her nose is wet and her shoulders heave up and down. She still has little droplets of water on her shoulders. Maren puts both arms around Beth and doesn’t stop hugging until the crying is done.
3. Dad

When Abby’s dad was young, his days snapped open like cans of Coors. In cut-off jean shorts and a helmet of 1970s hair, driving around the south side of Chicago with Dave Coutts and “Roadhouse Blues” playing on the radio. Dave’s draft number was 6 and Abby’s dad’s was 361.

There are the stories everyone always tells: when he was nine, he played all the positions in the baseball game he created using the stats from his baseball cards, just running back and forth between the back yard and the kitchen. He drove around with Abby on his lap when she was just two. He quit smoking for Abby’s mom, in exchange for never having to buy flowers again. He buys flowers all the time.

Abby’s dad got a master’s in psychology, but then he became the world’s greatest salesman. He’s really good at listening, which sometimes means his customers tell him all about their problems, but he doesn’t mind. He always worries about whether or not people like him, but he shouldn’t, because everyone always does.

Sometimes he’ll make jokes about “all this estrogen around the house,” but he’s actually the most sensitive one of the bunch except, maybe, for Abby.

When Abby was just a kid, he made her special mix tapes full of “Superman Cuts” and “Annie Cuts” and also Fleetwood Mac and Pet Shop Boys and Culture Club. She hasn’t listened to them in years, but she keeps them in a box next to her bed.
Abby:

“I like you in skirts,” he said.

For me it’s always been T-shirts. But it’s July, and I was flattered, so I thought I’d try.

His hand (careless) unsticking from the leather of the steering wheel to find my thigh (a little too high and inside)

And at the stoplight the driver in the pickup glances over and shoots him a smile.

So what’s wrong with me that the whole thing makes me feel like a liar?
Love Song

1. The Talking Cure

Jim says, “Come on. It’ll be easy. I’ll help you.”
Abby sits on the floor. She wraps the phone cord around her ankle.
The dinner dishes are being washed. They sound far off.
Jim says, “Make me cum with your voice.”
That word. Abby tried to put it in a letter to him once, but she didn’t know how to spell it.
She didn’t think it was like, Come over. But she didn’t know who to ask.
Abby says, “I can’t.”
Jim says, “Please.”
He says, “I need you to. Abby, tell me what you want me to do.”
Abby brushes patterns into the carpet with her fingers. She says, “Please. No.”
Jim says, “It’ll be the last thing before we sleep. A nice thing.”
Abby says, “I can’t sleep.”
Jim sighs. The air of his breath makes the phone crackle, a windy static.

Jim says, “I’ll start. You just have to finish.”
And he does. Abby grits her teeth. She bites the tip of her tongue. Nothing helps.
Abby pinches the skin inside her elbow. She pinches it hard.
Jim pauses. He waits.
Abby pinches until her eyes tear up. She breathes in through her nose. She opens her mouth and hopes for the words. She watches as they come.
2. Homecoming

up there’s the flight of stairs and the light past the glass doors closed up there’s the lit kitchen no one’s home We aren’t supposed to be either she had asked please let’s go with Katie and Craig to the city let’s get something to eat please let’s he parked the car shut the engine she said, please take me home he said, no Abby, I’m too tired to drive let’s go inside let’s sleep a while

what she can’t see but she knows the ceiling the floor the mattress surrounded underwear&jeans spread out like dead things over there’s the stereo a black&white picture of her with no shirt stuck in with the liner notes

he had said, let’s just take a nap together. No he had said, you’re being ridiculous. No he had said, walk home then. No he had said, I promise

over there gooseflesh from the cold the ceiling he’s knocking her into he’s ramming her into the floor she can’t see but she knows a picture he took no gooseflesh and cold rocking her into the ceiling the floor knocking her please take me home oh.

he falls asleep with his head on her stomach and his arms around her hips she knows he’ll say, I didn’t know she figures, ok, she wasn’t sobbing the air conditioner hums

she thinks, this dress was special
3. Parking Lot

They were supposed to go shopping for music. A Saturday afternoon thing to do. But Jim changes his mind once they get there. Jim says, “I’m going home.”

Abby tries to open the car door but Jim hits the power locks. She tries again and he squeezes her elbow. He looks her stern in the face and says, “No.” Abby says, “Let me go. I’m going.” Jim holds her arm and tries to grab for the other. Abby pulls her own keys out of her pocket and throws them Jim’s way. They hit the windshield and settle on the dash.

Jim turns to Abby. It seems so slow. He folds his fingers into a fist and hits Abby three times square in the jaw. Jim and Abby stare at each other without saying anything. It seems so slow. After a time, Jim puts the car in drive and, with his hands at ten and two, they begin to roll away.
Abby:

It’s like there’s a whole unseen world of feeling behind everything everyone does. I’ll never have time for it all, even though I want to.

Like, I know Tony’s trying so hard to learn the guitar, but his mom yells at him to “shut the Sam Hell up” every time he practices so I forget to remember not to ask how it’s going. Or like mom the other day. She told me the story of how she wrote my grandpa a letter to tell him I was born, even though he and my dad hadn’t spoken for almost a decade. She’d never met him. And dad was mad, but he invited grandpa to see us, and they talked things over. Grandpa died just two months later, she said, and ever since she told me I can’t stop thinking.

How does someone get so brave? How can you tell with people which things are ok, and which will ruin everything? There’s so much I don’t know it’s overwhelming.

My dad knows the names of even the kids of the grocery store cashiers. He stops to ask the toll booth people if they’re having a good day. But for some reason he can’t see how much I feel like I’m this close to falling apart. Neither of them can. I hate Jim’s greedy hands and my stupid body and almost everything we do. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. Ugly girl who doesn’t ever know what to do with her mouth.
Work

1. Tiny Dancer

There are three men at the table. They have grease around the edges of their fingernails. The one tries to order a Budweiser, but his friend tells him, “Asshole, they don’t have beer here,” before Abby has to.

When Abby brings their patty melts, the quiet one puts a hand on her arm and says, “Sweetheart. That apron would look much better if you weren’t wearing any pants.”

The other guys laugh with fries in their mouths. They look at Abby to see what she’ll say. Nothing is what she says. What else? Which makes them think she likes it, even though she tries not to smile.

Abby thinks, *If they have to say it, why can’t they have shame enough to wait until they’re leaving.*
2. River

Christmas Eve at the restaurant where Abby got a job, they’re overnight boxing pies for the morning orders. There are so many. Bob’s blue handwriting on the Official Order Slips he had printed up special. There’s a spot for people’s addresses. Who needs that? They don’t deliver.

Jerome says, “That man has such a stick up his ass.”
Erin says, “Think about it. So would you.”

While they label the boxes, they keep saying, “Come on, Ricky, let’s race!”
Until Ricky gets mad and raises his voice, says, “You can’t fucking race, it’s baking.”

So they go outside with serving trays under their arms to mess around on the ice. Heather and Abby link elbows and Jerome gives them a push, one big hand on each of their backs. Jerome has the biggest arms Abby’s ever seen. Sometimes in the kitchen he’ll pull one or another of the girls onto his lap and whisper in her ear. But never Abby. She doesn’t know why not. Abby falls first and hits her head. Heather comes over and puts her face where the moon was. “Abby, are you okay?” Abby sticks out her tongue, and Heather laughs. When they’re cold enough they go back in.

“This is bitch work,” Heather says. “Abby will you do the cooler?”
Heather’s been piling the pumpkins for an hour, matching them to their slips.
“No, honey, this is holiday pay,” Erin says. And then there she goes with her Big Grin. Everyone looks over, waiting. “Let’s take a break,” Erin says.

Erin takes a French apple, five forks, and a tub of vanilla to table B7, and calls Ricky and Jerome from the back. They microwave packs of caramel sauce, they pour too much on top. There’s a sticky littler of plastic corners they tore off with their teeth.
“This shit’s a bitch to clean,” Abby says.
“Just shut it and eat,” Heather says. “Then she dips her finger right in the middle and holds it up to Abby. “Here, you take the first bite,” Heather says, and she smiles fake sweet. Her knee touches Abby’s under the table.

Jerome and Ricky give each other a look. “Nice,” Ricky says.
“Hey,” Jerome says, fixing his eyes on Heather, “twenty bucks says you and Abby should kiss.”
Erin says, “You guys are dicks.” Heather’s finger drips.
Abby’s face prickles, but she can’t look up. She wants to smear that caramel around on the table with her thumb, but she doesn’t.
Erin hooks Heather’s neck in her elbow and says, “Come on, hot lips, pucker up.”

*I wish I had a river*, sings Joni on the Satellite Radio.
Abby doesn’t know why, it’s just some stupid song from the sixties, but it always takes her someplace kind of lost and far-off.
Everybody hangs out at this coffee shop in Beverly, closer to the city. They have open mic on Wednesday nights, which is mostly really bad: like, this one headbanger girl and her beardy boyfriend sing “Hotel California” every single week. Or there’s this kid who always plays Pearl Jam songs on the ukulele, which it turns out is even worse than it sounds. Or always some jerk screwing up the words to that one Dave Matthews song, and you’re pissed off that you knew it to begin with, and now he’s making you correct his mess-ups in your head. Or, you know, “Wonderwall.”

But every once in a while something good happens. Like when Chris finally got the guts to go up on stage and then he sang Hank Williams and even the people in the very back stopped talking. Or when Jill did a girl version of “Don’t Think Twice, It’s Alright.” Or the guy nobody ever saw before or ever saw again who actually made “All I Want Is You” sound like a decent song.

When Abby’s had enough, she goes outside for a smoke, and finds Lynn sitting in the grass across the parking lot alone, watching Maya through the window. Abby goes over to sit down beside her.
“It’s a full time job, keeping up with that girl,” Lynn says.
“I don’t think you should have to,” Abby says.
Lynn takes Abby’s hand and squeezes. “You’re always looking out for me.”

Abby shivers visibly, and Lynn wraps her in her blue cardigan. Abby doesn’t expect it to smell like baby powder. For months Abby keeps forgetting to give it back, and Lynn keeps forgetting to ask, and Abby wears it everywhere.
Squids

I have to believe nobody in the room meant it
singing the dumb ass fight song on the first day of school
(We’re the Chargers! Team of Shame!)
not the tight jeans not the NIN hats not the big boobs not the flannels
not the metal guys with the big hair or the girls that go with them
not the Rah Rahs or the jocks or the stoner kids or the punks or the skaters
not the NHS kids or the theater kids or the band kids

Well. Maybe the band kids did.

I don’t know what I am
which means I’m maybe a squid.
Squids are the ones who you can’t explain
who sometimes wear all black but sometimes don’t
sometimes ragtag thrift store mess of clothes
Squids like John Cage Allen Ginsberg Gandhi Kurt Cobain
Hal Hartley Mudhoney Husker Du

Here’s me: I look like a little boy
In math class, I put my feet up on the desk and read
Nobody knows what to do with me
Love Song

Em’s kitchen is warm and yellow, and Abby feels both light and heavy. She leans back into the wall. The refrigerator is covered with pictures that Abby wants to look at, but she’s not sure if she’ll be steady. Paul and Mrs. G go away for the weekend and everyone comes over. Paul thinks it’s hilarious when he calls it their “holiday,” Em says.

When Jim comes in, Abby’s got her head tossed back laughing at Randy telling about the time the Spanish teacher, Mr. Greg, lost his pants. Abby says, “Don’t forget to say about his face.”

Jim walks over and says, “Let’s go.”
Abby looks up at him and opens the beer she’s been holding. She should know better than when his mouth makes a line like that, but she says it anyway: “I don’t want to.”
Jim gets red in the cheeks. He says, “I hope you don’t think that’s cute. It’s not.”
Abby pushes her way up the wall to stand. She holds out her dukes and says, “Let’s see who wins.”
Jim looks around the room with his hands on his hips.
He says, “I’ll leave you here if you don’t come.”
Abby says, “You just don’t have the balls to fight me.”

And before she takes the smile off her face, Jim pinches Abby’s windpipe between his thumb and finger and pushes her head back against the wall. It’s a long minute and in it Abby thinks she hears Randy say, “Cut it out,” but she’s not sure. It doesn’t seem like anybody moves. And Abby doesn’t move, either, blurry inside her calm. She has time to remember how once Jim told her he hates seeing people’s throats when they tilt their heads back to chug the last of a soda. Something about it makes them into animals.

When Jim lets go he’s got sweat on his lip. He grabs Abby’s hand. It couldn’t have been more than ten seconds. He leads her out of the room. Nobody in the kitchen says not to.

Abby’s feet are drunk as they walk toward the door. She trips on the edge of the couch and Emily stops dancing to grab her arm.
Abby looks at Em and says, “I wonder which animal I am.”
Em pats her shoulder and laughs. She checks to see Jim’s okay to drive and says, “Goodnight you guys.”
All of this will make me hate chess boards and the Psychedelic Furs and the inside crease at the tops of my thighs—where he once thought to pinch the skin between his fingers and say, *Feel that? Fat cells*—and sucking dick and black Chevy Cavaliers and men with squat stubby fingers and William Zinsser and the bass guitar and the sight of an Adam’s apple gulping milk and Will Oldham and Budweiser and the thought of someone mispronouncing akin like *achin’* and a particular type of giddy male snicker and “Just Like Heaven” and “With or Without You” and White Castle and being fucked from behind and falling asleep beside a man and people who honk their horns as a method of defensive driving and *The Magic Flute* and Wittgenstein and the word *irrational* and Myrtle Beach and being quizzed about the names of streets in Chicago—*what’s so hard? It’s a fucking grid!*—and fingertips calloused by guitar strings raking across my skin and the chalk taste of antacids and my stomach’s any suggestion of roundness and what was once my favorite oak tree in the front yard where I grew up (but that tree was pulled up when a new house was built) and the fetish for women to shave their pubic hair to bare and Mill Road and Café Florian and the skin on my chin reddened by new stubble and Gallery 211 at the Art Institute of Chicago in particular El Greco’s *The Assumption of the Virgin* and for a while Sylvia Plath but that was a mistake and the memory of the sound of the crow hitting the windshield and the smell of thrift store clothes and the edge sex rides alongside physical pain and how many men I’ve met who like that and the sight of my handwriting, age 15, bubbled and soft and wild with need, and anti-depressants and the word *hysterical* and the kind of swagger that leads with the chest and the human
animal’s horrible capacity for self-pity and the play between fury and fear that makes a
fist reach out to hit and the stupid look on your face after
and out of this I will come to love. We will make it into a book, she and I, an endless list
of whatever we could think of that was good—Boston accents and Superman ice cream
and paddle boats at the Lincoln Park Zoo and the smell of Xerox machines and rose tea
and pink Reebok high tops and vinyl raincoats and the Indiana Dunes (where we first
snuck away from Jim and waded the silt-dirty creek) and eating hash browns late at night
and “Bright as Yellow” and the little blue weeds that grow by the highway and sweater
weather and cheddar potato soup and Gertrude Stein and the smell of clean laundry and
the reflection of stoplights on the pavement in the rain and the hum of life inside the body
if you listen—and we don’t care if you think it’s silly and naïve because we made copies
and gave them to everyone that Christmas when we thought he was gone and in mine she
made a special page that was just for me—“you’re my heart”—that was our thing.

for every violence, I think, there is maybe a peace inside it

for me it was Sara Jane
Prologue: The Talking Cure 2

Jim says, “You said it yourself in the beginning, you’re tough.”
Jim says, “I’m the only other person in the world as selfish as you, which makes us lucky. No one else would ever have either of us.”
Jim says, of Abby, over and over, “Borderline Personality Disorder.”
He doesn’t even know what that means.
And when Abby won’t do it, Jim says, “Fine, I’ll talk to them myself.”

Jim asks Abby’s mom and dad to have a seat at the kitchen table and tells them about what he believes is Abby’s condition. He gives them a list of reasons. The primaries being that she doesn’t like sex and she cries quite often. Abby stares at her hands.

Abby’s mom gets red in the face, and she folds her hands between her knees. Abby’s dad’s jaw starts going. Jim doesn’t stop long enough for either of them to say anything more than, “Hm. Ok. We see.” Maren sneaks into the dining room and listens where she can’t be seen, but Abby can hear her breathing.

Abby’s dad stands up when Jim mentions Abby might need hospitalization. His chair teeters and scrapes against the linoleum.

He says, “What I’m finding a little disturbing here is, maybe we could let Abby speak for herself?” He says, “Honey?”
Abby will cry if she looks up.

Abby’s mom asks Jim to leave. She doesn’t get up, just watches him walk out the door.

It was a few hours after Jim left that Abby’s mom came into her room and for once Abby didn’t tell her to leave.
She said, “Abby, do you think maybe you should break up with Jim? I’m worried about you.”

And that was all it took. After a whole year. It was bright and hot and August out when she said it. Abby went outside and played with Maren on her little kid swings.

The next day Abby told Jim on the front porch. She told him it was over.

But who’s going to believe anything ever ended just like that?

Who has to if it’s true?
Abby:

The thing about “I love you” is that everybody acts like they just ran through the rain to say it. Like saying it’s the big thing instead of listening. Like you have to take off your clothes whenever the conversation gets interesting.

What if instead we could sit really still until we forget to think about the sound of our breathing? Until we can hear what can happen in the air that makes up the space where our bodies aren’t touching?

Because I can point to the yellow in a dandelion and everybody knows what I mean but what’s yellow inside me they see as pink. And so when I say yellow nobody sees me. I feel like a dead tree in spring.
Section 2
You are a girl full of secrets, everyone would say, but she didn’t think it was true until later. Later she thinks of herself then and feels the want to reach out her arm to protect that girl from collision. Wide open. Stupid and full of nothing. Quiet and buzzing with wanting. She thought all touching was holding. She sat on her bedroom carpet and ran her own finger down her own cheek. She didn’t kiss the back of her hand for practice, but she did have her own phone and she did sit beside it. It’s true everyone was once this way.

She’s always been a girl who wears her every last heartbeat on her face. That was her first mistake.

Later she has to stop to remind herself to breathe. Later is a list of things she has to tell herself not to think. Later she learns how to keep moving while she counts silently to herself for as long as it takes.

Later she can’t do it unless there is a secret. One under her weight and the one someplace else, waiting. For a phone call, or for her to stop by. Or waiting—watching—hidden in a car outside her place.

There are those who have their theories. It’s a liar, you know, who’s more likely to look you in the face.

Here’s the truth:
She hates the way your face looks when she’s suddenly shaking. She hates the putting back on of clothes. She hates your hand on her back and you saying, “It’s okay,” when you don’t know what is and what isn’t. She hates that you have no choice but to soon wish she were different.

This is where she goes when she goes:
The then and the later meet in a car she’s driving. She’s got the girl with her and there are no secrets, and no one else on the road.
**Love Song**

1. **Under the Pink**

Abby keeps saying to Danny, “We might see Jim here.”

Danny’s checking his backpack again for the tickets. His hands are always busy. They smell like vanilla and smoke on skin and something spicy Abby can’t name. And they have this little tremor all the time. He says it’s from coffee or cigarettes or how much he didn’t eat for lunch. With him it’s always too much or not enough. But Abby says it’s just the way he is. You know, keyed up. His laugh shakes the same as his hands.

Abby and Danny are sitting on this couch outside the venue watching everyone trying for something paler than they really are. The doors don’t open for an hour. Here I am in paisley when everyone else knows to do black, Abby thinks.

Abby says, “Public couches gross me out.” “Probably we won’t see him,” Danny says, and he turns Abby’s way. He’s good at that. “What if we do?” Abby says. “What if we do,” Danny says. He squeezes her hand but doesn’t scrunch the knuckles. “Danny, can we go back to the car for a while?”

Danny’s car is called Mac, because it’s the color of mac and cheese with ketchup. Abby and Danny named it. It’s the same age as Abby, seventeen. She puts her feet out the window and lights a cigarette.

2. Homecoming

What’s weird is Abby only really met Danny because of Jim. Danny and Jim were in a couple bands together. The first was called One Car Funeral, then Happily Unconscious Patriot (Jim’s idea. HUP for short. Abby always thought it sounded dumb). Danny wrote most of the songs and sang, and Jim played guitar, and Jason was bassist, and Alan was the drummer. The whole time Abby knew Alan, he never said a damn thing. Jim always made fun of him, which is where Abby first learned the term “coke bottle glasses.”

Once Abby went with them to the studio, which was really just this shack out in the corn fields south of the suburbs, to watch them record a demo. The whole time she was there Abby felt like a groupie. The “producer” Jim kept calling him was this guy named Matt who smoked and ate at the same time. Jim was pissed about the mixing, and he was wild and pacing and impatient and rude and too too serious about everything. Matt thought it was fun to rile Jim up. And Danny just sat in the corner and bit the skin around his thumb until it was bleeding. Abby just wrote in her notebook and chain-smoked.

Everyone was ready to take a break and go to Arby’s, but Jim was upset about the guitar levels in “Grace Note” and he wouldn’t let it go. He stormed out into the yard and left the door wide open and started shouting Abby’s name.

And Danny looked at Abby with the skin around his thumb still between his teeth. And he said, “Don’t go.” It was the first time in a while he’d said anything. And even though she went anyway, it was nice that he had said it.

A few months after Jim and Abby broke up, Danny started showing up at the restaurant. He sat in the smoking section with everyone else, but he read *Spin* while everybody talked over each other. On Abby’s smoke breaks, she sat in the booth next to him, and they’d both cup their hands around their coffee mugs and be silent in a way that made them seem like they were together.

On their first date, they went to see a movie about tornado chasers. Danny didn’t have enough money, so Abby paid.

After the movie, Abby kissed Danny in the front seat of Mac and then cried in his lap. He never once made her tell him why. Just held her head and was quiet.
3. All Apologies

But of course they see Jim.
Right there in the parking lot, before they even get the chance to go back in.
He parks his Cavalier alongside them and honks the horn, waving like a maniac through the closed windows. And there in the front seat is his new girl, with long brown hair and enormous eyes and too much black eyeliner. She’s looking down, digging through her purse.
Danny says, “Shit.” He lights another cigarette. He looks at Abby, but then he turns away, because Jim’s face shows up in the window right behind her.

Jim has grown a beard since he went to college. He’s wearing black nail polish on his thumbs, which he never would have dared at Marist. But it’s his same grubby yellow cardigan with the coffee stains on the sleeves and the same thin hair grown long to his chin, dyed black with an inch of brown showing at the roots.

Abby says to Danny, “We could just not get out.”
Jim raps on the window hard. The girl’s still in the car.
“Danny,” Abby says. “I don’t know if I can do this.”
Jim says, his voice muffled, “What the fuck, you guys? Get out of the car.”
Danny says, “I’m not going to miss this show.”
Jim walks around to Danny’s door and opens it. He says, “Danny. Abby,” making a little curtsey after each of their names. He says, “Man, I still can’t believe you guys are fucking each other. You wouldn’t even know each other if it weren’t for me.”

The girl is still in the car. Still digging for something in her purse. She has a bright blue scarf tied around her long neck. It’s something, Abby thinks, that Jim would make fun of for being too colorful.
**Abby:**

I don’t think it’s ok for someone to send you an email and tell you they had a sex dream about you, and then call up this other person who they happen to be dating and say, “I love you, I love you, I love you.” Because then I don’t think they’re telling the truth, not to anybody. Is that something wrong with me? Jim would say, “monogamy’s unnatural.” But I don’t think that’s what I mean. See, it’s not that I think having some sexy dream about somebody else makes the love fake, no. It’s the email that does. Because why else would you want to tell someone about your sexy dream except to make them feel a pull toward you? And why don’t you just call the person you’re dating who you supposedly love and say, “Weird. I had a sex dream about so and so.”

Now you’re laughing, sure, because that’s not the kind of phone call that tends to work out very well, ok, I know. But here’s the thing: I don’t like what Jim calls and says to me, even though I don’t want him and Sara to be dating. And also? Today, my mom told me her and dad’s best friends are divorcing, and when I asked why, mom said it was because Greg got tired of Gina putting on so much weight. For real? And mom got mad and told me this is Greg’s third divorce, and she’s sure he’ll probably get married again. And John once told me his mom said a marriage is made out of healthy lies. Whatever that’s supposed to mean. And this is top secret, but you know, once when I was a kid I walked in on my parents, and now when I think about it, I get sad, because I can’t imagine them doing that at all. So just how much of “I love you” is an excuse to treat someone else just plain mean?

I’m not really sure what’s bothering me. Except that if I ever love somebody, they can tell me about their sex dreams, even if it makes me sad for a minute. Because it’s better than the distance that a secret makes.

But what do I know? Maybe it’s true the world’s built out of “healthy lies” and I just need to learn to deal with it.
4. Icicle

Abby likes to go to shows. Either Danny or she will call, say, “Wanna go?” Danny always says, “I’ll pick you up ass-crack early,” which always makes Abby laugh. Then they wait in line outside Sears for the Ticketmaster to open. Rain is much worse to wait in than snow. Sometimes the sun’s bright as a headache. I hope for overcast skies with a high in the mediums.

This is why she likes to go: A singer in a red dress with curls all over the place. Her skin lit blue by the lights. A voice with a tickle of wings in her throat when she’s speaking, but when she sings the whole room opens up. She jabs at the piano. She has a story about Amsterdam. She does a little shriek that makes the whole crowd laugh. Every time she moves her hands it looks like dancing.

This is why: Something happens, watching the songs from the dark. The singer’s so pretty Abby turns into a mirror. Into it, she’s allowed to stare and stare. It makes her feel pretty. Pretty lonely, but also, you know, all alone and only. Like the singer’s looking right at Abby when she sings. Abby thinks, of all these faces, I know the one she finds is mine.

Abby doesn’t tell Danny this, though she thinks by the way he’s looking up at the stage that he’s thinking the same thing.

But when it comes time for everyone to clap the rhythm, Abby remembers where she is. She starts to look around again. She holds her elbows with her hands. When the singer holds the microphone out for the crowd to sing the back up part, Abby remembers she’s not the type.
5. Something New

Danny and Abby are always trying to guess the set list. So far, they’ve seen this singer six times.

Between songs, Danny says, “Did she play ‘Jupiter’ last time?”

Abby’s trying not to look for Jim, but she can’t help it, because she doesn’t know where he is. She thinks it would be better if she could know where not to let her eyes look. She keeps smiling at people as they push past, forgetting that everyone’s supposed to scowl or look down.

Abby knows Danny wants to, but she can’t hold his hand. She lights a cigarette and watches the singer ask for more vocals in the monitors.

It’s more than halfway through the show when Jim shows up in Abby’s ear. Danny doesn’t notice.

Jim says, “A year ago, and it would have been you and me here at this show.” There’s this way people have at concerts of closing their thumb over your ear as they talk into it. So even though they’re shouting, it gives you the feeling of whispering. “Baker, Baker” is playing.

Jim says, “Don’t you think she’s pretty?”
Abby says, “I like her scarf.”
Jim says, “I miss you.”
6. Jedi’s Garden

Everyone goes out to eat after the show. They sit in this big round booth. There are too many of them here, everybody’s knees touch. Who are these people? What are we doing here?

Jim had said Lydia. Amanda. And Joanna Abby already knew from the elementary school bus. And then there’s Sara Jane.

Danny curves around the table like a cup. He hasn’t looked up for at least ten minutes. He’s drawing the cartoon he invented, Sammy the Somnolent Fish, in blue pen on the placemat. Sammy’s narcoleptic and sad-eyed. Danny gives Sammy the thought bubbles, but Sammy’s not talking yet. Nobody’s saying much. There’s lipstick on Abby’s coffee cup.

“I always think these kinds of places look like funeral homes,” Joanna says.
“Or a flea market,” says the one probably called Lydia.
“That doesn’t make sense,” Jim says. “What do you mean, a funeral home?”
They’ve got this art on the wall: cds strung together and hung backward to make a kind of tree. The cd tree catches the light when it moves with the air conditioning.
“I want that hanging over my head when I’m dead,” Abby says.
Jim laughs his laugh that’s half-snort, half-cackle. Like a manic hamster.
Abby puts her hand on Danny’s knee and squeezes. No fair of him, disappearing.

Sara Jane’s still got her head in the giant menu when the waitress comes.
“Rice pudding and coffee,” Abby tells the waitress. Danny says he doesn’t want anything until she says she’ll get it. Then he orders onion rings. But there’s something going on between Sara Jane and Jim. He’s whispering in her ear. The waitress sticks out her hip and waits.
“Fine, but it’s disgusting,” Jim says to Sara Jane.
“What is?” Abby says. She can’t help herself.
“It’s not your business,” Jim says, but Abby says it again, “What?”
Jim’s hand goes to the back of Sara Jane’s neck. “I’m just saying you should be careful or you’ll start to gain.”
“What were you going to get?” Abby says, looking only at Sara Jane. This is the first thing they’ve said to each other.
And Abby looks Jim right in the eye and says, “Can I share your fries?”
“Sure,” Sara Jane says. And then she smiles.
Abby:

The first time I saw Sara Jane, something happened that I can’t explain.
I felt like I knew her all my life—whatever—but it was more than that.

Jim always used to say soul mates in this way that I hate. Like Heathcliff and Catherine.
Like two people whose souls are bound together in a way they can’t change.
Like their souls are one heartbeat that got split, so they have to claw and kick
at the bodies between them that block their way back together.

With Sara Jane, it was like soul mates, but different. Like Through the Looking Glass.
Standing across from her was like stepping through a time warp.
I don’t mean she’s me. I mean she gave me back to me.
It was like all of a sudden remembering your last night’s dream.
Jim’s hand on her back and the way he muzzles you
like a hand always clamped over your mouth
acting like anything you have to say is stupid.

Meeting her was like if you’d been walking around encased in plaster
and somebody cracked you free.

Seeing them I kept thinking the most beautiful thing:
What in the hell is she doing with him?
Which is beautiful because for the first time it also applies to me.

I’m getting ahead of myself. So let me just say this:
Whatever I do, from now on, I’m going to break them up.
Friends

1. One Step Beyond

Danny’s mom was named Georgia. Abby only got to meet her twice, and it didn’t seem like she could have remembered, because she was so sick. Danny swears she remembered, and Abby’s learned not to mention it. A million times before she died, Abby imagined not knowing what words to say when Danny finally called to say it. But it turned out it didn’t matter.

They park in the lot at Our Lady of the Woods and wait. Danny presses the yellow sticker into the windshield. Abby watches the trash that edges 111th. It’s always the same who-knows-where-that-came-from: a kid’s shoe, the ribbon of tape from a broken cassette, a squashed neon green Frisbee. There are train tracks across the street, and behind them is the place where Abby went to preschool. Where Jeff Lyons kissed her on the Big Hill, which doesn’t seem so big anymore.

Nobody feels like they have to make conversation. Danny puts his head down on the wheel. It feels like they’ve been waiting for an hour at least.

From the backseat, John puts his hand on Danny. “If you want me to drive,” he says. “It’s fine,” Danny says. He’s wearing a tie. Dress-up clothes make him look like a kid. Or maybe it’s the way he’s set his jaw, which Abby can’t stand to look at for too long.

When he sees the guy come out to stop the street traffic for the cars, Danny puts in the cassette he’s been holding. “One Step Beyond,” comes out of the speakers loud. It’s clear Danny has thought this over. He’s cued it up to skip the intro.

He’s looking straight ahead. Abby puts her hand on the back of his neck, and he flinches, so she leaves her big dumb hands in her lap.

Maybe it matters. What you say.
2. Perfect Day

Abby and Danny are sitting silent in Mac, staring out the windshield at the overcast sky and the parking lot of the Chicago Ridge Mall. Everyone’s got their kids on leaches. Everyone can hardly carry all their bags when they come out of J.C. Penney’s. Abby likes it when the red cars are all accidentally parked right next to each other. Abby’s trying to focus on anything other than what Danny just said.

After an hour, Danny decided he’d had enough of the funeral. So they left. Danny’s dad is going to be furious.

Danny says, “I guess it’s been going on for a while. But I feel like I can get it under control.”

What Danny said, that Abby wants not to have heard, is that he’s been taking pills. He’s been doing it the whole time his mom’s been sick. He won’t say what kind. But he thinks he might be addicted.

Danny says, “I had to stay up nights with my mom. I never had time to sleep. I needed something.”

Abby says, “But why didn’t you tell me?”

Danny says, “I was embarrassed. I mean, I am.”

Abby holds Danny’s hand. She says, “We’ll get through it.” But she has no idea what that even means.

Danny says, “I’m going to miss her so much.”

He says, “She loved you. She loved you so much.”

Abby watches the inexplicable seagulls pick at the mall garbage in the parking lot.
3. Grace Note

When they hang out, Danny usually comes over to Abby’s house, and then they go out. But this week Danny feels like he should stay in, so Abby sits with him on the living room couch and they watch daytime T.V.

There are plates of half-eaten casseroles on the coffee table, and Danny’s sisters wander around the house in pajamas. Danny’s dad looks just like an older version of Danny; both of their cheeks are sunken in.

Danny’s dad sits perfectly still at the kitchen table, with his head bent like he’s listening. Danny tries to get him moving, but it doesn’t work
“Want to work on the cars today?” Danny says.
Danny’s dad says, “With you? Ha. You run cars into the ground.”
Mac has a broken axle. This is where the conversation always goes all wrong.
Danny says, “Oh, leave me the hell alone.”
“We don’t talk like that.”
“Now we do,” Danny says.
Danny’s sister Jean starts to cry. Danny’s lips are pale and his hands are shaking worse than usual. Abby knows it’s been two days since he’s eaten anything for real. It’s so strange to hear him yell.

“No in my car you don’t,” Danny’s dad says.
“Come on,” Abby says. “I’m driving.”

Abby drives straight to Highland Park and pulls off. She walks Danny by the hand over to the picnic shelter, then she presses him up against the brick wall and kisses him until she can feel the heat in his cheeks under her palms.
4. Sing Me to Sleep

Abby makes a picnic of green grapes and French bread and the kind of pasta salad with spiral noodles that you make from a box. Suddenly Salad, it’s called. Abby feels a little stupid carrying her wicker basket of food when Sara Jane picks her up at noon. They drive to the woods.

At first, Sara and Abby are quiet and new. She has the biggest, roundest brown eyes, the kind where you can see the whites all the way around the iris. Big eyes and a small mouth and pierced ears that stick out a little. Sara Jane is quick to laugh, and when she does it’s like a scale on a piano. It’s in the high C’s. When Jim isn’t around, she acts like she should permanently have a Kool-Aid stain around her mouth.

The rope swing is weather-frayed to nothing and the sharp midday sun makes them squint, even under the tree cover. They follow along the waterless bottom of the ravine. It’s still hot at the end of August.

They talk about the normal stuff—who you are and where you’re from—and Jim’s name doesn’t come up. Sara Jane has two brothers, both younger. One likes books and the other wants to be a Marine.

Abby asks, “And what about you?” Sara Jane bites her lip and blushes, which Abby soon learns takes almost nothing to achieve. After a pause she says, “A lawyer. That helps people adopt babies.” “You were just pretending you had to think about it,” Abby says. Sara Jane laughs and says, “But yeah right. Like I’d be smart enough for law school.” “I think you’d be smart enough,” Abby says. Dumb, dumb, dumb. “How would you know?” Sara asks. Abby doesn’t know what to say, so she laughs. “Jim won’t like us hanging out,” Sara Jane says. “I know,” Abby says. She can’t help but grin.
Abby:

Here’s a phrase I hate: *We think you need to talk to someone.*

I had to talk to Mr. Vidmar when I couldn’t sleep in second grade.
He blew his nose into his handkerchief then stared at it.
There was this lady last year who was nice enough, but she was so easy to trick.
She had a four-year-old daughter and all you had to do was ask
who drew that colored picture on the wall. That would get her going.

And now Eileen. I hate Eileen. She wears purple parachute pants
and walks on the tips of her toes like every minute’s a ballet.
Every Wednesday I have to drive the piece of shit Safari all the way to Midlothian
to spend an hour in her office telling the most obvious lies.

What else can I do? My mom came for the intake.
Eileen made me fill out this test. So she could “assess my needs.”

*I felt down today.* Not at all. Somewhat. Moderately. A lot. *I felt like the kids I know
didn’t like me or didn’t want to be around me today.* Not at all. Somewhat. Moderately. A
lot. *Sometimes I talk so fast people have a hard time keeping up with what I’m saying.*
Not at all. Somewhat. Moderately. A lot.

Ok.

I have a lot of dreams where he’s still touching me and I scratch the shit out of my arms
in my sleep. He calls sometimes and says things like. “We’re still the only two people
selfish enough to have each other.” Even though he’s supposedly in love with Sara Jane.
A lot of the time I believe him. I feel like the inside of a fluorescent bulb a lot of the time
unless I feel like the inside of a hot air balloon. I’m mean to Danny. I don’t want friends
because if I have them I have to try not to cry in front of them and they’d see my mouth
quiver and I’d hate them.
Love Song

1. Arms Reached Out

Danny, Jim, Sara Jane and Abby take a day trip to the Warren Dunes. Sara drives, and Abby demands to sit up front. They take off their shirts and drive in their bikini tops and cut-offs. They play Dee-Lite and Technotronic too loud for anyone to talk. Jim keeps trying to get them to play Velvet Underground or something, but they ignore him.

Until Danny and Jim give up. They sit in the back seat and sulk.

Sara and Abby packed their favorite sandwiches—peanut butter and honey, salami and mustard, turkey on rye, and—their favorite—bologna and pickle. Jim says the sandwiches stink, but he eats two in the car before they even arrive.

When Jim asks for a third, Sara says, “Sorry, buddy. That’s all you get.”

Sara and Abby park the car and take the first dune at a run straight off, leaving the car doors wide open. Also leaving Jim and Danny to gather and drag the cooler and towels and such. When the boys finally huff and puff their way over the enormous sandy hill to each the beach, Sara and Abby have already run into the water and wet their hair.

Jim is too overheated and the water’s too cold and he’s too exhausted and hungry and what’s the point of sitting around in some sand anyway, so Sara and Abby decide to go exploring. But once they decide to go, of course Jim and Danny have to go too. First they all try to walk the line of the water like it’s a balance beam, until they reach a spot where the lake water splits the sand and makes what starts as just a trickle of a creek. They follow it away from the lake and between the trees. The sand starts to turn to dirt, and the creek gets bigger. Sara Jane and Abby lead, Danny and Jim splashing behind.

“I’m getting eaten alive,” Jim says.

Abby says, “You’re welcome to head back.”

Sara Jane and Abby hook arms and outrun the boys.

At sunset, they get ready to leave. Danny says he’s getting a migraine, and Abby drives Mac back. Mac’s alignment is so off that Abby has to hold the wheel in a permanent left turn just to go straight.
2. Sugar Cone

Nobody ever told Sara Jane about any such thing as an oil change. So she didn’t. Sara and Abby had to walk three miles back to her house. Sara said, “Dad, it made a sound like this.” They were in her kitchen.

In the Blockbuster parking lot, Sara’s dad put the hood up. Said, “Sara Jane, you’ve got to be kidding.” But then he laughed and put his hand on the back of her head. Sara kept her eyes on her Chucks. Said, “Dad. I’m so sorry. I feel so stupid.” Then she started to cry.
Sara’s dad gave the back of her neck a squeeze.
“Come on,” he said, “let’s walk over to Rainbow Cone and make a plan.”

For a Rainbow Cone, Abby knows, Sara Jane will drop just about anything.
Sara Jane says, “Abby?”
Ever since the Dunes trip, Abby and Sara Jane have a new ritual. They put on bathing 
suits and meet at the halfway point between their houses, which happens to be Fox Lake. 
Mostly people go there for fishing, but Abby and Sara sit in the sun on the itty bitty strip 
of sand they call the beach and wait until they’re too hot to stand it. Then they jump in. 
She says, “I didn’t think I’d get along with you when I found out we were going to meet.” 
Abby says, “Why not?”
Sara digs a pebble out of the sand with her toe. She won’t look up. 
She says, “He tried to make me like you. Your clothes. Your hair. Your personality. He 
was always telling me all the ways you were better than me.”
There’s a spot at the center of Sara Jane’s chin that quivers when she cries. 
Sara says, “I thought I’d hate you. Because I couldn’t be you. Because he still loves you, 
you know.”
Abby’s eyes sting hot behind her sunglasses. But she can’t help but laugh. 
Sara says, “What’s so funny?”
Abby says, “You know he was calling me the whole time you were getting together to 
tell me how much better than me you were.”
Sara says, “Really?”
Abby says, “Yeah. You were happier and brighter and more hopeful and joyful. The 
word he’s always used for me? ‘Joyless.’”
It’s almost enough just to have made Sara Jane laugh, but even when she does, Abby 
can’t let it go. She says, “But what difference does it make anyway? What he thinks?”
“I know,” Sara says. “But Abby? Do you ever wonder what’s wrong with us, that we let 
him get away with so much?”
Abby says, “All the time.”

It’s after they’ve gone in the water twice and are air-drying their already July-browned 
skin that Sara says it. 
She says, “It turns out I didn’t, though. Hate you, I mean.” She’s grinning. “It turns out I 
actually love you.” Sara’s Jane’s face reddens as she says it. 
Abby turns on her side to face Sara, but then she finds out she can’t say it back so she just 
squeezes Sara’s hand.
Abby:

Sara Jane, she’s swimming pools and barefeet and big laughs. She’s pralines and cream. I’m something like winter. Like watching out a window. Like peppermint and hot tea. We both love when it snows. That’s not what I mean.

Just, Sara Jane’s cherry and I’m lemon-lime. She’s lips and I’m fingertips. She’s ladybugs to my fireflies. But don’t give us that yin and yang stuff. Your light and dark, moon and sun bullshit. That’s what everybody thinks. They say, “Oh, one’s an angel and one’s a devil. We see.”

Give me a break. I could say Sara Jane’s tongue piercings and I’m tattoo sleeves. Then what would you think?

Sara stops in at the restaurant every Sunday when my lunch shift slows down at 3. I bring her a bowl of cheddar potato soup and a root beer, and I drink coffee while she eats. I tell Bob I’m taking my break, even though there are no breaks. I sit with her and smoke anyway. We look out at the rain-drabbed street. So often, sitting there, something will lurch up in me. Happens almost every time I sit still. Something ugly from Jim sneaking up on me.

And I’ll open my mouth to tell it, I’ll say, “Sara?” But when she looks back I find there’s no need.

Cleaning her table later, I find the note she’s left on a napkin. Abby, you’re my heart. That’s ours. It’s what we always say.

Sara Jane’s mine too. That’s what I mean.
Friends

1. Not to Put Too Fine a Point on it

Sara takes the basement room after her older brother leaves for school, and everyone comes by to help her move. “Later it’ll be great, we can go in the pool,” Sara says. The boys are sweaty in cut-offs, except Danny who will only wear jeans. They make a big deal of carrying the T.V. Abby carries stacks of Sara’s books, but mostly she just looks through them.

Craig takes a load-off, and then everyone does. Jason tosses peanuts to catch in his mouth, but mostly misses. Sara’s dog Raisin chases the missed ones around the room. “Don’t make her too excited or she’ll pee,” Sara says. “What’s for lunch?” Craig wants to know. “Don’t let Sara make it,” Danny says. “Just ask her what she thinks about chili.” This is one of their straight-man routines. “Hormel’s the best,” says Sara. “And pizza?” Danny asks. “Only Totinos,” Sara says. Then everyone says Ewwww “The sausage looks like rabbit poo,” Jo says, but Jason says, “What? I love Totinos.” “You would,” we say, and Sara’s laugh makes everyone start up.

Later Danny plays guitar in the corner to better pay no attention, and Craig makes a joke out of shaking hands with everyone’s bare feet. “So Danny can play guitar, big deal,” Craig says, “I can touch my tongue to my nose.” Jason says, “I can say the alphabet backwards.” “What can you do?” Craig asks Abby. Abby says she doesn’t know, then Danny says, “She can do anything.” Sara says, “Look what I can do.” And she kicks her legs up into a handstand against the wall. Her shirt comes down so her stomach shows. Abby puts her head to the ground to look at her upside down until she laughs so hard she has to come down.

It gets dark, but the night’s still hot when they all go out to the pool. Abby borrows Sara Jane’s swimsuit, but she leaves her shirt on over it. Craig grabs them both around their wet waists to try to throw them in, but they don’t let him. After a while they all float quiet with the sound of the traffic on 53rd behind them.
2. Bright as Yellow

There are these long and nerved up afternoons in summer. Like the maniac tic of the cicadas is coming from inside you. Birdless days that make you sick with stillness. Days like these Sara Jane and I take Cicero to Archer, away from the city. We hit LaGrange and ride, past Orland Park, its Wal-Mart and Gas City outlying like guards, until we reach the bare weedy fields that used to be corn, but now are just waiting to be made into something.

We take I-80. We take it west.

We sing, “If you’re going to San—Fran—Cisco—”

We could take it all the way.

With Sara Jane doing 70 and the windows down, nothing seems too far off.

When we get it out of our systems, we stop for Twizzlers and, putting the sun behind us, we circle back east.
3. Spin the Bottle

Sara Jane hasn’t seen Jim in three days. Danny and Abby have been coaching her to ignore his calls. And there are many calls. Jim isn’t good at not getting what he wants. He’s not very good at letting go. He calls Abby, too, and asks, again and again, “Why won’t she talk to me? What did I do?”

Danny and Sara will sit in the smoking section while Abby finishes working her evening shift. Sara’s been staring at the salt shakers not saying anything. When she gets up to go to the bathroom, Abby sits down with Danny.
“Hey, you,” Abby says, tapping the back of his magazine.
Danny looks up halfway.
“Do something,” Abby says.
“What do you want me to do?” Danny asks.
Abby takes away his *Rolling Stone*. “Talk to her?”

Danny always has a migraine these days. He says he’s leaving, and Abby begs Sara Jane to stay. “We’ll do something fun,” Abby says, having no idea what.
4. Doing the Unstuck

Abby gets done with work at eleven, and Sara and Abby stroll past the closed shops of the strip mall that circles the restaurant. They peek their faces in the pet store to see if they can see anything. Sara Jane says Baskin Robbins is total crap except for Gold Medal Ribbon. Abby asks, “What about Superman?” and Sara laughs. “I haven’t had that since I was probably seven.”

It’s after midnight when Abby and Sara Jane walk into the 24-hour Dominick’s on the opposite side of the strip mall. They go slowly through the aisles with no particular mission in mind. Sara Jane can’t get over that there are people actually doing their grocery shopping at this hour. I thought they’d just be buying condoms and beer,” Sara says, and they both laugh.

“Hey, Abby,” Sara says, “have you ever eaten a pomegranate?”
“Nope, I haven’t,” Abby says.
Sara buys two and they take them out into the parking lot. She takes out her pocket knife and cuts the fruits in half, staining her fingers in the little red seeds. Sara takes a picture and then they eat. This is the first time in days Sara’s been smiling.

The truth is, Abby doesn’t much want to go home either.
Abby:
Sometimes it’s hard to get empty for sleep.
Sometimes when I close my eyes it’s like I see his black car
parked and waiting
with my eyes closed sometimes I can hear the particular slam of its driver’s side door
right outside on the street

my bed is a splintering wooden plank. my toes grip

and I can see his boy hips slinking across the street, looking both ways now
but nobody’s around now, and he pauses
at the head of my driveway to squint up at my stupid lamp that I leave on
because I’m too scared to sleep because he knows exactly where I am
and no one’s ever home
And he laughs

which is the worst of it, his *heh, heh*
that’s dead of mirth, that says only,
*for all the ways you’ve tried to get rid of me, here I am*
*I need you I love you forever and ever even if we kill each other*
*this is true love this is real you are everything*

it’s like I can hear the window breaking
there is no phone. backdoor. prayer.
I’m scared of his face
in the space
between the door and me
scared of quivering in bed like in some idiot movie

It’s stupid, I know
but these messages he leaves on my phone
Love Song

1. Café Florian

“It makes zero sense to me that you want to do this,” Danny says. But Abby is practicing calm. She’s watching what happens to her breath and her heartbeat as they drive the five miles to Jim’s house. Five miles she hasn’t driven in nearly a year. She promises herself ten steady breaths before they pass Hackney’s, home stretch.

“Did you know the basement at Hackney’s is haunted?” Abby says. Danny is flicking the ash of his cigarette out the crack in his window double as much as he needs to. His nervous thumb against Camel, flick flick flick.

Mac is back, and handling the curves of LaGrange. Where Abby lives, it’s half forest preserve, half strip mall, and they’re driving through the woodsy bit. At the end of the 1800s or something, the city of Chicago decided to preserve 60,000 acres of forest when the world first started to imagine what would become of urban sprawl. Abby always wonders whether or not anyone back then could have conceived of Wal-Mart.

“I’m not driving tonight, by the way,” Danny says. “Jim can. Where are we going?” “It’s ok,” Abby says. “We can sit in the backseat and hold hands.”
2. With or Without You

Abby remembers once—it was before Jim had moved away to college but after he and Abby had broken up—he begged her to come with him to Hyde Park, to see the university. He said he didn’t want to be on campus for the first time alone.

On the drive up, Abby watched the South Side housing projects leer on either side of the highway. The year before, someone had taken to shooting out a window at cars on the Dan Ryan. Five people were killed. Which was nothing compared to how many died inside the projects every day.

The buildings at University of Chicago were all castle and ivy, stone and parapet. They walked around Hyde Park and found 57th Street Books. Abby curled up with *A Coney Island of the Mind*, and Jim talked with the store owner about the neighborhood. He was using his know-it-all voice, and Abby tried her best not to listen.

Abby was shy of it, but she had the urge to read out loud. Like always the words rolling around in the sound of the voice in her mind, the feeling of them, like it almost doesn’t matter at all, their meaning. *outside the leaves were falling and they cried too soon! too soon!*

Jim walked Abby by where his dorm would be, and he started to cry. He said, “I think this is the best day we’ve ever had together. The nicest.” And actually, Abby agreed, but she was too scared of what would happen next if she said so.

And then Jim said, and Abby wishes she could forget it, “Every time I’m on this street I’ll remember right now, when I wanted to but couldn’t kiss you. Every time I pass this gorgeous fucking tree.”

It made her stomach turn. She started to cry.

He said, “Can I hug you at least? Please?”

And Abby told him no, and she asked him to take her home. Go figure.

But he said, “Abby. Please.” And he put his arms around her and squeezed.

And at first, Abby felt her jaw tense up, and she had the wild urge to scream. But after a minute she made her body ease up, and let his hands move up and down her back. *jellybeans glowed in the semi-gloom of that september afternoon*
3. Fit the Shoe

Abby can see Sara Jane through Jim’s parents’ bay window. She and Jim are in the living room. Sara has Jim’s electric guitar in her lap, unplugged. Jim is kneeling in front of her. He’s—Abby would guess—teaching her chords. He’s spreading her fingers and pressing them into the strings until it stings. He’s talking about the important of developing calluses, and the necessity of tuning by ear, and the sad magic of E minor, and how much Nirvana accomplishes knowing next to nothing about guitar. He’s talking about passion and inspiration and rock and roll and he’s insisting that, yes, it’s nine-tenths intuition. Classical training be damned.

Sara Jane is, Abby can see, concentrating. Her fingers are small and soft and they cramp up when she tries to make bar chords. Even though it wasn’t her idea to learn in the first place, this failure will frustrate Jim. He’ll take the guitar away, saying, “No. Like this.” And then he’ll play “Love Buzz.” He’ll play “Disarm.” He’ll play “All Apologies” and sing along. Sara will feel mute and careless, like she wants to stand up on the couch and dance to see if he’ll notice. To see what he’ll say. She will watch him close his eyes and she’ll imagine reaching out to pluck the E string. She will listen to the faint scratch at the back of his throat and want to clear hers. She will say to herself, I don’t want to play the damn thing. And then when she drives the twelve miles home from the suburbs into Chicago, she will sing at the absolute top of her voice. With the windows down.
Abby:
Lately I’ve been obsessed with breathing. Just, you know, the idea of it.
Don’t laugh, but—
if you’re still you can feel how it moves in and out of the body like it’s a liquid.
The way it fills you up, and empties you,
and the way you can take from it, but you don’t get to keep it.
Like Pinocchio—it’s what makes us more than just a sack of bones.

It’s like my family. When my aunts and uncles and everybody has a barbecue.
And everyone’s so happy to touch each other’s faces and hear each other’s laughs
They want you to tell them every single thing that’s happened since you’d last seen them.
They say, “Tell me about your dorm room. Tell me about your boyfriend.”
They want you to describe it enough so they can live it.
But you can’t. No matter how much you want to.
It’s because they want to hold onto you so much it turns into gripping.
And their sadness, when they leave, is about all the little minutes they’ll be missing.

I wish that what they feel they’re missing
is just like the way we forget we’re breathing.
4. Turn the Radio Up

Jim says he’ll drive.
It was his idea to take us to his favorite café in Hyde Park, near University of Chicago. Abby only agreed to go because she can’t seem to keep herself away from him and Sara Jane. Being around them is like a reconnaissance mission.

Jim puts the keys in the ignition, but he doesn’t start the engine.
He says, “Sara Jane wants to show you something.”
Sara, in the passenger seat, whips her head to face him. She says, “Jim. Come on. No.”
“Didn’t,” Sara says. “Didn’t say that.”
“I just want everyone to see how talented my girlfriend is,” Jim says. Abby almost throws up.
“Seriously, I can’t,” she says.
“Why are you being such a baby?” Jim says. “Fine, don’t. But don’t think you’ll ever be brave enough to be in a band, if you keep acting like that.”
Jim turns around to face Danny and me, and he says, with a sigh, “Sara Jane said she wants to sing. I told her she should practice in front of you guys.”
“You said I should sing,” Sara says. “It was your idea.”
“How great to start a band together?” Jim is looking at Danny as he asks. Danny takes his thumbnail between his teeth.
“Can we just go?” Abby says. She makes her voice impatient.

Jim turns and looks at Sara. She looks at her lap. Abby looks at Danny. Danny looks out the window.

“Jesus,” Abby says. “This is crap. Leave her alone.”

Jim turns the car to battery and the first chords of this horrible pop song called “Stay” start up. It’s one of Jim’s favorites.
Jim stops the tape and Sara stares straight ahead out the windshield. After a minute she says, “Okay.”

And it’s painful. Not really because Sara Jane can’t sing, but because she’s swallowing her voice nervously. Because her fingers are trembling in her lap. And because Jim is watching her appraisingly.

Danny and I listen and don’t look at each other.
When she’s done, I squeeze her shoulder over the seat and say, “Sara, that was beautiful.” I can see her smile in the rearview.
Jim says, “I’ve just grown really sensitive to different kinds of energy since I’ve been away at college, and I can’t stand to put so many toxins in my body anymore.”

Jim doesn’t see Danny’s look, but Abby does. She loves it when Danny’s eyebrows spike up, and then he rolls his eyes.
Sara Jane sees it too. She swallows a little giggle.

“You’re full of shit,” Abby says. “You used to say your favorite food was Doritos.”
“College changes people,” Jim says.
“No people who dip their fries in their Frosty,” Abby says.
Sara and Danny laugh.

This place is some kind of pseudo-hippie bullshit snob café. The menu’s all vegetarian, which is cool, whatever, but the sandwiches have names like the Chèvre Guevara and the Tortilla Flat. Just the kind of place that Jim would love. All the waitresses have dreadlocks and gauged piercings. They make the four of us look like Young Republicans.

“It’s partly the animals themselves,” Jim says. “When you eat that stuff, you’re absorbing their pain. Their suffering.” He pauses. Thoughtful. “I guess it started when I went to Africa.”

Jim went to Africa last summer, after his first year of college. Some kind of study abroad program, but who can tell what the point of it was. He didn’t learn a language, he didn’t have a host family. Basically, a group of super rich college students just read Joseph Conrad.

“You mean your safari,” Abby says.
Jim’s face goes red. “When did you become such a godawful bitch, Abby?”
Danny and Sara Jane stare at their plates. When Abby sees that Sara looks like she’s scared enough to cry, Abby feels like an idiot. So she apologizes.

Danny and Jim start to talk music. Abby asks Sara, “Do you really want to be in a band?”
“Kind of,” she says. “I think it might be fun.”
“You could for sure wear those boots,” Abby says. Sara Jane is wearing knee high lace-up shiny boots.
“These are my favorite,” she says. “Hey, we should be in a band together.”
“What kind?” Abby says.
She pauses. Thoughtful. “Metal,” she says, wide-eyed, and we both start laughing.
“What are you girls cackling about?” Jim asks.
“Good idea, Jim,” I say. “We can be called The Cackles!”
6. Shattered

Jim had ordered The Timothy Leary—“I get the same thing every time I come,” he had said—some kind of grilled cheese with habañeros. It had five little blow torches next to its name. The menu said, “So hot you’ll trip.”

This is a thing with nearly every boy Abby has ever known. Even Danny. It’s hard to understand. They always want to compete to see who can swallow more hot sauce packets, or bet on who can eat the most jalapeños. They go to Taco Bell and order the spicy chicken burrito with extra fire sauce. And then they sit around and sweat and wait for steam to come out their ears.

After three bites, Jim starts squealing—actually squealing—and shouting for the waitress. “My mouth is burning, my mouth is burning!” he keeps saying, hunched over and fanning at his face, as the three of us try to pass him our waters.

“You idiots,” Jim says, “water only makes it worse. Don’t you know anything? Milk! I need milk!”

Our waitress saunters over slow with a glass of milk and a smirk. The look on her face is the best thing Abby’s seen all day.
7. Away from Home Again

The drive home is a mess. Abby has pushed Jim over his mean edge. She should have been more careful. She should have known that he’d make a duplicate of his wounds on Sara.

Jim says, “Seriously, sometimes I wonder if you ever even read that book. You don’t understand a single thing about it.”

Sara says, “Probably because I hated it.”

Jim and his stupid books. Jim and everything he expects you to prove to him. Jim and the girl version of him that he expects you to be. Danny’s gone useless, scowling out the window. And Abby has to sit there and—what?—just watch? Doing nothing but seething?

“I think you’ve got the idea of quality all wrong anyway,” Abby says.

“I didn’t ask what you think,” Jim says.

“It’s just,” she says, “you think everything that’s actually on the inside is found outside. And everything that’s really on the outside, you think you have inside of you. You forget that all wisdom is basically just intuition. He’s just talking about how we already know everything we need to from the very beginning.”

“That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard,” Jim says.

“I know. Because you don’t understand it. You never take the time to understand what anyone means,” Abby says. And she means it. She doesn’t even care anymore if Jim gets riled up. It’s nice to argue back.

Everyone is silent for the last fifteen minutes of the drive. Abby’s watching Jim’s clenched jaw, and Jim’s ten and two hands, and Jim’s angry white knuckles. And her heart is beating wild and she’s scared now and just waiting for what’s next. And she’s wishing she could go backward and erase everything she’s said for the past five hours, because she can feel what it’s all going to lead to, and it would be one thing if it were going to happen to her, but it isn’t.

Parked on the street in front of Jim’s house, they erupt from Jim’s car as though everyone was waiting poised to escape.

“It was fun to hang out,” Abby says, and adds, absurdly, nervously, “we should do it again.”

“Right,” Jim says.

Danny grabs Abby’s hand and leads her toward Mac, but she hangs back, watching Jim and Sara Jane standing next to Sara’s car. Sara is trying to leave, and Jim’s trying to convince her to come inside.

“I have a fucking curfew,” Sara shouts.
“Abby, let’s just go, please,” Danny says.
She says, “Wait.”
Sara gets the keys in her car door and starts to open it, but Jim slams it shut with the palm of his hand. He’s got Sara Jane by the shoulder. Danny says, “Abby, come on. It’s not your business.”

Sara starts to walk around to the passenger side, and Jim grabs her arm and spins her to face him. Jim pushes Sara with two hands, and she falls back hard on the street. The next thing Abby sees is his step toward her, and then she’s taking the fifteen feet between them at a run.

It’s Abby’s shoulder, it seems, that connects with Jim, awkward, yes, but sending him back toward Sara’s car. And Abby hears Sara say something, but she’s not listening. And it’s absolutely magic; Abby gets her bearings and stands up straight and without even thinking she makes a fist and punches Jim hard and strange on his left cheek.

Jim can do whatever he wants to me when he gets done whimpering about getting hit, Abby thinks. She’s not concerned. She sits down in the street right behind Sara Jane, who is crying, leaned forward and bent over her knees. Abby takes her around the shoulders and pulls her back and kisses and kisses again the top of Sara Jane’s head and everything is going to be so totally the fuck okay, Abby all of a sudden just knows it.
Abby:

*And that was the last we saw of him*, is one thing I could say.
I could say, *This was the day Sara Jane left Jim to be with me.*
Forever and ever amen, you might think. I did.

Because who doesn’t love the word *forever.*
A word so big and safe, it makes you want to rely on it.
It says exactly what you mean when you are looking at someone
who’s just about the only thing you can seem to see.

But everything leaves a residue. So nothing’s ever really an ending.
So I guess because everything leaves a residue then in a way there is “forever”
But not in the way we mean when we say, *You’re my heart. You always will be.*

*So we set Jim’s car on fire*
*So we stole all his vinyl and sold it and used the money to buy enormous straw hats*
*So we tricked Jim into going to the zoo then we locked him in with the jungle cats*
*So we tied Jim to a chair and force-fed him Crisco*
*So we wore punk rock wigs and The Cackles took the world by storm*

*And that was the last we saw of everyone*

Eventually Jim will lose Sara Jane, it’s true.
But here’s the thing:
Eventually I will too.