To Tell the Story

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Abstract

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The following is a compilation of personal essays I have written while studying creative nonfiction at Ohio University. Each essay contains elements of personal reflection, narrative, and research on topics including sacraments, home, faith, personal identity, and whistling. Thought disparate in subject matter, each of these essays speaks to my efforts to “tell true stories and tell them well enough that they resonate with readers in the same way good writing—and good music—resonate with me."

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Introduction: To Tell the Story

As I’ve considered how to preface this small collection of disparate essays, I’ve been thinking about jazz—how jazz and essays intersect, overlap, and inform one another. I think Phyllis Rose had it right when she called the man widely accepted as the father of the essay, Michel de Montaigne, “the father of jazz” and “the inventor of the verbal riff, the man who elevated organic form over inherited structures and first made art by letting one thing lead to another.” How else to explain the mental meanderings in each of Montaigne’s essays, from “Of Thumbs” to “Of Experience”? How else to explain the wanderings of my own curious mind that I’ve recorded here?

Sharing terminology among artistic disciplines, as Phyllis Rose has done here, is common practice among artists of every ilk. For example: a musician considers the frame and layers of sound in a composition; a visual artist questions the theme and symbolism of a painting; and a writer admires the rhythm and voice of a story. The comparability of creative writing and musical composition makes understanding one useful to anyone studying the other. This, I think, is especially true of essays and jazz—both the language we use to discuss them and the way we go about composing them.
The comparability of essays and jazz begins at the very definition of either form. Frank Delany, editor of The Hutchinson Book of Essays, has said of the essay, “to meet it is to know it.” Similarly, Robert G. O’Meally begins The Jazz Cadence of American Culture by recalling the idea common among jazz musicians, that “If you have to ask what it is, you will never know.” It seems that a concise, widely accepted definition of essays or of jazz just doesn’t exist. It’s difficult to find more than a handful of people who agree on any one definition, and the result is that both terms are left pretty much wide open to interpretation, allowing room for all kinds of artistic variations.

Among the similarities between essays and jazz, I am most interested in improvisation and associative movement. These two characteristics dominate discussions of both the essay and jazz, and they have a lot to do with the way I think about my own writing and writing process.

Improvisation

I usually discover the structure as I go...So, for example, I might imagine a certain interweaving of storytelling and reflection, but the working out of such a scheme is highly improvisatory, rather like the way jazz musicians elaborate on a skein of chords.
In the past, I have associated improvisation with lack of preparation and directionless spontaneity. When I first began hearing the term applied to the essay, I wondered if it were just an excuse for laziness, lack of coherence, or sensational surprises in writing. But this interpretation doesn’t match up with the kind of improvisation I’ve witnessed while listening to recordings of Miles Davis or John Coltrane, though. Despite my very limited knowledge of jazz theory and composition, I can tell that these artists are practiced, prepared, even inspired in their improvisation. Then how does artistic, productive improvisation come about?

One aspect of effective artistic improvisation is having a framework of some kind. Albert Murray, in “Improvisation and the Creative Process,” puts it this way: “By improvisation, of course, I most definitely do not mean ‘winging it’ or making things up out of thin air. The jazz musician improvises within a very specific context and in terms of very specific idiomatic devices of composition.” In jazz composition, each piece of music consists of a theme and arrangements. The melody and accompanying chord progressions make up the theme, which guides the general direction of the whole piece; arrangements let musicians know what to play when they are not
playing the theme. When a vamp (improvised introduction) or a break (solo passage) comes and a musician begins to improvise, he or she works within the context of the theme and arrangement of the piece.

This same concept operates in essay composition. In “The Essay as Form” Theodor Adorno explains a process similar to the one Murray describes: “The person who writes essayistically is the one who composes as he experiments, who turns his object around, questions it, feels it, tests it, who attacks it from different sides and assembles what he sees in his mind’s eye and puts into words what the object allows one to see under the conditions created in the course of writing.”

It’s easy to imagine switching out “puts into words” for “puts to music” in this passage to let it stand as a description of a jazz musician’s improvisation. The key phrase in this passage, as it applies to frameworks of improvisation, is “under the conditions created in the course of writing.” An essayist may compose as he experiments, but in this process he, or maybe the piece itself, puts restrictions on where it can go next. Maybe “restrictions” is too strong a word--perhaps they are more like “directional guides” that lead the essayist in productive ways. In jazz and in essays, though both very open, difficult-to-define forms, the compositions themselves put limitations on improvisation. An artist can
make something up on the spot, but once you begin writing things down, the improvisation is bound to the framework of the composition. This framework keeps improvisation from enabling laziness or confusion.

Jazz and essays celebrate spontaneity and creativity, but they do so in a way that still feels controlled and meaningful. William Howarth articulates this idea when he says that essays “fulfill but also surprise our expectations, because they are both designed and improvised. After all the preliminary study and thought, the writing process still takes unexpected turns, reveals unforeseen consequences.” I think Howarth is describing exactly the process that Scott Russell Sanders refers to when he talks about working out the structure of an essay as he goes. I have found this to be the case in my own writing time and again. A “trial and error” approach seems befitting to a genre of writing derived from a word meaning “to attempt or try,” but there’s more to it than this. There’s something intuitive to the process as well. An example of intuiting the writing process is the essay “The Fourth Story,” included in this collection. This piece began as an attempt at straightforward narrative, with few visual breaks and no sections. As I worked with Rebecca McClanahan on it several months ago, however, and we discussed the theme of excavation, I thought it necessary to at least try
restructuring the essay in such a way that a reader would be witness to my attempt at reconstructing my childhood home, building up to the fourth story of my memory. The structure suggested itself in the process of composition, and though I’m sure there are countless ways to structure this or any piece, this structure seems appropriate in a way the original structure did not.

Associative Movement

Albert Wilkes’s song [is] so familiar because everything he’s ever heard is in it, all the songs and voices he’s ever heard, but everything is new and fresh because his music joined things, blended them so you follow one note and then it splits and shimmers and spills the thousand things it took to make the note whole, the silences within the note, the voices and songs.

–John Wideman

An alternative definition of improvisation is “to make, provide, or arrange from whatever materials are readily available.” Improvisation is not something created from nothing but something created from an abundance of things. This is where associative movement comes in. A jazz musician cannot move from a thematic chord progression through a run to
a quote without first having knowledge of and experience with those elements. As Albert Murray puts it, "The most inventive, the most innovative jazz musician is also one with a very rich apperceptive mass or base, a very rich storehouse of tunes, phrases, ditties which he uses as a painter uses his awareness of other paintings, as a writer employs his literary background to give his statements richer resonances." A masterful musician cannot improvise without being willing to explore everything he has in him from his experience as a musician and as a human being. Good music is all the richer for its influences and allusions. It is the same with good essays.

Essayists aren’t required to move associatively, just as improvisational jazz performers aren’t, but the attempt to do so is characteristic of both artists. In the introduction to The Art of the Personal Essay, Phillip Lopate describes this tendency in the essay:

The essay is a notoriously flexible and adaptable form. It possesses the freedom to move anywhere, in all directions. It acts as if all objects were equally near the center and as if “all subjects are linked to each other” (Montaigne) by free association.

I would qualify this description in the same way improvisation has been qualified previously. Associative movement can enrich
an essay, but the essayist should be careful not to let free association take over. When this happens, essays fall into the trap of becoming “gimmicky,” a ride that is fun while it lasts but does not need to be experienced more than once for full effect. Without limitations, I’m not sure I would know where to begin and where to end an essay, especially if I believe, as Montaigne did, in the infinite connectivity of things.

Associative movement is one of my favorite things about essays I read as well as essays I write. It allows for seemingly insignificant moments, people, places, things, and ideas to be infused with meaning at the hands of skilled writers. This is true also, I think, of the subjects and practitioners of jazz music. In the following quote by G. Douglas Atkins, consider the interchangeability of “the essay” and “jazz”:

The essay is a genre that flirts with all the other genres; it avoids marriage or even commitment to any one style, manner of presentation, or subject matter. It may be precisely this protean and loose character—with its marked if not promiscuous openness to diverse topics, “approaches,” and modes of expression, indeed with a receptivity and a willingness to welcome, even to embrace and consort with, many and disparate, in effect almost
all, callers—that makes the essay popular and vital, which is not to say licentious.

The ideal of this protean, associative character of the essay, in culling all of the most interesting and enriching associations and condensing them into this form, is to strike a note that “splits and shimmers and spills the thousand things it took to make the note whole.”

In my own writing, I strive for this kind of resonance. I enjoy the possibilities that associative movement affords me in subject matter and possible meaning. My use of associative movement in this collection is most evident in the final essay, “Whistling in the Dark.” This essay grew from a personal reflection on whistling in my life and expanded into something quite unwieldy before settling back down into a contemplation of human whistling generally. I incorporate lots of research into the essay (as I do in much of my work) in the hopes of expanding and exploring my insights into the subject of human whistling and why it feels somehow important to me, why it fascinates me. The associative movement of essays allows me to do this in a way that, I hope, seems meaningful to the reader, too.

Improvisation and associative movement enable composers of jazz and essays to explore subjects in a unique way, and I
hope I have accomplished this in my work included here. But to what end? As Robert G. O’Meally says,

Among [jazz’s] most magical words are those reminding its players to “tell the story.” This is jazz’s profoundest invitation, its most deep-voiced invitation and witness, amen-ing those who have achieved more than technical fluency and tricks of the trade; exhorting and high-praising those who have reached jazz’s highest goal of attaining a personal artistic voice. . . . If to “tell the story” means to find an artistic voice and language of one’s own and to recite with style one’s personal history, it also means to tell something more than one’s own private tale. I refer to the capacity to tell one’s story with resolution and resonance, with a sense of the fullness of the jazz tradition.

Ultimately, I hope to tell true stories and tell them well enough that they resonate with readers in the same way good writing--and good music--resonate with me.
Bibliography


Blood Loss

I stood over the white ceramic basin in Jenny’s bathroom and scrubbed, rubber gloves protecting my hands as I washed bloody garments in cold water. Jenny sat next to me in a wheelchair, and we talked about school and church and work while halogen lights hummed above our heads. I acted as if this were not strange to me, as if hand washing my quadriplegic friend’s underwear in front of her was as comfortable to me as passing bread down the dinner table. But Jenny sensed my unease, so when I finished she patiently directed me as I fed her dinner, brushed her teeth, and dressed her in nightclothes. Jenny is small, but the weight of her body in my arms felt enormous as I lifted her out of the wheelchair and carried her to the bed. When I pulled the comforter up over her still body, she asked me to read to her from the Book of Mormon lying on her nightstand, so I sat on the edge of the bed and read aloud:

And the death of Christ shall loose the bands of this temporal death, that all shall be raised...The spirit and the body shall be reunited again in its perfect form...and there shall not so much as a hair of their heads be lost...
I read slowly, enunciated, tried to ignore the slight tickle in my throat. I believed these words then as I do now, believed that after this life Jenny’s body will be whole again—but more than that, I knew Jenny believed these words with fervor I was grateful not to comprehend. Whenever I spent time with Jenny, I struggled to understand how someone as smart and capable as she is could be so completely dependent on others for basic tasks she cannot physically do by herself. This dependence on others has made her vulnerable and humble but also strong and sure of herself. I try to remember this about Jenny when I feel weak; I assure myself that vulnerability and strength are not mutually exclusive, and that somehow even when I am broken I can feel whole.

As a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I believe that the blessed bread and water I consume each Sunday in a sacrament meeting not unlike a Catholic communion has the power to cleanse me of my sins and heal my brokenness. I don’t believe in the miracle of transubstantiation, as Catholics do, that the bread I eat and the water I drink actually become the body and blood of Christ; instead I see the sacrament as Augustine of Hippo did, as “a visible sign of an invisible reality.” In my sacrament meeting, young men in white shirts and dark ties kneel by an altar at the front of the chapel to pray reverently over
broken pieces of bread, symbols of the broken body of Jesus the Christ. Following the prayer, more young men pass trays of bread through the congregation until everyone has had a chance to partake before returning to the altar where water is then blessed and passed, symbolic of the blood of that man who lived two thousand years ago. I eat bread and sip water as a sign of the redemption I hope is happening in that “invisible reality,” and I think that this is truly an act of faith, a hope to be cleansed and made whole again put into motion.

While the word *sacrament* could be used to describe any ritual in the LDS church that is supposed to further unify man with God, the blessing of water and bread each Sunday is the sacrament that is most commonly referred to as such. The Holy Roman Church has retained seven official sacraments: baptism, confirmation, anointing of the sick, holy communion, matrimony, holy orders, and penance. Hinduism bumps the number of official sacraments, or *samskaras*, up to sixteen. As with other religions, some of the sacraments in Hinduism occur only once in a person’s life, while others should be observed again and again. Practitioners of Hinduism observe sacraments ranging from *garbhadhan*, the sacrament of impregnation, to *antyeshti*, the last rites of the dead, seeking divine intervention on behalf of their loved ones. Sacrament then becomes a form of prayer—for smooth transitions into and out
of life, for help with school, for a happy marriage, for a healthy family, for blessings, for hope, for grace.

Several years ago I found yet another kind of sacrament, a “sacrament of the present moment,” or the idea that any moment has the potential to be blessed by divine grace. I think I have always believed in such a thing as a sacrament of the present moment, even before I knew it existed. I came across this phrase in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a precious text to someone like me, who is fascinated by the infinite connections afforded by the trace words’ meanings leave on language as they shift over time. For example, since finding “sacrament of the present moment,” I have found out that *sacrament*, from the Latin verb *sacrare*, means “to consecrate or make holy.” This comes very close to the roots of *bless*: when early translators of the Bible came across the Hebrew *brk*, meaning “to bend the knee, to worship,” they replaced it with the Latin *benedicere*, “to speak well of or praise.” Later English translators went with the Northumbrian *bloedsian*, meaning “to consecrate or make holy,” bringing blessings and sacraments close together. *Bloedsian* itself came from *blothisojan*, “to mark with blood” (from *blotham*, or *blood*). For early translators of scripture, then, blood was blessed.
Yet bleeding was no blessing in the Biblical world these translators dealt with on the page; when people bled they were considered unclean and segregated from the rest of society. In the New Testament, for example, we find the apostle Matthew’s account of a woman “with an issue of blood twelve years” who was healed by touching the hem of Jesus’s garment. I have always understood “an issue of blood twelve years” to mean that this woman had been menstruating for a very long time. In Hebrew tradition, a niddah, or menstruating woman, is unclean from the moment she begins to bleed until she has performed a mikveh, or ritual cleansing, which means that this woman sought the cleanest and holiest of men in defiance of law and custom after years of being set apart from anyone who was not also marked by her blood--not as blessed, but as tainted.

For she said within herself, if I may but touch his garment, I shall be made whole. But Jesus turned him about, and when he saw her, he said, Daughter, be of good comfort; thy faith hath made thee whole. And the woman was made whole from that hour.

I imagine the woman in Matthew’s account driven by desperate faith to the crowd, I see her eyes scanning the sea of covered heads, and I watch her hesitate before laying her hands on shoulders and pulling herself through until she is enveloped by a warmth she has not felt for a dozen years.
Judaism’s mikveh is similar to Islam’s ghusl, and with the exception of a Sunni ghusl—which is quite complex—both cleansing rituals require simply that a person be immersed in clean water. I was baptized by immersion at eight years old, but my baptism was one of conversion and remission of sins; I am not required by my religion to undergo ritual cleansing after a menstrual period or after childbirth or after sex, as women of traditional Islam and Orthodox Judaism are. I don’t completely understand why these women must cleanse themselves for things that aren’t sinful, or why women in Matthew’s day did, for that matter. But I do know that they were required to do this cleansing under the Law of Moses, a very specific code of conduct given to the Israelites by God through Moses when they proved incapable of obeying the higher laws, which were based more on principles than strict rules.

Under the Law of Moses, sinners had to pay for their own transgressions by offering a blood sacrifice—usually in the form of a ram, sheep, or other animal; however, Latter-day Saints believe, as do many other Christians, that when Jesus bled in the Garden of Gethsemane, was crucified on a cross, and then was resurrected three days later, he fulfilled the Law of Moses by suffering vicariously for all sins. From that point on, sinners didn’t have to offer their own blood sacrifices because Christ had done that for them. Instead,
sinners were asked by God to figuratively sacrifice their hearts and wills to Him. We (for we are all sinners to one degree or another) all became (and become) clean through the blood of Christ, including those who have previously been banished for their bleeding. I love this idea of blood’s redemptive, life-giving power, of blood purified, made holy, blessed. I imagine, though, that giving up the Law of Moses must have been difficult for many who relished the security of strict codes of conduct. In fact, many who lived the Law of Moses did not believe that Jesus’s death eliminated the need to follow those laws and so continued to offer their own blood sacrifices, continued to shun the unclean bleeders among them.

Nearly six hundred years after the death of Christ, Catholic Archbishop and doctor St. Isidore of Seville wrote a book called *Etymologiae*--a saint’s attempt to gather all universal knowledge into one place, from metallurgy to astrology. Within this encyclopedia of 448 chapters in 20 volumes, St. Isidore includes even a description of a woman’s menstrual cycle:

*The menses consist of an overflow of women’s blood. They are called ‘menses’ (menstrual) after the cycle of moonlight in which this flux regularly comes to pass....If they are touched by the blood of the menses, crops cease to sprout, unfermented wine*
turns sour, plants wither, trees lose their fruit, iron is corrupted by rust, bronze turns black. If dogs eat any of it, they are made wild with rabies. The glue of pitch, which is dissolved neither by iron nor water, when polluted with this blood spontaneously disperses.

St. Isidore’s continued influence into the Middle Ages makes me wonder whether some of our aversion to the subject of menstruation comes from such beliefs, which themselves might stem from the Law of Moses. Whatever the reason, today the subject of menstruation remains taboo—we seem to have fallen in line with those who associate this blood with corruption and death instead of holiness and life.

I can’t remember my first period. I know I was fifteen or sixteen years old, at least, because I remember being scared that if I didn’t get my period soon I would have to go to the gynecologist and endure I-knew-not-what. I imagine I felt some relief on this account the first time I bled, but one anxiety replaced another once I recalled stories of girls having to tie jackets around their waists to hide stains and of boys who blamed every mood swing their girlfriends had on “that time of the month.” As a teenager, menstruation was something we joked and whispered about, and as I got older this didn’t seem to change much.
I don’t know how or when it began, but for the past few years I have felt keenly the loss of my own blood each month, a new kind of anxiety at the loss of life or at least the potential for it. I feel some pressure to have children from my very family-oriented religion but more so from a feeling of being left behind by close friends and family who have families of their own now. But this feeling should not be mine, now or maybe ever, because I don’t want children yet, and, when I decide that I do want them, I have no reason to believe that I won’t be able to have them. I’m young and there’s still time. Yet I wonder what I might be losing each month besides blood and time.

I recently learned that women reabsorb about two thirds of the endometrium each cycle, which means I’m not losing as much as I think, at least not literally. I have never been good at biology and can’t quite grasp how this reabsorption happens, but I’m curious about what’s building up inside of me. Like the woman in Matthew, I want to be whole; like many women, I want to stop bleeding at least for a little while; and one day I want to give and not lose life. Until then, though, I want to believe that my blood loss is sacramental, not shameful, and that it is “a visible sign of an invisible reality,” much like the bread I eat and water I drink each Sunday. I have participated in that ritual nearly every week.
since I was baptized at eight years old. I still have the white cotton dress trimmed with lace that I wore the day I was baptized eighteen years ago. I remember worrying that the water would be cold, but it wasn’t. I stepped down into the large font with my father, held onto his arm while he uttered a prayer of blessing, and closed my eyes before he tilted me back into the water, immersing me in warmth. At eight years old, washed clean, I had not yet even begun to bleed.
The Fourth Story

In 1985, the year I was born, twenty-five-year-old Sylvia Seegrist walked into a mall in Springfield, Pennsylvania, and opened fire on mall patrons, killing three people and wounding seven more before being disarmed. Six years later, my family and I moved into her home. By that time the house belonged to the University of Pennsylvania, my dad’s employer. The powers that be at the University allowed my family and I to live there at a discount under the condition that Dad fix up the place as much as possible. Most of the house was in disrepair after enduring years of neglect by previous tenants. I remember days spent helping Dad tend the garden, haul junk out of the basement, and even re-shingle the roof (to my mother’s horror). Most of the time, when I wasn’t helping Dad or following Mom around the house, I ran wild through our three acres of woods with Adam and Emily, my brother and sister, swirling sticks in swampy creeks and climbing high into the trees.

From the front yard of this home I had the surreal experience of watching our previous home next door being demolished, deconstructed from the attic all the way down to the foundation. We had lived next door for several years
before moving into the Seegrist house, forced out because our home had become too dangerous to live in, too unstable. Heavy machinery and men I didn’t know took the house apart, and, instead of hauling away the debris to a landfill, they buried nearly all of it on the property. Each day as I walked down the driveway from the bus stop to the Seegrist house, I passed our old home and witnessed its steady destruction. To my young mind it seemed the earth was slowly swallowing up the house. What remained after the demolition crews abandoned the site was a lumpy sprawl of ground and a giant mound of displaced earth.

I am told the demolished house had been a three-story house, though I remember four. It stood, barely, on a wooded lot along a meandering driveway that began in Swarthmore and ended in Springfield. On the Swarthmore side, we were just a few blocks away from the gray stone and expansive lawns of Swarthmore College; on the Springfield side, we were situated right along Route 1, a four-lane highway that courses along the east coast like a large river. Our yard was all tall, wispy grasses, violets, pussy willows, dandelions, and honeysuckle up to the edge of the property, which was lined with patches of deep blue morning glories and young trees heavy with foliage. I can remember only fragments of the
house's form and what happened within its walls, and even these are distortions, mosaics of my memories combined with those of my parents and siblings.

We lived in the old house before I was old enough to understand what it meant to be poor. My father had trouble finding or keeping work in those years, and he had gone to the bishop of our congregation for help. Bishop Itri was a good man, an accountant, and a family friend. I didn't know him well before he died of cancer when I was a teenager, but I remember his large, squarish glasses, dark suits, and perfectly smooth black hair, parted on the side. He was rarely home while I spent afternoons and evenings playing with his kids as our moms gossiped in the kitchen, but he always came to church picnics, where I saw him in shorts, a t-shirt, and a broad grin as he played baseball with his sons and the rest of the youth in our congregation.

When my father went to Bishop Itri to ask for help, there was every reason to believe he would receive it. The bishop has the final say in the distribution of funds available to each congregation for those in need. Our church is a wealthy one, with lots of expendable resources, but it is also a church that emphasizes the virtues of self-reliance and hard work. When Dad explained to Bishop Itri that he couldn't make enough money to pay his rent and asked for help, Bishop Itri,
Dad's friend, said no. He believed that if he gave my father any money it would serve as a crutch that Dad would never relinquish. My father, a very tall, very strong man, must have left the bishop's office feeling hopeless and scared, rubbing a rough hand across his forehead as he walked to his car. When he got home, I imagine he stood by the door for a moment as Mom struggled at the kitchen table to calm us clamoring kids. I wonder how long he might have stood there before Mom caught his eye and knew instantly that they were going to have to figure this situation out on their own. Without outside help, my parents believed their only option would be to move from our quiet, suburban neighborhood to the projects of West Philadelphia.

Soon after this exchange with Bishop Itri, my parents were sitting in the chapel during church services when another couple, Greg and Becky Bradbury, saw them and felt prompted to help them. That's how Dad tells it--these two people, who didn't know my parents from anyone else in the congregation, saw my parents and felt simultaneously that they needed to do something. So they introduced themselves after the meeting, listened to our troubles, and offered to let us live with them. We were a family of five. They were a family of six. Greg Bradbury was a surgeon working for the University of Pennsylvania hospital, and they lived in a large home owned by
the University that was in such bad condition that they were
charged no rent. My parents accepted the offer without
hesitation, knowing that they had no choice. All of the
parents agreed that we would share the first story and divide
the rest of the house between the two families.

First Story
I can remember coming into the house through the back door
after playing outside and walking past my mother at the
kitchen sink into the small living room to plop down on the
couch. I can’t recall the walls or floors or the color of the
kitchen cabinets or the living room sofa, only some of the
things that happened in those rooms—for example, teenagers
and grown-ups I didn't really know sitting at the kitchen
table eating snow mixed with chocolate syrup, laughing and
talking about something I didn't understand. The kitchen
ceiling sagged so badly from water damage that Dad chopped
down a small tree, sheared off the branches, and used the log
to prop up the ceiling and keep it from collapsing. Beneath
the leaking plaster, Dad arranged pots to collect dripping
water. This kitchen and small living room formed the oldest
part of the house, actually a cabin built by William Penn, the
namesake of our state. Someone had come along after Mr. Penn
and built additions onto the cabin, expanding it into the
four-story house of my memory.
The rest of the first story is, in my mind, vast and empty, consisting of a large living room and a dining room or front parlor. One winter I had a wart on the top of my left foot that the doctor froze and then severed. I remember sitting by the fireplace in the living room as people around me opened presents, and I lifted up my Band-Aid to see the skin underneath, pink and shiny with ointment.

Second Story

There was a rule that we Dambrinks weren’t allowed on the second story. Because of this, I have no recollection of the second story as it was while the Bradburys lived there.

For a long time I had memories of hiding behind a fireplace, playing hide-and-go-seek with my siblings and friends, but I wasn't sure the memories were real because I couldn't remember what the fireplace looked like inside or how I got there. Years later my parents explained that our house had been part of the Underground Railroad, that on the second story of the house there was a shallow space behind the chimney where previous homeowners hid slaves when guests or enemies entered the home. My parents also told me that no one knew about this compartment behind the fireplace until demolition crews tore the house apart and uncovered a body-wide gap between the back of the fireplace and the outer wall.
Perhaps I developed false memories of hiding in this space that no one yet knew existed after hearing this story repeated by my parents and siblings enough times that I internalized it, made it my own somehow. I wonder how often I have done this, how many of my memories are false. Each time I return to my memories of this place and time by asking Adam or Emily or Mom or Dad to recount their own memories, I get lost in the tangle of recollections. I want to understand what happened in that house because so much of what I remember is unnerving. Yet if someone asked me whether I had a happy childhood, I would answer yes. I want to know whether I was happy or not then because I think my emotional state then may have something to do with whether I should be happy or not now. How much have I blocked out, really, and why?

Third Story

On the third story, there were four bedrooms and a bathroom, all of which opened up onto a square landing. My bedroom was in the far left corner from the stairway. The only memory I have of that room is of lying in bed with the covers pulled up to my chin, staring at the ceiling with its continents of peeled paint and exposed wooden slats, listening to raccoons squabble above me. I couldn't see through the dark slits in the wood, but I knew they were right there, the scratching and
raspy squeaks wearing on me until I finally tore from the bed and rushed to my parents' room.

My parents' room, like Adam's room and Emily's room, was empty except for a bed. I'm sure this recollection isn't true, but I don't remember any other furniture. Each room in my mind has bare wooden floors, walls of cracked plaster, crumbling ceilings, and rainwater dripping into pots scattered across the floors. The only exception to this bareness in my memory is the fireplace in my parents' bedroom, which I never saw lit. I'm sure there were windows in each of the rooms, but I can't say where.

The bathroom was small and situated between Adam's room and mine. My Dad loves to tell about the time he sat on the toilet and heard raccoons scurrying above him. Running along one corner of the bathroom was a wide lead pipe rusted through in some places, leaving gaping holes. Dad was listening to the raccoons, trying to keep track of where they were above him in the ceiling, when a pair of black eyes caught his attention, the eyes of a raccoon poking its head out of the lead pipe, perhaps deciding whether to risk escaping past the human or to face its pursuer above. It opted for racing back up the pipe.

Fourth Story

Beside the door to my brother's room was the door to the attic. The attic contained three small bedrooms with slanted
ceilings at the top of a long landing. To the right was my brother and sister's room. Emily once stood by her bed in this room, ate cherry ChapStick, and then offered it to me. At the other end of the landing was my parents' bedroom, another mostly empty dark room. I have only two memories of this space. In one I am curled up in a darkened corner with my arms wrapped tightly around my knees, crying and screaming at my parents to stop shouting at each other. In the other, I am sitting on the floor, holding a small green stuffed dragon that I call Petri while Adam and Emily eat sparkling blue toothpaste that oozes out in the form of a cylindrical star. I eat it too. Between these two rooms is my room. I have two memories of this room as well. In the first, I throw up in the crib and stand at the edge, holding onto the wooden bars and crying for my parents. In the next, Mom is cradling me, softly singing "Rockabye Baby" as we sway gently back and forth in a wooden rocking chair.

For years I never thought to question how it came to be that each of my family members had rooms on the third story and up in the attic. I assumed that we had stayed in the attic for a while until Emily and Adam couldn't stand sharing a room, at which point we moved down to the third story, returning the attic to its atticness. Only recently have I learned from talking with my Mom that there was no fourth
story. The Bradburys moved out of the house well before we had to leave it, so when they left, we Dambrinks took over the second story. That means that all eleven of us shared a single leaky bathroom on the second floor. When I asked Emily about this last Christmas, she said that when the bathroom plumbing broke occasionally or when my parents couldn’t stand sharing the bathroom any longer, they made us kids bathe in a corrugated metal tub. My sister was ten or eleven then, and she hated washing herself in the tub. At school kids made fun of her for smelling bad, and one teacher sent her to the nurse’s office to shower there before allowing her back into the classroom. Emily still resents our parents for this.

Stories such as this compel me to learn more about the old house and about our family while we lived there, but each time I learn a new part of the story, I feel my own memories slip through the cracks—especially the pleasant ones.

Once or twice in the past two decades I have gone back to where this house once stood, but I cannot remember what I saw. I can’t imagine it as anything but an overgrown stretch of ground flanked by a large dirt mound worked over by children indifferent to what lay far beneath their digging hands. All that remains is a lingering sense of dread and confusion where memory fails me.
The Door Approach

Sarah

We drove carefully up a muddy dirt incline to the nearest trailer off the main road and saw that it was the one we were looking for. Spread out around us were a dozen or so broken-up trailers and one dilapidated wooden church with peeling red paint and broken windows. Up behind the trailers, just before the tree line, crooked and sinking headstones dotted the hillside. Everything was blanketed in snow, while paths from cars to front doors were slick with mud.

It was obvious that my friend Natascia and I were out of our element. Natascia is a thin, bespectacled blonde who always wears her long, straight hair pulled back in a low ponytail and never says a rude thing. She rarely says anything, in fact, without an accompanying smile or soft giggle. We complement each other nicely—Natascia a shy blonde studying organ performance and me a gregarious brunette studying English. Both of us wore jeans, nice sweaters, and dark pea coats.

Natascia and I were asked by our local church leaders to find a girl named Sarah and invite her to return to our congregation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day
Saints. We had never met Sarah because, as I soon found out, she had stopped coming to church long before Natascia or I moved into the area. Nevertheless, we did what we were asked and ended up in Glouster, Ohio, in a neighborhood of strangers.

The trailer seemed to be sagging a bit in the middle, held up by a wooden deck built onto the front. Rusted car parts, plastic tricycles, and garbage littered the yard. Walking up onto the porch, we found bags of old diapers, spare bike parts, and more garbage. I knocked before I could talk myself out of it, and a tall, skinny man opened the door. He stood just inside, looking out at us. “How can I help you?” I explained that we were members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who hoped to invite Sarah back to church.

“Is Sarah home?” I asked.

“Yeah, she’s here. Come on in.” I considered turning around and walking back to the car. Walking into a rundown trailer with a guy I don’t know, accompanied only by my less-than-threatening friend seemed ill advised at best. Still, we went in. The whole room was brown—brown fake-wood-paneled walls, brown couch, brown chairs, brown coffee table, brown rug. The guy who invited us in asked us to have a seat, and I looked down at the couch to find a medium-sized dog curled up at one end. He was brown, too, though I couldn’t figure out
what kind of dog he was because his matted, filthy hair made it difficult to tell. I scooted between the coffee table and the couch, past the dog, and sat on the opposite end. I sort of perched on the very edge of the couch, and Natascia followed suit, because the couch was all torn-up yellow foam and exposed springs with a few spots of stained upholstery.

Before our host returned with Sarah, I scanned the rest of the living room and kitchen. The coffee table was covered in cigarette butts and trays, old receipts, and empty bags of chips. In the small kitchen off to our right, all of the cupboard doors hung open, drawing attention to the bare shelves they were supposed to be covering.

When our host came back, he sat on a chair next to me, and I got a good look at his worn jeans, old t-shirt, fair complexion, and yellowed teeth. Sarah followed him in and sat in a chair beside him. She was also tall and skinny with bad teeth. She was blonde, though. I smiled at them, introduced myself, and then let Natascia introduce herself. Sarah said, "Hi, I’m Sarah, and this is my brother Michael." I really had no idea what to say next.

Why am I doing this? I asked myself. The answer is as simple as Because I was asked to by people I have agreed to support in their church callings and as complicated as Because by visiting this person I could be saving her soul and thereby
maybe my own, too. Being a member of my church means I should be willing to venture outside of my comfort zone to introduce (or in some cases reintroduce) people to the doctrines of the Latter-day Saint church. Missionary work is important because there are a lot of people who want and need more truth in their lives, and those who do missionary work are blessed for their service. I believe in pushing beyond my comfort zone. I believe that it is good to help people find faith. My hesitation is that I don’t have a proselytizing bone in my body. It feels invasive to me. This is one of the reasons why I haven’t served a full-time mission for my church, though the opportunity remains open to me. It’s not that I think proselytizing is an inherently bad thing. I’ve heard lots of stories of people who have felt that something was missing in their lives until two young men or two young women with name tags knocked on their door and offered to share a message about Jesus Christ. And I believe in the message itself—in fact, it’s a beautiful message that has brought me incredible peace and happiness. It’s the feeling of forcing my beliefs on other people that makes me uncomfortable. That’s the word to describe it, really—uncomfortable.

“So, what do you do? Going to school?” I asked.

“No, we finished high school a while ago,” Sarah answered.
“Right. Working then?”

“Nope.”

Then Michael chuckled and said, “I’m just doing my best to keep myself out of prison these days.”

“Ha, yeah,” I said, as though I had any clue what that was like or whether it was actually funny or not. He seemed to be all right joking about it, though, so I thought it safe to laugh. Then I thought of my roommate’s exboyfriend, a guy down in Florida who was in prison for illegal possession of prescription-strength painkillers. She told me about their phone conversations, how he talked about being forced to detox, that it was worse than hell but that now he felt really good for once. He watched TV and played football with his inmates most of the time and enjoyed three meals a day, something he never got at home with his addict uncle. He even got a daily ration of chocolate milk. I considered this and thought that if I were Michael, I might prefer prison to this cold trailer.

“Well, we just wanted to stop by to see if you’d be interested in coming to church. When was the last time you came?”

“Oh, a long time ago,” Sarah said. “Our dad got baptized years ago, and the only reason we went was ‘cause he made us. But he’s not around anymore.” Several toddlers I had heard
giggling outside in the snow came rushing into the living room, followed by a very stocky woman with blonde hair and rosy cheeks. Sarah introduced us to her mom and then to the kids as I made a fuss over how cute they were—all chubby and blonde with blue eyes. I wondered if they were Sarah’s kids or her mom’s.

“I take it, then, that you’re not interested in coming anytime soon?”

“Not really, no,” they both replied.

“Okay, fair enough. You’re still more than welcome to come hang out with some of us who get together every Sunday to play games and sometimes on the weekend.”

“What do y’all do?” Michael asked, with seemingly genuine interest, though I had a hard time imagining him playing Settlers of Catan with us anytime soon.

“Well, sometimes we watch movies, go bowling, hiking—”

“I love hiking!” Michael exclaimed.

“Really?”

“Yeah! Man, I walk up there in the woods all the time. Keeps me out of trouble.”

“Awesome. Well, yeah, then I’ll definitely let you know when we go. Maybe one of us can come pick you up or something.” Their mom had only stayed in the room for a minute, evidently apathetic about our presence, but the kids
were still running in and out of the trailer through the back door. I thanked them for letting us visit with them, they said it was no problem, and then we left.

Annabelle

To visit Sarah, Natascia and I invaded only one home; to visit Annabelle, we invaded two. Still winter, we parked off to the side of a dirt road in a shallow snow embankment and began trudging up into someone’s yard, looking for Annabelle’s house number. The address of the first house we approached was just two digits below the house we wanted, but the next-door neighbor’s address was two digits too high. We walked around back to a garage, thinking maybe Annabelle lived in there. Our snooping didn’t feel strange at the time, but in hindsight I don’t know why we thought what we were doing was okay.

Before giving up on finding the house, we decided to knock on some doors to see if anyone could tell us how to find Annabelle’s address. I walked up to a large white house and rapped my knuckles against the wooden door. A man in his thirties answered the door. I said hello, introduced us, and asked for Annabelle, who, as far as we knew, still lived in the neighborhood. The man shifted his stance awkwardly and said he recognized the name but didn’t know where she lived. Then his wife came to the door and asked us to repeat the name.
“I know Annabelle. My daughter is friends with her daughter, Tenaya,” the woman said as she motioned for us to step inside.

“Really? Can you tell us where she lives?” I asked. Her husband closed the door behind us, and we all remained standing, grouped awkwardly by the door. Puddles of melted snow formed at our feet.

“I’m not quite sure. She used to live around here, but she and her daughter moved away a couple of years ago. Let me go ask my daughter if she knows.” As she walked into a back room to talk with her daughter, I smiled at the man and tried to make small talk. I’m never sure what people think of Mormons, so I do my best to seem normal and polite and, well, not weird. Then the wife came back into the room with her teenaged daughter, who brought a cell phone and said, “It’s ringing.” She then handed me the phone, and the next thing I knew I heard a “Hello?” on the other line. It was Annabelle.

“Hi! My name is Amanda. I’m over here with my friend Natascia, and we’re from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We’d love to stop by some time to get to know you and invite you to come to church.”

“Oh, I see.”

“I’m not sure where you live, though—would you mind giving us your address and phone number and maybe we can come
visit you? Maybe today? Maybe right now? We’re not very busy.”

Even as I was saying this, I knew I was being incredibly awkward. I rationalized it by telling myself that if she wasn’t interested in being contacted, I would be willing to back off immediately. I was trying to get to know her and possibly help her, not annoy or offend her.

“Uh, well, sure. I think that would be okay. Do you have something to write with?” Annabelle was hesitant but friendly. We took down her correct contact information, thanked the family for their help, and then trudged back to the car. Natascia and I wondered at the chances that we would knock on the door of probably the only people in the neighborhood who happened to have Annabelle’s phone number. Luckily, Annabelle hadn’t moved too far away, so we drove along the highway back towards home and turned off onto a county road that wove among fields and small neighborhoods, past little brick churches and dilapidated graveyards. When we got to Annabelle’s address, we parked in front of the small white house and made our way to the back door, which seemed as if it had the most foot traffic leading up to it in the snow.

We weren’t sure what to expect, especially now that we knew we were visiting a middle-aged woman with a teenaged daughter and not a twenty-something who had decided church just wasn’t her thing. We knocked on the door and were greeted
immediately by the loud yips of a small dog on the other side of the door. A short, round woman with shoulder-length dark hair came to the door and let us in, smiling. We introduced ourselves, shook her hand, and she invited us inside. Annabelle wore a baggy old t-shirt and cotton shorts, and hobbled a little as she walked, leading us through the small kitchen into the dining room area. We sat on wooden chairs among piles of folders and newspapers, the whole room turned into an office or workroom of some sort, or maybe just a processing area for things coming into and going out of the house.

Annabelle sat opposite Natascia and me at the table and asked us to tell her a little bit about ourselves before letting us find out more about her. We explained that we were graduate students and members of the church who just wanted to meet her and see how she was doing, whether she wanted to come to church, or if she needed help with anything. She told us that she and her daughter Tenaya had joined the church over a decade before and had stopped coming mostly because her husband resented their decision to be baptized. Eventually he had softened a bit, but Annabelle and Tenaya hadn’t been back to church for years. I let her know when and where church meetings were held each Sunday and offered to ask the missionaries to come by and visit with her and her daughter
and maybe her husband. She seemed genuinely interested in coming. Annabelle was pleasant to talk with, and I asked her all the questions I could think of while Natascia sat mostly silent beside me, smiling and patting the dog. I was paying attention to Annabelle while she talked, but my eyes wandered over framed Wal-Mart portraits of family members and knick-knacks scattered on every surface. After fifteen minutes or so, I stood to go and thanked Annabelle for her time. I asked if we could help her with anything, but she sort of waved us away and said “No, but thank you.”

Michael

On a warm spring afternoon recently I was given the task of tracking down a few more people who are on our church records but who have stopped coming. I was paired up with my friend Ivan, a thin, quiet man from Uganda. We were given a list of four people and their addresses and told to go try to find out what we could, invite them to church, and basically let them know they are missed. Unlike Natascia and I, Ivan has served a two-year mission for our church, so he is much more comfortable proselytizing than I am. In addition to two years of knocking on people’s doors and approaching strangers on the street, Ivan, like all Latter-day Saint missionaries, spent several weeks in a missionary training center learning how to communicate effectively with people about our church. As we
drove to the first address, looking for a young man named Andrew Johnson, I asked Ivan if he wanted to do the talking or if he’d rather I talk. He smiled at me and said, “I want to see what your door approach is.” Door approach, right. But I wasn’t selling Girl Scout cookies or something else people might actually want; I was reminding people that they once committed to something and have since abandoned it. What’s more, I’m not really one to think it’s a terrible thing if someone stops coming to church. I know that in my own case I’m much happier when I’m participating in church services regularly, but I’ve been through phases where that wasn’t where I wanted to be. I didn’t want to make anyone feel guilty for opting out of church.

When Ivan and I turned onto Michael’s street and saw his tiny house clinging to the hillside, surrounded by large truck tires and rusted lawn furniture, I wondered how I’d never noticed it before, since I drive by it on an almost weekly basis when I pick Ivan up for church. We parked and got out of the car, and I told Ivan he could do the talking this time. I’d try to keep my mouth shut. A little terrier barked at us from behind one of the tires, trying to scare us or warn us but failing miserably. As we stepped onto the porch, a tall old man came to the screen door and peered over his brass-rimmed glasses at us, one eyebrow raised.
“Hi,” I began, forgetting already that I was supposed to let Ivan do the talking. “We’re looking for Michael Cassel?”

“Well, I’m his senior.”

“Oh! Well, how are you? I’m Amanda, and this is Ivan. We’re from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and we’re hoping to invite your son out to church. Is he home?”

“Nope. Just me.” At this he opened the door and stepped out onto the porch. He must have been 6’5” and about 65 years old. He wore a red flannel shirt, torn-up blue jeans, and dark shoes. He was slightly cross-eyed in one eye, so that I couldn’t tell exactly which one was looking at me at any given point. Bald on top, he still had some silvery grey tufts of hair on the sides of his head. On one side, his hair was sticking straight up, as if he’d been sleeping on that side of his head for a few hours. He looked crazy in a friendly way. Ivan took my moment of silence as an opening to say something.

“Well, sir, could you give Michael this flier for us? It has information on it about where and when we meet for church, how to get there, who to contact, other activities going on each week, and other things.”

“Sure, I’ve got a pile of mail I need to give him. I’ll just add it to that.”

“Where does Michael live, then?” I asked.
“He’s kind of in between places right now, moving around from one friend to another.”

“Could we get his phone number from you, maybe?”

“Well, I don’t think so. Last time I gave his number to folks from church, he got real upset.”

“Oh. Never mind, then. Man, your dog sure is cute.” The dog had started yipping at us again.

“Yeah, that there’s Kitty. I got a dog named Kitty and a cat named Dog. So what are you folks doin’ here in Athens?” Michael asked. Ivan responded first.

“I’m a graduate student studying International Development.”

“And where are you from?”

“Uganda.”

“Uganda.” He turned his crazy-eyed gaze to me. “What about you?”

“I’m at OU, too, studying English--”

“Say! Do you know Dave Ransom?”

“Actually, yeah, we do,” I responded. Dave Ransom is a middle-aged father who goes to church with us. He and his wife are locals with big hearts—they’ve got several kids and have adopted several more. They fill up a whole row of seats at church, and, at least as far as I know, people see them as being solidly good, practical people.
“Dave and I go way back. We grew up together, you know. My family and I wouldn’t have made it if it weren’t for his father. He had a tiling company and gave us roofing work whenever he could. You know what Dave’s father used to always say to me?”

“What?”

“Improvise! Improvise, improvise! Haha.”

I smiled up at him, and the reason for knocking on Michael’s door took a back seat to my curiosity. I wanted to learn everything I could about this man and his life. In that moment, I figured it was more important to Michael that someone was listening to him than that someone was preaching to him.

“So you’re a roofer then?” I asked Michael.

“Used to be. For a long time. I been disabled twelve years, now. Boy, it’s tough tryin’ to make ends meet when you’re on disability.”

“Man, I bet.” I didn’t know what I was talking about; I was just trying to be affirmative so he’d keep talking.

“Yup. I was a good roofer, though. One of the best. People used to say to me all the time that I was the best roofer they’d ever known. One guy even told me, he said to me, ‘You know what my one regret is?’ And I said to him, ‘What?’ And you know what he said? I’ll tell ya. He said, ‘Lettin’ the
Cassel brothers go.’ He knew he shoulda let us do his roofing, but he went with someone else, and he’s regretted it ever since. You know, one time I offered to build my landlord a gazebo. He asked me how much he should pay me. I said, ‘Nothin.’ I just always wanted to try and build a gazebo, is all. So I worked on that thing real hard, got all those shingles up there—you go from top to bottom, you know—and when it was all finished, there was just one tile outta place. The guy told me not to worry about it, but I said I couldn’t let it go. I’d know it was outta place, and I couldn’t stand it. So I went up there and fixed it.”

“You sound like a man with a lot of integrity, Mr. Cassel,” I said.

“I’ll tell you what, though, it’s hard, gettin’ by on just $484 a month. It’s hard. I mean, you take out electricity, gas, the cable, rent, and you got nothin’ left. I just got enough for my coffee and cigarettes. I guess those are expensive, though.”

“Yeah, smoking is an expensive habit.”

“It is. But that’s the downside for you guys, isn’t it? No coffee, no tea. I’ll tell ya, that’s what I live on. Now I know they done those studies recently and found big lumps of hard stuff in people’s stomachs, and it was probably all coffee and tea and stuff, but what I’m sayin’ is, what if
that’s all those people had left? What if that’s all he had to keep him goin’?"

“I hadn’t thought of it that way, sir.” That’s when Ivan tried to wrap things up with a “Well, sir, thanks for letting us talk with you,” but before he could finish, Mr. Cassel started right up talking again.

“You know, you really can’t say enough about Dave Ransom. Is his father still alive?”

“I don’t know.”

“Hm. That’s just a good family. Raised right, you know? Not in that they had any money, but—”

“They were raised with the important stuff, you mean?”

“Yeah.”

“People like the Ransoms are why I like Athens so much. It’s a great little place.”

“Eh, Athens. The university owns everything, and the rest of us just gotta try to get by on nothin’.”

“You don’t like Athens?”

“Nah. Can’t say much about a town that doesn’t tolerate a nigger sayin’ what he thinks.”

“Wait, what?”

“I’m part black, you know. Got arrested once for runnin’ my mouth to the chief of police. And then to the judge. They just couldn’t tolerate a nigger runnin’ his mouth.” He pointed
at Ivan. “I hope you never had to deal with stuff like that here. Have you?”

“No, it’s no problem,” answered Ivan, looking as if he’d just been jolted out of a stupor.

“How long ago was this?” I asked, imagining Athens in the 1950’s.

“Two years ago.” He never did say what he was ‘runnin’ his mouth off’ about. “I got ten months in solitary.”

“What? Ten months?”

“Yep. Next time I went in, though, I didn’t have any trouble with anybody. I had respect. Everybody asked me, ‘How did you do it? Ten months, man!’ I said to them, ‘I dunno, I just got by each day.’”

“Wow. I can’t even imagine what that would have been like.” Everything I said sounded dumb, naïve. “Well, sir, we should be going. I should ask you, though, would you ever be interested in coming to church?”

“I can’t ever get up in time, to tell you the truth. My wife’s trying to leave me, so I just wait up till she comes home and try to talk to her until she leaves again. I don’t know what’s day and what’s night anymore.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah, and then a buddy of mine stole $400 from me. That’s why she’s angry. See that red truck over there?” He
pointed across the street, not to the shabby red pickup truck with a bed full of junk, but to the red truck behind that one, the shiny Dodge Ram. “That $400 was to fix that truck up so I could sell it. But my friend, he just up and took the money from me. It’s hurtful, you know, a friend doin’ something like that.” He put his head down and leaned his shoulder against the inside of the doorframe. “It’s not right.” I stared awkwardly past him into his living room. By the door there was a bookshelf lined with VHS tapes. Beside that, a scratching post for Dog, and behind that, a large brown sofa. Piles of paper and trash lay all over the furniture. “Anyway, those Ransoms. Can’t say enough about ‘em. Good people. Maybe I oughta give Dave a call, see if he has room in that minivan or station wagon or whatever of his for me.”

“I hope you do that, Mr. Cassel. We’d love to have you at church sometime.” Ivan and I shook hands with Michael, said goodnight, and left him standing on is front porch, waving goodbye.

I’ve driven by Michael’s house several times, just to see if the truck he’s trying to sell is still parked outside and if he’s home. I want Michael to come to church. I think he would be happy there, and I know the church might be able to help him out financially if he came more. Mostly, though, I want to sit with Michael on his rickety porch one evening,
maybe let Dog curl up on my lap, and swap stories until we have no more to say.
"So wait, where do you live again?" my cousin asks me as we nosh on catered Italian meatballs or cannoli after another family wedding/funeral/baby blessing/Super Bowl party. It could be any one of my cousins asking me this, because they each do every so often when I return to visit my parents outside of Philadelphia. Everyone on my mom’s side of the family says I move around too much, that I should stay near home as they do and be content. Southeast Pennsylvania is pretty ideal, encompassing plenty of farmland and quiet suburban neighborhoods in addition to gritty Philadelphia. I often consider moving back there for good, but just as often I succumb to wanderlust.

Most of my graduating class stayed close to home, opting for colleges and universities in Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, or New Jersey. I ended up in Utah. And though I lived in Utah for five years, I moved to a new apartment or house each fall. After college I moved to Washington, D.C., for a year before then moving to Ohio for graduate school, where I am now. For every year since I left for college I’ve traveled to another country. In a few months, if my plans to begin working for a company in Wisconsin don’t pan out, I’ll
likely stay with my sister in Phoenix until I can find work. Moving and traveling as often as I do make my life seem more fulfilling, purposeful, just...full. When I listen to my relatives question or even criticize my frequent relocation, what I hear are accusations of disloyalty, fickleness, and disapproval. I’m afraid that when they listen to me talk about my last trip abroad or my latest scheme to set up house in another state, what they hear is, “I don’t love you enough to stay. You’re not good enough--not enough.”

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The French author Alphonse Daudet wrote a story years ago about Monsieur Seguin and his goat. As the story goes, Monsieur Seguin lives on a humble farm at the base of a very large mountain. He keeps animals on this farm, but whenever he gets a goat and brings it home, the goat eventually runs away to the mountain to be free and to climb as high as it can--as goats are wont to do. He tries everything he can to persuade each goat to stay, even warning against the danger of crossing paths with the wolf that lives on the near side of the mountain. Regardless, each goat runs away and enjoys freedom for a short while before being attacked and eaten by the fierce wolf. One day Monsieur Seguin buys a she-goat, named Blanquette, and brings her back to the farm. He decides he will treat her so well that she will never want to run away.
He drives a stake into the very best patch of grass in his pasture and ties one end of a very long rope to the stake and the other end to Blanquette. Every day he checks on Blanquette to make sure that she is content, and for a long time—a longer time than any of the other goats stayed—she is happy there with the farmer.

Sure enough, though, Blanquette slowly realizes that even though she is treated very well, she still is not free to roam wherever she pleases. She begins to feel bored and becomes so depressed that she stops eating. The farmer can tell something is wrong, so he asks Blanquette what is the matter. She replies that she wants to be free, to climb to the highest part of the mountain and look out over the valley. The farmer reminds her about the ferocious wolf that roams the mountainside, but she says that she still wants to go. I’ll fend off the wolf with my horns, Blanquette says. The farmer, for fear of losing his little she-goat, locks Blanquette up in a dark stable. He forgets about the unlocked window, however, and Blanquette escapes up into the mountain.

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I met Lina while we were student tutors at a university writing center, passing the time between appointments as we often did, discussing obscure trivia or workloads or current events. I can still imagine her sitting across from me,
puncturing her left forearm with a glossy black stapler she held in her right hand. I told her repeatedly to stop, put the stapler down. I asked her why she wanted to do that, what’s the point? And she just grinned at me, somehow pleased that the several of us tutors sitting around her were so adamant that she not hurt herself. It didn’t really hurt, she told us, maybe just a little bit, but look, see? And then she stapled her arm, pulled out the staple to reveal two tiny pinpricks in her skin.

Since that first day we met four years ago, we have worked together, traveled together, and taken classes together. Once, while sitting at the tutor table at work five years ago, we were talking about nicknames when I told her that I have never really had one that stuck, that I haven’t ever really been “known” for something specific among my friends, to my knowledge. To this she replied by telling me that I am a goat.

“What?” I wondered aloud.

“Yes, you are our goat,” she said. She then elaborated by explaining the origin of the phrase “Got your goat.” She told me that it comes from a tradition of keeping goats in horses’ stables so that they don’t become too anxious. Often, if someone wanted to rig a horse race, he could steal the goat from any horse he wanted to upset or make anxious, thereby
hindering the horse’s performance on the track. When someone gets a goat, he or she is essentially removing the stabilizing influence.

“I keep you stable?”

“Sure, you keep all of us stable,” Lina said, referring to some of the other tutors who were also close friends of ours, all very intelligent, artistically inclined individuals.

Whenever Lina finds a newspaper article or online video or story or song that has anything to do with goats, she sends me an email with the proper attachments, eager to remind me of my status as a calming, stable companion. I think about this often and want to believe it of myself. They need me, I think when I need assurance. I am needed. I cling to my goatness and try to avoid considering whether I am a better goat to my friends than I am to my family.

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Blanquette spends an entire day climbing the mountainside and feeling blissfully free. Later in the day, she hears Monsieur Seguin’s horn far below and scoffs, relishing her freedom and refusing to return at his call. Eventually the horn sounds no more, darkness descends, and the wolf finds Blanquette. When she sees the wolf through the brush, Blanquette realizes she cannot win against him. She decides, though, that she will try her best to fend him off through the night and not give up at
least until daybreak. The wolf pounces on Blanquette, and they grapple with each other until morning comes. Finally Blanquette, exhausted, lies down in surrender, and the wolf devours her.

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Three years ago I traveled to the Netherlands with my parents, my brother, his wife, and their daughter for a family reunion. It was also my father’s sixty-fifth birthday, and we enjoyed several days of family parties with my dad’s side of the family, most of whom still live in the Netherlands where they, including Dad, all grew up. One morning, Dad and I ran an errand to a local drugstore to pick up a few necessities. I don’t remember what we talked about, but I do remember that I was frustrated or worried with something. Mid-sentence, Dad interrupted me and said, “Ah, if there is one thing I do know about my Mandie, it is that she is very easily discouraged.” Dad and I are very close and open with one another, but this blunt statement silenced me. Like all comments fathers make that cut unintentionally, this one has left behind a small yet festering wound on my subconscious. I am reminded of it each time I give up too easily, whether that be on a grade or a relationship or myself. But I am a goat, I reminded myself. And goats are sturdy creatures. They navigate precarious mountain ledges and keep skittish animals grounded and calm.
And they do not give up easily—they grapple through the night.

A few months ago I saw a video of fainting, or myotonic, goats that has been swapped via blogs and Facebook walls for some time. In the video, a man runs toward a group of myotonic goats while waving his arms, causing the little kids to topple over and rock back and forth, legs sticking straight into the air. Fainting goats have a genetic disorder that makes their muscles go stiff when they are startled. The does and bucks of the breed have mostly figured out that if they splay their legs fast enough, when they tense up they can stay up; the kids, though, just tip over onto their sides and lie for a few seconds before scrambling back up on their hooves. After the comedic effect of the feat lessens, the indignity of the situation sets in. By then these jumpy creatures just seem pathetic.

Capra, the Latin word for goat, shares its root with capricious. Ghaidos, the Proto-Indo-European derivation for our English goat, means young goat but also jump. I wonder whether that is jump in the sense of jumpiness or jump in the sense of one willing to leap. And is the leap a hopeful one or a self-destructive one? Is it a jump up or a jump away? Or a jump ship? I find myself qualifying my goatness. Goats can be
just as pathetic and weak-spirited as they can be stalwart and stable. This sounds ridiculous, even to me, but which goat am I?

Years after Lina dubbed me the goat among our friends, she further qualified it by calling me an escapist goat. She told me that I wasn’t always an escapist goat but that sometimes I avoid or deflect threats by depreciating myself. I escape through self-deprecation to a safe place where others cannot say things of me I have not already said of myself. I keep traveling and moving, all the while clinging to some semblance of stability, at least for the sake of others, and end up doubting whether I could ever be happy in one place, worrying that someday I will be found out as not the stabilizing kind of goat but as the feinting kind of goat I suspect I might really be. I’m afraid of being the wrong kind of goat, but more than that, I’m afraid of becoming the wolf.
If I were to make a soundtrack of my childhood and adolescence, it would include my mom’s lullabies and the sound of her laughing on the phone in the next room; a sampling of 90’s pop country albums my older sister Emily listened to in her bedroom while curling her hair and the repeated sound of slamming doors she left in her wake after fights with my dad; a Weezer cover performed by my older brother Adam’s punk rock band and the theme from the video game Goldeneye; Chopin etudes my dad played on our rickety upright piano and the sound of his whistling throughout the house and in the garden. All of these sounds have carried over into my adulthood. When I look after my friends’ children, sometimes I get to sing them to sleep; in my high school I was one of just a handful of kids who unabashedly loved Tim McGraw; I even learned how to play the James Bond theme on the piano. However, none of these sounds makes me feel as connected to specific family members as my dad’s whistling does.

Dad whistles while he shaves, showers, walks, gardens, and, yes, while he works. In fact, if Dad’s moving he’s probably whistling. Some of the time, his whistle is a cheerful, bouncing melody true to a tenor’s range. Most of the
time, though, his whistle is what an online whistling dictionary I found calls “pink noise.” Pink noise is “the so-called whispered or breathy tone in which the pitch is discernable, while white noise is equally present.” It’s a documented form of whistling that dates back to ancient China, so I’ve read, but Dad’s the only pink noise whistler I know. This type of whistle, in Dad’s case at least, is created by inhaling and exhaling rhythmically through rounded lips, raising and lowering the tongue to alter the pitch. Several years ago I caught myself whistling pink noise and later told Dad about it. He asked me what I was talking about. “You know, that breathy, whistly thing you do while rummaging through papers on a desk or raking leaves in the yard?” I imitated the sound to him.

“I do that?”

“Yeah, like all the time.”

“Huh. I’ll be darned.”

I explained the term pink noise to Dad, and he’s brought it up several times over the past few months. When my parents came into town recently to visit, Dad made the offhand observation that he doesn’t whistle as much as he used to—why, he couldn’t really say. “But I’m still heavily into pink noise,” he added.
I have learned that a whistling Frits is a happy Frits. And I love when Dad is happy, yet at times I have become irrationally aggravated by his whistling. Back home it was rare for me to get through playing a single song on the piano without Dad supplementing the tune with his “la-dee la-daaa’s” or “tweet-a-tee-tat’s,” which only sometimes followed the melody and often added fanciful flourishes. His distracting participation flustered me, and I too often whined in his general direction, “Daaaad! Stoooop!” Dad’s whistling becomes especially obnoxious when we’re listening to music in the car, his warble piercing the enclosed space with extraneous trills and tweets. His habit doesn’t perturb me nearly as much as it does my older sister Emily, though.

I’ve known for a few years that Dad’s whistling gets on Emily’s nerves, but when I asked her directly just how often she is annoyed when Dad whistles, she responded, “All the time.”

“Really? All the time?”

“Yeah. I have a story about that, too. Almost two years ago, everyone was at our house for Christmas, and we were all in the kitchen. Ryan [Emily’s husband] had the TV tuned to a blues music station. It was a good blues song and, you know, one that we all knew. And Dad started whistling. Ryan and I looked at each other—-we didn’t know what he was whistling to,
something in his head maybe? I think he was trying to whistle to the music, but he was doing his own tune, trying to whistle jazzy bebop stuff. It was horrible. So Ryan went right up to the TV and turned it off. And then Dad stopped. I don’t think he had any clue what he was doing, but Ryan and I still joke about that.”

Though I grew up hearing Dad whistle almost constantly, I didn’t start whistling myself until Brad Stanton taught me how when we were about seven years old. Brad was my neighbor, friend, and classmate. We spent most of our shared childhood thrashing the bamboo in my backyard with sticks to make mazes, poking at the spring layers of slime in our creek, or climbing trees in the forest at the bottom of our hill. I remember one day Brad taught me how to whistle by inhaling through firmly puckered lips. He said that after I practiced that for a while, he could teach me how to whistle the other way, by exhaling. Then he showed off by whistling his way back home, leaving me to practice—nearly hyperventilating as I repeatedly drew in deep breaths. Eventually I got it, and I’ve been whistling ever since.

I whistle most often when I am alone, to keep myself company. Last spring, while walking around my English Department building late at night, I took to whistling the theme to the 1968 film “Twisted Nerve” for the benefit of my
colleagues who pulled the same late nights that I did. We all knew I was just having fun with it, alluding to a scene from the more recent “Kill Bill” in which a sexy female assassin whistles this same eerie tune as she descends on her next target. Still, my own whistling in the dark often gave me the creeps.

A college roommate once told me that whistling is only fun for the whistler, by which she meant, “Please stop whistling in the apartment when I’m around.” That was the first time anyone was annoyed enough by my incessant whistling to confront me about it. Had she asked me to stop any other kind of absent-minded noisemaking, I would have simply felt bashful, but asking me to stop whistling confused me because it’s something I do when I feel happy.

Over the years I’ve gathered that whistling in public is sometimes impolite and almost always awkward, but I’m learning that whistling can mean lots of different things to lots of people. My friend Nataliya tells me that in Ukraine, where she is from, whistling outside is okay, but whistling inside the house brings bad luck, specifically in the form of losing money. I’ve read that Russians believe whistling indoors causes poverty, Serbians think it attracts mice, and Koreans worry it’ll lead to snake infestations; some Scotsmen warn their children that whistling makes Jesus’s mother Mary cry;
other Scotsmen (back in the eighteenth century) believed “A crooning cow, a crowing Hen and a whistling Maid boded never luck to a house”; in the Philippines, it is improper for women to whistle at all, while men are allowed to whistle only in private; sailors whistle to summon a strong wind; whistling in a theater is considered bad luck because it used to confuse the stagehands’ signals to each other, many of whom had been whistling sailors; and Muslims fear that whistling summons demons. Whistling is often associated with the Devil, perhaps because “whistle” and “hiss” were nearly interchangeable in ancient Hebrew scripture. In Genesis the Devil assumes the form of a serpent and lures Adam and Eve into transgression, presumably hissing along the way. In Goethe’s Faust, the Devil whistles while angels sing. In folk tales and from around the world, there are those who can communicate with birds by whistling to them. This “language of the birds” is believed to be mythical, adamic, something hearkening back to our origins as creatures of this ancient earth.

Whistling does not usually feel mythical to me but practical. I whistle daily as I walk to school, fold laundry, drive to the grocery store, and sweep my kitchen floor. Though I have imperfect pitch, and my whistling is usually a little breathy, I think I’m pretty good at it. I can at least imitate phrases
from my favorite orchestral music and whistle along with most songs on the radio.

I whistled for an audience for the first time in Iowa City just a few months ago while I was in town for a conference. One week before leaving from Ohio to drive out for the week, I got an email from my friend Amy, who would also be in Iowa City:

There is a slight chance that I will need to use you and your mad whistling skills on Saturday night of the conference (there's an awesome reading series and I'm reading for some of it--well, perhaps playing the Iowa Song, if I can get my ukulele out there). I will keep you posted on it though. xoxox

The "Iowa Song" is a simple love song Amy wrote with our friend Patricia a few years ago. I have an mp3 of Amy singing it while playing the ukulele, accompanied by Patricia on clarinet and Patricia’s dad on mandolin. Without hesitation, I said I’d do it.

It wasn't until a few hours before the reading that I realized why agreeing to sing and whistle in front of a large crowd might be terrible idea. As Amy and I ran through the song a few times at a friend's apartment, I became increasingly nervous about the performance. I could handle singing harmony alright, but my whistle was a shaky tremolo
rather than the clear, rounded tone I’m usually capable of. Amy, trying to be supportive, assured me that the shaky whistle had an old timey quality to it, as though I were intentionally imitating a scratchy phonograph recording—perfect for our folksy tune. But I knew better. As I whistled, straining to keep my lips from quivering, I recalled my experiences performing on the flute in front of large crowds at school or at church. I played the flute all through middle school and high school but rarely performed as a soloist or in a small chamber group because when my embouchure often trembled uncontrollably. Of course, the harder I tried to stiffen my lips, the less I was able to do so. What’s worse, when you’re playing the flute and your mouth shakes, the flute shakes, too. After several attempts at fluting in public, I gave up. I couldn’t handle the embarrassment of being visibly nervous and giving a poor performance—vibrato is a good thing, but an uncontrollable vibrato draws way too much attention to itself. Yet there I was, about to whistle in front of a crowd of artists and creative writers—all of who, I assumed in my insecurity, would scoff at my lack of skill and composure.

Amy and I walked to Prairie Lights, the bookstore where the reading would begin at 10pm, and climbed the stairs inside to the second-floor café. We were fifteen minutes early, and
already the place was filled with twenty-somethings milling about in their dark tweed and corduroy, looking for their friends and drinks and seats. On one end of the long room was the bar, behind which a bartender was pouring glasses of wine as fast as she could to accommodate the impatient patrons. It had been a tiresome week for all of us, trying as hard as we could to be charming and engaging for hours on end to impress our peers. On the opposite end of the room was a row of windows looking out onto Dubuque Street. A wide windowsill ran the length of the wall, lined with the same white votive candles that sat in clusters on every table in the room. The windows served as the backdrop to the “stage,” a small section of bare wooden floor where the microphone stood. The glow from the streetlights and votive candles provided most of the lighting in the room, which filled to capacity by the time the reading began. Those who weren’t able to find an empty chair stood along the walls or sat on the floor. Amy and I stood against the wall on the side of the room opposite the door, taking in the smells of wine and wool and warm bodies.

A few minutes after ten, two creative writing graduate students stepped up to the microphone, shushed the audience, and ran through several announcements before introducing the readers. Ten readers in all, five minutes each. Halfway through, there would be a break so everyone could refill wine
glasses or step outside for a smoke. Amy was fifth on the list, so I had adequate time to worry about all of the ways I could possibly screw up. To relieve my anxiousness, I tried some positive self-talk, tried tensing up all my muscles for a minute before then relaxing them as I let out a long breath, and tried focusing on the readers and not myself. The first reader was a short, bald Pakistani man dressed entirely in rich, black fabrics. Over a black cotton dress shirt he wore a fitted velvet blazer. Black corduroy pants, a leather belt, and pointed leather shoes completed his very serious ensemble. He held a book out in front of his stomach, keeping his back erect and his lips just inches from the microphone. He looked down on this book--his book, already published--with one raised eyebrow, drew a deep breath, and commenced reading the first few pages in a deep, sensuous tone. It was unreal. I looked around at other people to gauge their reactions. Did anyone else think this guy was a perfect caricature of the brooding writer type? I saw a few people cast sideways glances at their friends followed by not-so-subtle eye rolls, but for the most part the audience seemed absolutely absorbed in the intensity of the reader’s rich baritone voice and his exotic dialect. When he finished, he nodded in response to the audience's applause and slowly walked right out the door, coming back only after a few more readers had gone.
The next three readers were less intense but equally intimidating, reading poems of sexual confession and confusion, damn-the-man rhetoric, and coy humor. After the fourth reader, Amy and I stepped carefully around the people on the floor and at tables to make our way to the front of the room. We stood there at the microphone—me in my jeans and sweater and Amy in her dark blue dress and cardigan, ukulele in hand. Amy smilingly introduced us and explained that, instead of reading a short piece about visiting the Cabbage Patch Kid factory in Cleveland, Georgia, she wanted to share a love song she wrote to cope with writer's block. She gave a self-deprecating caveat about knowing “only three chords” on the ukulele and then announced that I would be her human clarinet, her whistler. I looked at her with eyebrows raised, trying to signal to her to quit drawing attention to the fact that I would be whistling, but she continued: “I want everyone to feel free to sing or hum along if you catch onto the tune, and please—when Amanda is done whistling, I want all of you to give her a big round of applause!” The audience murmured its agreement, then quieted as Amy began the brief intro. We sang the first verse in unison, then the second verse in harmony before my whistling interlude.

We placed our weary hands in the fields that we worked,
And tossed heaps of earth to protect our fragile hearts
And we dig, we dig and we dig down in Iowa.
We drove from Cropseyville down to Rochester just to see you my dear.
Will you harvest my heart, my sad and lonely heart, my little Iowa sweet?

We may act a little shy when we look in your eye,
But don’t be confused—we were once made out of straw
And we swayed, we swayed and we swayed down in Iowa.
We drove from Cropseyville down to Rochester just to see you my dear.
Will you harvest my heart, my sad and lonely heart, my little Iowa sweet?

When the moment came, Amy stepped away from the microphone and I leaned toward it, puckered my lips, and blew out a quiet, airy sound of a whistle. I felt my knees, hands, and lips shaking as I pressed on through the lines of melody. I tried to smile reassuringly with my eyes to let the audience know, yes, I know I'm messing up, but I'm okay. The audience was unnervingly silent as I whistled until about halfway through when I heard two or three people way in the back begin whistling along with me. That was when I realized they weren’t going to scoff at me. They wanted to encourage me, help me even. I kept shaking, but I also felt a sense of relief as I
continued through to the end of the verse. When I stopped there was an almost audible sigh from the audience, before they began clapping, cheering, and whistling for me, drowning out the first few lines of the last verse:

In the place where we meet, we let the corn grow in heaps,
We walk through the fields and let the dew stick to our knees
And we sing, we sing and we sing down in Iowa.
Who’d think that all that love could come from one little seed, my little Iowa sweet?
Who’d think that all that love could come from one little seed, my little Iowa sweet?

We finished, and Amy and I walked back to where we had been standing before as the room rang with applause--partially because we had done a decent job, and partially because our performance had roused more than a few people out of a mellow, poetry-induced stupor.

A few friends and I decided to leave after the intermission, but before I left I made sure to buy one of the letter-pressed posters that announced the event and listed all of the readers. The poster background is white with a few multi-colored firework explosions scattered about the top half. The performers’ names and event info appear in dark
purple ink. In the bottom right-hand corner is a large portrait of Harry from *Harry and the Hendersons*. His expression is blank, and he is looking sort of sideways at you from the poster.

As I pushed past people to get to and from the poster table, several people tapped my shoulder or tugged at my sleeve to get my attention and let me know how much they had enjoyed my whistling, saying “Thank you for whistling! That was so great!” or “I loved the whistling!” I suspect that their praise was motivated a little more by pity than by genuine admiration.

After buying the poster I made my way out into the hallway to wait until my friends came out. One young man, wearing a dark blue sweatshirt with his hood pulled on and carrying an open flask, walked up the stairs and stopped in front of me. Leaning in close to my face (were his pupils dilated...?) he looked at me and asked, “Are you the whistler?”

“...Yeah...”

“Awesome. Man, that was so great. I loved it.”

“Thanks, that's really nice of you to say. I was really nervous—like, shaking I was so nervous—”

“Naw, dude, it was great. It totally helped with the...the...” He held his right hand in front of his face and tilted it back and forth.
“The vibrato, you mean?”

“Yeah! Totally.”

“Thanks.” And with that he moseyed his way on into the café.

The next morning, on our way out of town, my friend Kelly and I stopped by Prairie Lights to pick up a few books and some breakfast. Upstairs in the café, I ordered a vanilla steamer from the manager, who had been checking IDs at the reading the night before. I thanked him for hosting the event and told him what a great venue the café was for that kind of thing. He smiled and thanked me, said he was glad I liked it, and then did a double-take. “Wait, were you one of the musicians?”

“Yeah, I was the whistler.”

“Great job last night!”

“Thanks.” And with that, he handed me my change and my drink and Kelly and I drove back home to Ohio.

There was a period in my life when I couldn’t whistle. Due to an injury I sustained as a teenager, I had to undergo multiple surgeries over the course of ten years to replace my two front teeth with implants. For a few years in college, I had what is called a “flipper,” or a retainer that has two fake teeth attached to the front of it. While wearing this retainer, I
couldn’t whistle because the retainer interfered with the flow of air across the roof of my mouth; when I took the retainer out, the large gap in my top row of teeth made it difficult for me to control the flow of air out of my mouth. If I had tried hard enough, I think I could have made it work, even without my two front teeth.

Some people insist that they are incapable of whistling. I don’t believe them; I think just about everyone could whistle if they tried hard enough. This isn’t to say that whistling is an easy trick to pick up, though. Lauren Bacall might have sounded really convincing when she told Humphrey Bogart to simply “Put your lips together and blow” in To Have and Have Not, but it’s a little more complicated than that. Though there are ways of explaining on paper how to whistle, I love that whistling is something you just have to practice over and over again until you catch that just-right vibration in the air, and then voila! music. All of us have to figure out how to whistle for ourselves because we all have uniquely shaped throats, mouths, tongues, teeth, and lips. The important thing to remember is that, so long as a person can breathe, that person can whistle.

In a book all about learning how to make odd noises with your mouth, called MouthSounds, author Fred Newman describes
the key physiological difference between whistling and singing or speaking:

Almost every sound around us is created by the transfer of vibrations from some rapidly moving object to surrounding air molecules. In the case of the voice, our vocal folds vibrate, rhythmically compressing the air around them. The resulting vibrations travel in the air to the ears of others. In whistles, however, no physical object vibrates—the air molecules themselves vibrate directly.

Humans who speak or sing depend on the vibrations of their vocal chords to produce the sounds they want to use to communicate. When humans whistle, though, our vocal chords don’t vibrate at all. We make the air vibrate by forcing air through the small hole of our puckered lips—some of the air passes through, but some of it collides with the sides of the opening and swirls into tiny vortices that cause the air to vibrate and whistle. Human whistling is little more than eddies of air, really, and as far as what our body requires to create the sound, whistling is simpler than speaking or singing. Whistling is an ancient, animal part of us that responds to natural whistles occurring everywhere—from sea to land to air. As we whistle, the world whistles back.
While attending a conference recently in Washington, D.C., several of my colleagues and I decided to exchange one zoo for another and headed across the street to the National Zoo. We wandered into the Great Ape House first, and I watched through a thick pane of glass as a giant silverback gorilla vomited onto the cement ledge in front of him, just a few feet from where I stood. After disgorging the contents of his stomach, he sat up for a moment, his gaze of ennui focusing on something just over my left shoulder. Leaning forward again, he began to drag his right forefinger through the creamy, pumpkin-colored puddle of mush, scooping it up into his mouth. He leaned back to savor each mouthful, like a cow chewing cud. A boyish zookeeper stood beside the large enclosure in his jeans, tan polo shirt, and matching tan cap, assuring the few of us who looked on in curious disgust that the gorilla, named Baraka, was okay and that he did this all the time. A few moments more and I turned away from Baraka to strike up a conversation with a friend who sat nearby, also averting his gaze from the scene still going on behind me.

When I strolled on ahead to the orangutan enclosure, I had a moment to chat one-on-one with another zookeeper about the now vomiting orangutan before me. She explained that nobody really knows why the primates repeatedly ingest their own regurgitations, but her best guess is that they do it for
attention. This would explain, at least, why the primates insist on performing the ritual just inside the glass of the enclosure, as close as they can get to the zoo’s patrons as we pass by. The orangutan, named Bonnie, imitated her gorilla cousin across the way by propping herself on the wide cement ledge in front of us, alternating between gazing past us and leaning over to vomit, eat, and repeat. According to the second zookeeper, these large primates don’t do this in the wild, just here at the zoo. When a new primate is introduced to the band of apes living in these enclosures, it doesn’t begin vomiting like this until it learns from its companions how and when to do so. This pathetic gesture made by animals that look so much like human beings unnerved me. I’ve heard of children vomiting for attention, but as I understand it this usually happens only when the children are upset by something and either do it by accident or gag themselves because they think it’ll get them what they want. Bonnie didn’t seem upset to me, though, and neither did Baraka. They seemed more bored than upset. If they wanted attention, why didn’t they learn to do something less repulsive to keep visitors standing just outside of the glass, gazing in on them?

I didn’t think about Bonnie again until a week later when I was at home in Ohio browsing my university library’s online database for articles about human whistling. In a 2009 article
called “Zipadee Do Dah” from Natural History Magazine, biologist Stephan Reebs shares an exciting development in the study of primates: an orangutan at the National Zoo, named Bonnie, whistles. She mimics her caretakers’ whistling, actually teaching herself how to form sounds completely different from the typical sounds of an orangutan. What’s more, she’s the first documented case of a nonhuman primate whistling or even mimicking the sound of another species, voluntarily. Other primates have been able to do this before but only after being trained to. Since stories of Bonnie’s whistling have gotten out, other zookeepers across the world have reported similar behavior in the orangutans they care for. One zoo, in Germany, has recorded one of its orangutans whistling and set it as the background to a punk rock album sold at the zoo’s souvenir shop and online. I keep watching short video clips online of Bonnie puckering her lips between the metal grids of a cage, looking past the camera and whistling the same soft, almost owl-like hooting tone over and over. Scientists have known for a long time that primates can imitate the physical movements of humans, but Bonnie’s self-motivation to learn the sounds that a human makes gives scientists hope that they’ll be able to learn about the evolution of human language from the whistling of orangutans.
I believe our own ancestors whistled before they spoke, long before creating instruments from materials around them or developing the complicated syntax of our modern speech. I imagine they reached a point at which bodily movement and physical touch were not enough to communicate their increasingly nuanced thoughts over growing distances, so they thought to mimic the birds around them. According to Charles Darwin, “it is probable that the progenitors of man . . . before acquiring the power of expressing mutual love in articulate language, endeavored to charm each other with musical notes and rhythm.” Perhaps our progenitors whistled to woo one another, their echoed calls an act of unification. Woop, a word we form with our lips, tongues, and breath in very much the same way we prepare to whistle.

In 2009, professor of archeology Steve Mithen, resurrecting an old theory, proposed that “music and language might have evolved from a single form of ancient communication” that incorporated sounds heard in the natural world. Mithen writes that as our ancestors evolved and spread across the globe, they developed increasingly complex languages that met two criteria: they could adapt to unfamiliar situations, and they could be taught to strangers. Before this split, the musical languages we spoke were so specific to our various communities that it was incredibly
difficult for others unfamiliar with our culture to learn how to speak to us. When these protolanguages became insufficient, music split off from language to become a secondary system for communicating emotion, while language became the primary means by which we transmitted information. Our modern system of language, then, may have developed because strangers couldn’t agree on what music meant, so we eliminated as much confusion or misinterpretation as we could by sacrificing most of the musicality of our vocalizations.

This ancient form of communicating through music has persisted in small pockets throughout the world. One of the richest examples of this is found off the coast of Spain on an island called La Gomera. Many of the people here speak Silbo Gomero, a whistled language that imitates the myriad intonations of their particular Spanish dialect. Silbadors cup one hand at the edge of their mouths, alongside their cheek, while holding a knuckle or two of their other hand just inside their mouths as they force their breath through the opening they’ve formed. Their birdlike whistles, a function of mouth and hands, are audible for several miles across the dynamic terrain of the island. Those who have studied Silbo are not sure whether this mode of communication was brought over by ancient people emigrating from Africa or was developed out of necessity by shepherds and farmers who traversed the mountains
in the course of their daily labors. Online I find videos and photos of mothers and brothers, tradesmen and shepherds, standing atop jagged cliffs or along sloping hillsides, whistling across mountains and valleys in a language that sounds both utterly foreign and completely natural.

I’ve said that Bonnie was the first documented case of a nonhuman primate learning to whistle without formal human training, but that may not be true, depending on what you want to believe. While talking with my friend Spencer about Bonnie recently, Spencer said to me, “You know that some people say Bigfoot whistles, right?” I studied Spencer’s smiling expression for a moment, trying to gauge his level of sincerity. “Excuse me?” I responded, still unsure whether Spencer knew just how gullible I can be. “Yeah, people who claim to have seen or heard a Bigfoot say that it knocks rocks together and whistles. I’m telling you, there are people with PhDs researching this stuff—there’s even a national organization for Bigfoot research!” I could tell Spencer thought this was funny but also that he was genuinely fascinated by it. It turns out my friend is a Bigfoot enthusiast, of sorts—not quite so interested, I think, in the existence of Bigfeet as he is in the people who spend their lives investigating these mythical creatures—people such as
Jeff Meldrum, Associate Professor of Anatomy and Anthropology at Idaho State University, who claims footprints are the best evidence we have of the existence of this nonhuman, apelike species. Spencer recommended that I look into the BFRO, or Bigfoot Field Research Organization, which of course I did, and I found that there are a lot of people reporting ridiculous bigfoot sightings, but there are also a surprisingly large number of people who have taken upon themselves the tasks of assessing these reports’ validity, documenting them, and even organizing national conventions and expeditions to sighting locales.

In 1972, Vietnam veteran Al Berry and former Air Force pilot Ron Morehead camped out in the Sierra mountains of northern California between September and November of that year for the sole purpose of finding tangible proof that Bigfoot, also known as Sasquatch, is real. Morehead had been hunting with friends in the area when they began hearing frightening sounds in the night and spotting large, five-toed footprints during the day. Morehead and Berry’s campsite, eight miles from the nearest road and sitting at an elevation of 8,000 feet, consisted of a small, makeshift shelter of logs propped against large pine trees. A row of logs balanced on top formed the roof of the little teepee-like enclosure that sat on a bed of browned pine needles along a mostly bare
hillside. Forty feet away from the cabin, Berry and Morehead hung a microphone from a tree and waited. Though they never did manage to produce proof of anything particularly suspicious during those months, aside from more footprints, they did record a lot of nighttime noises that have become known as the “Sierra Sounds.” The noises picked up by their microphone include rumbling growls, breathy grunts, indistinct mutterings, disturbing howls, and piercing whistles. Al Berry’s description of the second night at camp is almost poetic, albeit a little overwrought.

As dusk became dark night, something approached camp from a ridge above, rapping on wood or rocks as it came, and when it arrived . . . it vocalized, and the sounds carried through the trees as I have never heard human voices carry ever before or since. And it whistled, a clear, beautiful whistle like a bird might make, between its kind and, at one point, back and forth with us.

On the BFRO’s website I found an eight-second clip from the Sierra recordings of the supposed Bigfoot whistles. Midst breathy inhalations and a single low, resonant moan there are several distinct whistles--brief, high-pitched tones that seem to be coming from more than one whistler. It’s a quick call-and-response, a short whistle far away answered immediately by a chirping call nearby.
I have never believed in Bigfoot, or Sasquatch. Growing up on the east coast, I was not entertained with stories of Bigfoot around the summer campfire as I know some of my friends from the northwest were. As I listen to the Sierra recordings, though, I admit there’s a part of me that wants to believe it. It’s a feeling I remember from childhood—that desire to believe in things like unicorns or UFOs or fairies. These things are all lumped together in my brain. I don’t believe in Bigfoot, really, but I could, and I love that other people do, that they are finding each other and going on expeditions to try to track this more ancient version of ourselves that probably doesn’t exist, but might. And I love that Al and Ron whistled back and forth with the creatures that were calling to one another that night in the woods, all of them signaling into the darkness, and only half of them understanding what was being said.