The American Dream Starts Here

THESIS

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Abstract

This collection of essays examines a family—created, sustained, and broken—through their lives in a small town, war, and each other. Essays include "Highlights From the Apocalypse," in which the narrator examines familial prophecy and tragedy and their place in the context of a culture over-saturated with end-of-days narratives. "This Is the Story of Someone You Should Know" weaves analysis of a Pink Floyd album through the narrator's attempt to define her father. A foreign war bride, and the family she creates as she leaves behind another, is the subject of "I'm Depending On You to Tell Me the Truth." "In Paradise" chronicles a narrator's time abroad, haunted by a childhood and hometown she can't quite leave behind. In "Blue Collar Love," a couple try to understand their roles in a not-quite-traditional marriage, and examine the class they came from and are ultimately trying to overcome.

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Fountain Girls

There are two exits out of Fountain, Colorado.

The northern exit also acts as an entrance to Fort Carson, the Army base located in the foothills of Cheyenne Mountain, just south of Pikes Peak. Fort Carson is "*The Best Hometown in the Army—Home of America's Best!*" A large portion of the 4th Infantry Division is stationed at Fort Carson, and has two of its own slogans: "Deeds Not Words" and "Steadfast and Loyal." The base website welcomes incoming 4th ID soldiers and promises, "The assignment will be challenging yet personally and professionally rewarding." Someone told me once "the 4th I.D. has had the most casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq." I don't remember who; I may never remember when.

The southern exit winds past the 7-Eleven and a barn-shaped country western bar and a trailer park christened *Chancellor's Mobile Estates*. Grandpa once managed that 7-Eleven. My mother was a slim eighteen-year-old clerk when the cocky G.I. who was to become my father walked in with a grin for a pack of Marlboro's. The country bar has changed hands and names more than a dozen times in the last ten years, and recently, accurately, reopened as Country Bar. Just beyond, the Mobile Estates welcome sign beams a cheery red, white, and blue catchphrase: "*The American Dream Starts Here*."

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Thailand has sand like Gold Medal flour, water like Windex.

The blue is see-through more than fifty feet below the snorkeling mask, this other world where plants maneuver in alien ways and rocks are not what they seem. The fish dance, frantic for bits of bread, eluding my greedy hands. My back burns through three layers of SPF 80, but I don't know the protection is failing just yet. I come up for air, and my husband and I watch the palm trees sway on the lush island bank, a live-action postcard: *Wish You Were Here*. "You and me in paradise," I say.

While I hover through fleeing fish, Tara is dying, then dead. She is in Fountain. I am in Phuket. We are both 27, or we were.

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I didn't know Tara well, though we were both raised at the foothills of Pikes Peak, where Katharine Lee Bates wrote "America the Beautiful," in the landlocked state of Colorado. The city of Fountain, a waterless place, was the would-be capital of our Colorado square until "The Blast" in the spring of 1888—when two trains carrying passengers and explosives, respectively, collided on the tracks I know so well. Occasional summers in Fountain we have a "Blast Dance," and a caboose race, in honor of those who died. I walked those tracks as the poor kids, sans summer camp, do. I walked them with food-stamped Slurpee and Cheetos in hand. I walked them every day in the summer to Metcalf Park where the middle class boys Little League'd. I walked to

escape my siblings and our stressed-out single mother. Tara, I imagine, knew these tracks too.

Tara and I had mothers who had too many kids, too young, who raised us in houses too small, in walking distance from the 7-11 and Paradise Liquors. Both of our fathers died as we were just reaching adulthood. We hocked Girl Scout Cookies at Wal-Mart, Tara and I, dominated Student Council, played in the band and lost spelling bees. We have, we had, fierce familial pride; our ties to the military are strong, as they are for everyone who attended Fountain-Fort Carson High School. Tara was a friend of a friend, someone I knew from a distance, but I saw these, our commonalities—did Tara see me too? Her husband came home, if only physically, from Iraq; my little brother, Ronnie, did not come home at all.

❖

My husband and I leave the Phuket fish behind for the day, the clown fish and the flat and menacing ones glowing like hot steel. Our lives abroad are not real, and happen in a liminal space. We teach English in Korea, have long departed our hometowns, but I can sense our pasts approaching, merely on pause. We travel through Asia and struggle to stay with water that's more like transparent glass, like nothing we've seen before in our lives.

I first saw the ocean when I was twelve or thirteen. My siblings, Daisy, Ronnie, and I accompanied our cunning father and his new, wealthy, older, girlfriend to Sea World and Vegas and places as seen on TV; at thirteen, San Diego was the most exotic place I'd ever been. I flung myself into the waves, marveled at the vastness of the blues and greens, turned circles in the water and let my palms skip, skim the fragile surface. It was too much, the water, endless water. My behemoth mountains, the sentinels over my youth, were a shadow; a memory; a blankness closing in, overwhelming the throb of the ocean. The horizon left me claustrophobic.

My brother Ronnie, eleven then, followed me in, his confidence stronger than his swimming. Daisy stayed ashore, but Ronnie and I floated past our dad's line of sight. One hundred feet from family, then farther, and the undertow seized my little brother's thin frame, and he seized mine.

Ronnie dragged me down, and the salt poured into my eyes, ears, and nose. He struggled above my head, pushing me down or trying to pull me back up. The world slowed. When the water finally gave, we both hit air and struggled arm in arm back to shore. Halfway there, I threw up. I kept our near-drowning from Dad. Fountain girls do that, keep secrets. We see the ocean later, late, or never.

❖

I don't remember a cloudy day on Shield Road in Fountain, Colorado. I remember nights in 406 Shield, nights my dad showed up in our living room, drunk, crumpled, and

weeping under my mother's framed Georgia O'Keefe poster. I remember shadows across my mother's knit brow as our appliances broke down one by one, our ketchup-colored refrigerator, our mustard-yellow stove, our fourth or fifth-hand washer and dryer. But out on Shield Road we lit illegal fireworks with the neighbors and jumped rope and chased our runaway pound puppy. Our father's girlfriend bought us a trampoline, and it fit remarkably well in the midst of weeds and gravel. Soon every down-and-out kid from every meager block was flying in our yard.

My siblings and I failed to notice our neighborhood as a place where people shouldn't thrive. We grew older, and avoided questions on what area of town we lived in. We became aware of the mentions of our streets on the news—child services investigations, drug busts. Spiral out a bit from the houses, and the neighborhood fills with trailer parks, or "mobile home courts" as they once were called. When they were promising and clean in decades past, they were full of new families and Fort Carson soldiers and retired veterans—but those people moved on before we moved in, or if they stayed, the people lost value, too.

My mother, my sister and brother and I, lived at 406 Shield Road for a decade. We played hide n' seek with the neighbor kids at 405, ate MREs that belonged to the neighbor-kid's soldier-dad on the sidewalk near 407, had Fourth of July barbeques with the people of 408. We made plans in the wood-paneled living room, over government-funded meals.

Our father moved away first, but he'd never truly leave. It was impossible to determine when he'd show up drunk in the back yard, or sober and meek at school events. He changed jobs as often as the sun sets. He fell behind on child support, tried to make up for it with elaborate jokes and lavish Christmas gifts. "Jack-of-all-trades," he'd offer. "Master-of-none," we kept to ourselves. But Mom would finish college, become a teacher, remarry. I would be an actor, my sister a doctor, and my brother would join the Army. We've always been on our way out, away from Shield Road, and now we're all gone—or, at least, not physically there.

❖

Fountain, Colorado was named "America's Millennium City" by the *New York Times* in 1999. An award—or at least distinction—based on statistics from 1997, when I was drowning in San Diego, when Tara stayed behind (she would never visit, never see any ocean), the title meant Fountain was the most demographically accurate representation of America, per the national census. Due to the men and women who served, the abundance of soldiers who stayed on as veterans, we had just the right number of each race and each class intersecting at just the right time.

In 2002, when I went to college in Grand Junction and contemplated the Colorado desert, the National Civic League named Fountain an "All-American City." I went to school on a full-ride academic scholarship, the only way I would go anywhere, how I'd

earn a graduate degree later, and another, after that. All this fully-funded education, all this frantic growth, all for me to evaluate what it means to be from an "All-American City." Perhaps more of the same: enlistments, young mothers, missing fathers, children taught to find a way out, to achieve more than their parents, and later, those same children, taught to settle in. There are Fountain girls who try to leave, but cannot out-run their hometown legacy; there are Fountain girls who never even find the chance to try. The American Dream says if we just try hard enough, if we work as hard as we can, if we push and pull and reach and reach—but what then, when the Dream hurtles farther ahead?

What then, if the Dream is only just?

❖

I didn't know Tara well. Her hair was wild, full of huge dark curls spilling down her back. She was a hugger—always surrounded by a tight circle of friends, their clique gliding down the school hallways as one. Tara's mouth urged toward smiling. Like all Fountain girls, hers was an easy laugh—a pressure release valve, a defense mechanism, a happy veil. She was a grade below me, her older brother my classmate, but in Fountain we are all-American. We are all intersecting at just the right time.

When my brother was killed by the IED, Tara left me kind comments on Facebook. She may have been one of the Fountain community, one of the All-Americans,

who left KFC or bottled water or another frozen lasagna at my family's flag-waving doorstep, at our new white house on the right side of the tracks, though minutes from 406 Shield Road. No one knocked. They knew we were making slide shows of Ronnie in the sprinklers, Ronnie eating birthday cake, Ronnie in a JROTC uniform. They knew we were setting the moments to his favorite song. Ronnie memorized every lyric of "See You at the Crossroads," by Bone Thugs-N-Harmony. He did it unironically, all heart, all loss. He sat for hours and listened on repeat every day the summer our dad died, just seven years before we'd memorialize Ronnie with the same desperate song.

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My husband is from New Mexico. Jesse is from another small town in another dry state where beginnings and endings are hard to distinguish. We were visiting my mother when those men in uniform came to say Ronnie would not return to Fountain, would never come back. We were in the midst of planning our wedding—at twenty-four and twenty-six, we were actually late to wed compared to our small town peers. Jesse answered the door that day, my soon-to-be-husband, and kept answering days after. He retrieved condolences from the doorstep, lasagnas, bottled water, floral cards and tear-stained letters, the relentless sun slicing through the house each time he opened the screen door. "I could see myself in a town like this," he said, and my shoulders collapsed, my heart went cold, because I understood him perfectly.

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The street that runs down the center of Fountain has two names: from the northern Fountain exit the drive is US Highway 85-87, but as it reaches the heart of Fountain, the name is Santa Fe. It is 85-87 as it passes the sewage treatment plant; still, farther south, as it passes the open fields where horses graze too close to the railroad tracks; 85-87 when it passes the dirt lot where the *World's Largest Rocking Chair* once sat looming and empty. As the highway reaches the red brick Lutheran church, it's Santa Fe. Santa Fe would be the name of a mirage or city in New Mexico, but the Fountain street refers to the Santa Fe Railroad. There is a red Santa Fe Caboose pulsing at the center of Fountain, a lonely train-car branded with the encircled yellow *Land of Enchantment* cross. It is a photo-op for anyone who has made an entrance out of a Fountain exit.

The streets of our childhood neighborhood have misleading names: Royalty, Crest, Arms, Windsor, Shield. They speak of heritage and inheritance, of a level of class we would never know; they speak of a tradition of prestige, though we now understand this place as one with a habit of violence, loss, and decay.

The neighborhood was derelict—headed that way since before we moved in, in the early nineties—but in its heyday, two decades before us, the place where I grew up, behind the 7-Eleven, in the shadow of Interstate 25 and the Tomahawk Truck Stop, was where the people who now run Fountain, Colorado, got their start. Mayors and county

commissioners, high school principals and motel owners, a future war hero—many began in what was once the second biggest subdivision in my hometown, content in those days to settle in mobile homes. In the sixties and seventies it was one of two coveted Fountain neighborhoods. As the city grew further east from the interstate, and Fort Carson moved a bit farther north, the ambitious people of Fountain moved to larger tracts of land, to homes stationary rather than mobile, to houses, not trailers, and by the early eighties, the neighborhood at the southern tip of Fountain was disposable.

Shield Road itself is a weave of concrete fissures with one long crack running down the middle, each crevice filled with layers of black tar, inky seams struggling to hold the surface together, ready to burst from whatever was bubbling beneath the street where I learned to ride a lay-awayed bike.

❖

I was a middle schooler, perhaps a year or so from the first time I would see the ocean, on the early morning I woke and found my mother leaning against the counter in the kitchen: the right side of her face illuminated by the overhead stove light, the rest of her thin body shrouded in dark. She had the cordless phone in her hands and wrung it out as she told me her friend, who lived in the trailer up the street, had been murdered. My mom had heard the sirens, saw the flashing lights, and she walked out onto cracked Shield Road, bowed, reluctant, towards the sound, knowing what it was—who it was for.

She had met the woman at the community college. They were both single mothers at the time, their children attending the same elementary school, both of their lives in places unexpected; they knew each other intimately, or not at all—their relationship not unlike mine and Tara's. Lives parallel, and lives divert. My mom divorced my father, who was a good but self-destructive man. The woman from the community college met a good if self-destructive man and he moved into her trailer and tried to parent her children. Later, it was said, he was not a good man.

I remember my mother's face as she told me the story. It is the gaunt—lovely—face of a woman thin from worry; it is a face with a smiling, cackling laugh my siblings and I never stop trying to invoke, a face full of resigned anger, with a cutting tongue and a sigh that could level a house like 406. Our home, a tomb the morning after that woman and her children were murdered. My brother and sister slept, unaware, Ronnie wrapped in his Broncos blanket, Daisy cozy in the bottom of our red bunk bed. The dusty morning light lingered, found my mother and me with nothing to say, the shadows of the kitchen consuming us.

In that trailer up the street, the woman and that man—they'd had a baby of their own. She's who survived the shots that night up the street from our home, the baby—only the baby. The man shot the woman, and he shot her two children from a previous marriage, a boy and a girl. Then he shot himself. He left that baby in the crib crying alone.

I can, as vaguely, describe the scene of Tara's end. I can unspecifically promise you her children live, they are living—they are alive.

There once was a bullet hole in our own living room wall, a clean round breach in the wood paneling. Dad still lived with us then, a time we fled him—drunk, bitter, less-than-employed, shooting at pictures of himself on the mantle. I didn't know about the bullet hole until after we'd left Shield, after my dad left us; I need to believe with a numb certainty that he would never have shot at anyone but himself.

We've left Shield Road behind, haven't we? And that baby—where is she?

Where is that Fountain girl now?

The second time I saw the ocean it was the Atlantic. I spent most of my time in close proximity to it, shifting and sighing underground in Manhattan. Those subways were dank, rodent-filled tunnels, the people in limbo, a place in between. After college I auditioned for shows and wrote film reviews there. I fled from the City of Fountain.

Tara stayed behind, embraced it. Tara moved a little north of our without-a-namesake hometown—where is this mythical Fountain?—but stayed close to her family, the tracks. Facebook says in those last few years she had three beautiful young boys who lavished her with Kay jewelry and kisses. She adored Zumba and considered becoming an instructor. She had an administrative job with health care and steady hours. She lived

for the mountains and wore red lipstick on four-wheelers. She had a pouty mouth and wild hair and wore eye shadow the color of water in Phuket. She longed to see the ocean someday. I know because the Facebook page is still up, a memorial to all she was, wanted to be. I visit it, again, again, searching for clues, for opportunities missed. There are articles friends post: "This is Why I Didn't Tell You He Was Beating Me." Her sons grow too quickly, so handsome, their eyes knowing, like hers. Her mother, her sisters, dream about her. The Facebook feed is current and full, candlelit gifs and prayers and weddings and birthdays, everyone still posting as though she might check it, respond. Her last status update was February 19th, 2012, two days before her death. *My life right now is much like a broken mirror, I'd rather leave it in a million pieces than hurt myself trying to fix it anymore.* Of course this is the last thing she wrote, of course this is how she wrote it. I note her impulse to render pain in an illustrious way.

I didn't know Tara well.

❖

It's strange to look back now, to really look. I drive down Shield Road every time I visit my hometown. I've made it my duty to catalog this place. Survivor's guilt is gluttonous, indulgent at best, but still, I binge. I do not spend time considering the obligation I feel to witness, to record, the place that I was, that I am, and I do not stop

myself from writing, obsessively, all of it down. I am here, hunched over a laptop on a second-hand desk, sturdy-oak my mother sanded down, repainted in a soft, numbing, lavender-gray. If Fountain is ever too much—too close, too far—I rest my forehead on closed fists and map the lines in the wood, follow the grooves that didn't smooth down and out. The proud sign that once stood in front of Chancellor's Mobile Estates has been torn down in the last few years, abashed of its once confident or at least compelling proclamation, *The American Dream Starts Here*. My mother has asked around town for it, has searched old barns and storage sheds for that promise. Now how do we know where the American Dream begins?

My mother remarried when I was seventeen, married a man of uninterrupted kindness and patience, a man with a very precocious young son. They moved our newly formed Bunch to a white picket-fenced house in those middle class Fountain 'burbs further east; at that time our father's recent death served as anchor or homage to the past, and our Ronnie's future was still intact.

Though my siblings and I have now been adults longer now than we lived in 406, I am pulled to drive down the nobly-named streets. I follow the sunlight to a house on Crest, once a moderate-scale meth lab just a block from 406 and across the street from a house I had slumber parties in. I park on the side of Royalty or Arms, study light glinting off the side of the trailer where a man buried his mother in his backyard. She died of natural causes; he continued receiving her welfare checks. The sunlight caresses the

border of our neighborhood, the old apartments now flanked by a massive stucco wall. The rust-colored monster does not serve as a sound barrier between the now boarded-up, largely abandoned brick buildings and the interstate pressing upon them. Instead, it serves as a visual barrier, shields the people driving seventy-five miles per hour from our unsightly neighborhood, allows them to at least consider the southern Fountain exit.

My parents now live in a neighborhood with bucolic names, Harvest Field Way and Candlelight Lane and Autumn Place, but still I return to the heft of Shield Road. I can't retreat from or escape the place where I began, a place that has lived in me as a guarantee—or a vow.

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The Fountain Caboose Park is not a park. Children don't play there. It is only a crimson caboose in the middle of a nicely grassed and concrete square, with a low brick-wall surrounding the caboose. The City of Fountain has christened it "*The Wall of Honor*." My brother's name is on two different bricks in the wall; his name is on many different walls across America now. My mother bought one brick from the Chamber of Commerce. We don't know who bought the other one. My mother plans, someday, to build a statue in the park. It will be a statue of the Soldier's Cross. My sister has this permanent image tattooed across her freckled, sun-kissed back. It is a rifle, upright,

perpendicular to the ground. The firing end is placed between two combat boots. From the butt of the rifle hangs a soldier's helmet, a soldier's dog tags.

In Fountain, sometime in late 2013, one year after Tara's death, a young GI with PTSD holed himself up in his car with a gun. He is another young GI, one of so many, so many, with guns; I don't know any wall with his name on it now. The news said he had a minor car crash at the corner of Shield and Crest. The car crash triggered a flashback episode for the soldier, just four houses away from ramshackle 406. The 406 yard was once big enough for a haphazard club house and our trampoline with a tear in the middle, but there are trucks parked in the dirt-yard now, and demolition derby cars, white cracking numbers painted on the sides, the hoods and trunks collapsing in on themselves. My mother's baby pink rose bush is gone, ripped out from the roots, and we threw that trampoline in the trash when a friend jumped too hard, too high, and turned that tear into a sink-hole.

But that young soldier, there, at the corner of Shield and Crest, almost exactly fifteen years after we'd left those streets behind: he had a wife and a young son. He also had three deployments under his belt; he had seen Iraq, been to Afghanistan, and spent a recent four months in Kuwait. The woman who had been in the car with him called the police because of the crash, but when they arrived, the confused young soldier drew his weapon on the two officers, and in turn they did the same. He later died from wounds to his hand and his heart.

My mother heard about this on the news, and she heard someone say that the young man promised he wasn't coming out of the stand-off unless he was in a body bag. Where did she hear this?—I needed to know. They don't say such morbid things on the news, do they? They don't report possibilities, determine things that couldn't possibly be determined? And yet—that is how he came out in the end, in a black body bag, his blood on the sidewalk of the place where we grew up.

❖

You fill the hollows of growing up poor, of growing up, in different ways. I trot the globe, cross seas with a man I love, and worry too much about the past. I've not lived in Fountain for fifteen years, but I can't unsee it—in every military uniform, in muted, invisible Memorial Days abroad, in a kid's shoes that are more scuffed and worn from time than play. I move far away to feign something like distance, or dread, but Fountain is all that I love, is all that I am. Tara claimed Fountain, built a family with a man she loved, and, from what I can tell, worried about the future. She longed for the ocean—she wrote this on Facebook. She bought her first New Year's Eve dress just months before her death, and posted hope after hope. *Working on Resolutions! Changes are coming to this girl's future! If life has shown me anything lately, it has shown me that life is too short to be anything but happy!*

And then: Tara's husband (at war) comes home; came home; is home. With PTSD and a gun. His life, her life, *in a million pieces.* Her children, all young, all innocence, all

three, hide in the basement. Her husband's family will post their own dreadful hope. They will want us to know he was a good man. He was dangerous, he was war-torn, he was a good man. He is, was. And he was Tara's husband, and he is Tara's killer.

I didn't know Tara well, and I must understand—when, where, is the place *good* gets derailed? Where, in our reach for something better—an enlistment, an education, a steady job, a family, the Dream—where do we, instead, cycle back, or discover our beginnings have inevitably been our end?

Here is Tara's worried future, now past, where he takes the gun and her life and his own.

❖

My mother, a Fountain girl, had three kids by 27. I don't know how late she saw the ocean. She walked the railroads of Fountain once too, the two sets running North and South, bisecting the city in half; she showed me all of the tracks. My mother had us, two girls and a boy, all freckled, all loyal, all three. She had a husband with a gun, too. He only left bullet holes in pictures of himself when we fled the house and him. He suffered and died from drugs, from drink, from loneliness, not from PTSD or a gun. I witnessed my mother suffer my father, and live. We suffered him, loved him, and lived.

❖

I am in a hotel lobby in Phuket, Thailand. This is approximately 8,878 miles from Fountain, Colorado. The tears slip out onto my sunburned cheeks as I scroll through the status updates. I am crying and sweating and the cloudless blue and the guileless fish are so far away. Dear Tara, your boys, so young. Here, in this lobby, on this island far away, I tell myself our lives intersect, then careen, forever, apart. But I didn't know Tara well. We've not been running parallel for years—we've been moving towards perpendicular, our own distant elsewhere, for some time.

❖

In the middle of the decade we lived on Shield Road, men in orange vests replaced the sidewalk at the corner of Shield and Crest, the same sidewalk that would later become the resting place for that young GI, one more Fountain man with a gun. Daisy and I watched from a distance, grew bored and went back to dumping homemade mud pies outside the porch of our crumbling clubhouse, swept the Astroturf carpet and promised that summer would be different, life-changing, like we promised each summer before. Ronnie, a scrawny spike-haired pre-teen, a regular Bart Simpson, waited for the construction crew to leave so he could carve his name into the drying concrete. Ronnie will never return from Iraq to see his name is still there, etched in the sidewalk where the young GI would die five years after our Ronnie did. The 'R' in his name is sprawling, the

‘onnie’ progressively smaller with each letter, as if done with great haste, the future moving in, for all of us, so quickly.

❖

Tara is dead and I am in Thailand. The sun is dawning in Fountain: I know the night is holding on, the air is bone-dry, the mountains stand watch over the fading city lights, the trains blast horns in early warning. In Phuket the air is thick with water and the night is just beginning. My face is layered with aloe and humidity and bewildered despair.

(I didn't know Tara well.)

We walk hand-in-hand, my husband and I, through a dusty street where everything spoken is not English. Casual dogs pant on the sidewalk, without collar or owner or residence. I take a picture of one, and he nods his fuzzy head as if to say, “Go further, keep going, I'm fine.” We sit at an outdoor cafe called *Home* and I order French fries. It is the only food that makes sense as the Thai house band plays Sting, then Phil Collins.

❖

We mouthed the lyrics together on the playground, swayed in the sandbox to the unheard melody. *It’s just another day, for you and me, in paradise.* "Do you know what that song is about?" Rachael asked me. In second grade she was my best friend, another

kind of Fountain girl. She lived on the right side of the tracks and her hair was triple platinum and she had her own bedroom, thus all the knowledge of the world. Surely she's seen many oceans by now. “This song is not really about another day in paradise. He is singing about people who are homeless,” she confided through perfectly square white teeth. She belted out across the sand. *It’s just another day for you—you and me in paradise.*

I was ashamed. I assumed he sang about palm trees and the Pacific and though I’d heard the gloom the lyrics were brighter. I kept this a secret. I joined her mournful singing. I told her I knew all along.

Progress Report: Cognitive Dissonance

My therapist agrees with me, which is all I've ever really wanted. We enjoy railing, together, against systematic injustice. "The American Dream is a get out of jail free card," she says—the context being my life, my mental health, no one else's— "and it promotes the opposite of mindfulness." This is the least of its problems, but we can start there. *My* pursuit of the American Dream is not mindful. It is future-tense. It does not allow for coping, for present awareness, for a reconciling of how while my *pursuit* is true, there will likely be no realization of it. And what am I in pursuit of if, at my core, I believe The American Dream is a fallacy? Do I want to win the argument? Do I seek redemption? How long will I feel owed for my brother's death, for the messiness of our family's beginnings?

I've always meant my hand over my heart. I'm a military kid. I cry when I hear the National Anthem, and you can guess why, but you may be wrong. I'm American, so I've long believed I am destined for greatness, or, at least, that I've earned greatness. I'm arrogant enough to promise there is no pot of gold, only rainbow, and still, I'm chasing colors. The oppressed, the poor, the afflicted, the waiting-to-overcome, they know the distance, the futility, can see the lives we project on one another and the possibilities we cannot seem to get enough of. We are hot in pursuit, but perhaps more present than anyone could ever imagine. We are struggling to put food on the table. We marry quickly, and move on quicker. We are *always* trying, though so many people like to

dismiss drug-use, generational trauma, lack of access to health care, to education, to opportunity; those who dismiss are comfortable deciding we just aren't trying *hard enough.* Hell, we decide that too. If we tell ourselves we only have to try harder, we conjure something like control. We enter the uncanny valley willingly, our motives just one foot in front of the other. We name it hope, or will to live. My sister and I call it Ronnie.

To Stem a Conflagration

"History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation."

--Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending*

Our city of Fountain, whoever we are, is what they call a "bedroom community" to surrounding Army and Air Force bases. This phrase presents Fountain as a layover of sorts—a place, perhaps, we were never meant to settle in.

But the Fountain of 1888 was only thirty years old, and settlers had come, yearning for some level of distinction. Though it had not grown as quickly as neighboring Colorado Springs, Fountain had even once put in an ambitious bid to be the capital city of Colorado; this was before The Blast leveled large tracts of the town, hurled metal and shrapnel and train-car bits nearly a mile's distance from the tracks.

"Once upon a time," is how Colorado historian Lester L. Williams begins his essay, his version of the fabled devastation of Fountain. "Once upon a time, a runaway train on a long stretch of downhill track, a tank car of flammable liquid, a carload of explosives, a stationary passenger train, and a small community striving to stem a conflagration, all combined in sequence to produce a disaster." The Oxford English Dictionary shows use of "Once upon a time" dating as far back as Chaucer's Canterbury

Tales. The stock idiom has since overrun, kicked off fabled events, mythical happenings, and is oft paired with the charming: "And they all lived happily ever after." In reality, *Ever after* was—once upon a time—instead: "Happily, until their deaths."

Williams is driven, like so many others, to record, to pore over histories, to assert and maintain that rhetoric of heroes. "Mr. Smith had bravely stuck to his self-appointed post on the roof of the depot whence he poured buckets of water in a futile attempt to stem the fire. He received the full force of the blast and was hurled to the ground. Later County Physician Strickler testified that a large piece of iron had entered his back to the left of the spine and passed out the right side. He [Mr. Smith] died about two hours later. When picked up, barely recognizable as a human being, he uttered: 'Boys, I am not a coward.'"

A historical accuracy: the All-American past of Fountain, Colorado, has a serious lack of cowards. It is, you might say, a factory of Heros, the "H" capitalized, the assembly line of the improbably willing chugging along without end.

Mr. Mauirro leans in close to share our beloved Fountain history. He has gifted me this copy of "Disaster in Fountain 1888," Williams' 1965 essay on the event which altered the future of our hometown. The celebrated former student government teacher at Fountain-Fort Carson High School, Mr. Mauirro is a physically small man whose pulsating energy makes him larger, pontificating at the front of the classroom, sprinting the length of the basketball court, and barking plays to the varsity team. He has always

been thoughtful and insistent of critical thinking, and he is eager to help with my investigations of Fountain, of our designated histories; he has offered to make phone calls, dig through city records, though he wants me to call him "Moe" now, as much of the city of Fountain affectionately does. He pauses in all the right places as he offers eye-witness accounts, connects the dots for me, a fellow all-American in search of the truth. We sit in a blue plastic booth at the back of a 50's nostalgic Culver's, another new fast food joint in Fountain. The city is moving up—there's a Panda Express now, and an Ihop, a godforsaken Denny's and even the once derided, undercooked-chicken-serving Jack-in-the-Box.

Moe, in his reluctant retirement, has designated himself the Fountain Historian-at-large. He understands my urge to uncover our beginnings, to predict our endings, but my aim is more interrogation. I'm worried our truths may not align. Still, faithful Moe has brought me a three-inch stack of photocopied papers in a sunny orange folder that includes some of the following:

1. Articles on "Old-time Hoosegows," the disintegrating pioneer jails that still stand in modern Fountain—"time in these 'pokeys' would discourage crime" the headline states;

2. A research paper titled, "The Early Days of Fountain," written in 1961 by Ted Hanson, of *the* Hansons, an established family that has been around Fountain long enough to have a nature trail named after them. Ted received a B- on "The Early Days of Fountain," mostly due to spelling and typing errors. Also noted: in the nineties my mom hocked

Avon with Ted's wife, Nancy; 3. I add a print-out of the email correspondence to the folder, between me and Moe regarding the details of the christening of Aragon Middle School and story of Jose Aragon.

Moe also passes to me—not included in the cheery folder—a hard copy of the May 13th, 2008, edition of *The Gazette Telegraph*. My mother and sister are pictured on the front page, their faces collapsed, our family's devastation a record for others to witness, interpret. The paper promises my brother was "DESTINED TO BE A SOLDIER," the letters bold and capitalized, insistent in their proclamation. If this news is true, his destiny was done at twenty-one by a roadside bomb in Baghdad, Iraq. I don't tell Moe I have an identical stack of these papers, same day, same headlines, buried in a closet somewhere. His addition will be placed on top of the teetering pile.

We nod to each other over the paper, acknowledge the silence before Moe's excitement overwhelms the moment and he recounts the multiple stories of Jose Aragon.

They chose Jose, Our City of Fountain, because he was the trifecta: a Fountain native, Hispanic, and a war hero—a man the city and its people, in all of their complicated, military-driven diversity, could finally get behind. His middle name is frequently misspelled by the Fountain public: he is either Jose Reuben Aragon, or Jose *Ruben* Aragon, with newspapers listing one and the school district listing another. I passed by his black and white photo every day as a student at Aragon Middle School believing his name was *Juan* Aragon; my childhood neighbor was named Juan Aragon,

and I insisted on the musicality of the name, the happy rhyme of it, so my mind was, has always been, stubborn in its recollection of Jose as Juan. His namesake brick building is Aragon *Elementary* now, and a stoic portrait of Jose Aragon still hangs at the entrance of the school at the end of Main Street in downtown Fountain, Colorado, not far from the site of The Blast of long ago.

Jose Aragon's death was a non-combat related incident, an accident during his time in Vietnam. "Non-hostile" is another term for this sort of death in war. *The Fountain Valley News* reported,

Jose, born and raised in Fountain, served in the Air Force. On May 16, 1965, while serving at Bien How Air Base in Vietnam, several 500 pound bombs exploded while B57 Canberra bombers were preparing to take off on a mission. He remained on the flight line despite fire, exploding ammunition and flying debris. He rescued fellow airmen and cleared equipment. He was credited for saving many lives, but he unfortunately could not save his own.

Jose was twenty-five-years-old at his heroisms, and left behind a wife, a son, and a daughter. The first Colorado airman to die in action in Vietnam, he posthumously earned the Bronze Star, the fourth-highest medal an individual can be awarded in the United States Military. My brother earned one as well. Service members receive it for acts of merit or heroism, and Sergeant Jose Aragon earned his by running back into burning buildings and saving three people.

My brother was on what they called a "Good Will Mission" the day he earned his—just finished building a soccer field for Iraqi kids, someone told us, driving his commander and leading the platoon back to base when they hit the IED. There is a website commemorating the awards my brother has earned, ribbons and medals displayed just beneath a black and white of his chubby high school face. No one has ever really explained the specifics of my brother's heroism that day. The assumption is that because he was at war and died there, this is sequential: he *was* a soldier, *is now* a hero. This, an iteration of equations Fountain is built upon. It is productive to believe my brother a hero. For everyone—the men and women who had to come back without him, the government who sent him there to begin with, the family in need of something like closure. He was driving his commander that day, and they both died. There wasn't a firefight or an ambushing militia. There was a roadside bomb, likely in the works for months, placed that very day at that specific four-way stop. The bomb waited, off-base in the Iraq desert, strong enough to tear through the militarized vehicle that my brother was driving on his way home from work. From flames, smoke, ash, bone: Our Intentioned Hero.

Moe hovers over his seat. His is both urgent and hushed as he describes Jose Aragon's restitutions: money for his family, and—eventually—the commemoration of his name, though it took years to happen. After our meeting, Moe will encourage me to call the former mayor of Fountain for confirmation of this. I will find that long before she'd become a former mayor, Jeri Howells was a 19-year-old young mother working as an

administrator for Our City of Fountain in 1965. As such, she also sold plots for the city's Fairview Cemetery. She was there when Mrs. Aragon and her two small children came in to buy a grave for their Vietnam War Hero. Howells petitioned numerous times for the dedication of Jose's name after she met his widow. She went to City Council, but the park became, instead, John Metcalfe Park. She joined the school board, yet the new elementary school became Jordahl Elementary. Howells can't or won't say for sure that the city's reluctance was due to some kind of prejudice, but she does admit people seemed stuck on Jose's reputation as a young man rather than his act of heroism.

We forget, Our City of Fountain, that Demographically Accurate Heroes often have humble beginnings. They are Fountain's poor (my brother), people of color (Jose), and they are many times those troubled youths who stalk the railroad tracks until the military offers a way out.

Here is a civilian-clothed Marine who has forgotten the tracks, or perhaps, to rewrite his own beginnings, is more inclined toward my brother's "heroic" end. The Marine corners my sister at a mutual friend's birthday party and intends to pay homage to what our brother has been made. My sister is a Navy veteran herself, a Corpsman, honorably discharged, but the Marine will not discuss their shared work experience. He will only promise that "He's a Hero—he did the *right thing*, he served his country, your brother." He means no harm—none of them do, kidnapping my family's torment, bending the arc of our Ronnie's life, holding his story hostage and branding him, selling

him as a Hero, just so they can face us—the well-meaning Marine simply needs to remake Ronnie's death as one not in vain. Now the wide-eyed Marine is defensive, runs a nervous hand through his closely shorn hair, when my sister wants to know just what *that* is, the *right thing*. "It is what it is," my brother used to say, his commitment to one foot in front of the next rather than to someone else's political agenda. His steady philosophy of life, I think.

Perhaps in order to define the *right thing*, Jeri Howells eventually served Fountain as Mayor Howells, and rallied for Jose Aragon. In the 80's she involved reporters, and a local, Hispanic, college professor to work any prejudiced angle, and they helped her secure the middle school as the place where Jose's name would rest. The Aragons would leave Fountain behind, only return for the naming ceremony—where Jose Aragon would finally be publicly recognized a Hero, a selfless and sacrificing man, when the city of Fountain was finally ready to honor him as such, where and when Moe's real story begins.

The dedication ceremony was scheduled for Tuesday, November 10, 1987—I must interrupt to tell this is the very year my brother, that future fated Hero, was born. I only say it as everyone wants to know them after they are named. They want to know the Hero! They must know the person who was, in truth, only and importantly just a dad, or a daughter, or a brother, our Mr. Smiths, Joses, or Ronnies. All corners of the country mourned with us, it seemed. Presidents spoke of him, wore his button, hugged us tight.

People still sign some logbook online where his obituary is forever displayed. They light candles, they say, on the anniversary of his death. Some people sewed us tender, humbling quilts and sent them through the mail. We will never shake the hands of the people who took the time to sew us quilts, but we got them. We got them, and we got tattoos, and found ourselves rewritten, our Ronnie, as a Patriot when he was only, perfectly, a kid who loved the Denver Broncos and fat babies and cheap beer and sending his mom flowers and over-easy philosophies. In the aftermath we didn't question the narrative. We did what we could, what we had to, as partly instructed. We wrapped ourselves up in some star-spangled love. It is what it is.

Moe leans in across our Culver's booth, says he remembers seeing Jose's wife and children in attendance at the dedication ceremony, alongside city officials, school district administrators, school board members, Fountain citizens, a portion of which was largely Hispanic, and both Army and Air Force delegates. The morning, Moe says, was warm for a late fall day in Fountain, and students and faculty and the school band mingled on the lawn with special guests and city dignitaries seated near a small stage set-up. The group was perhaps a few hundred proud, excited and energized, bustling not far from where train cars once collided and erupted.

Jose's somber black and white image waited on an easel, his uniform crisp and proper, his black military-issue tie straight, his handsome and stoic profile gazing to the right of an 18x24 inch frame. They propped him up near the podium and sound system,

and Jose's image waited for the commencement speeches to begin, his children adults in 1987, gazing on the photo of a man they'd had little time to know.

Moe watched as the portrait was taken from the easel. The crowd broke down into smaller, tight-knit, whispering groups—something was amiss—and a short delay was announced. The portrait was taken into the middle school; Moe followed a group of uniformed men down the hall and to a janitor's closet, and the crowd outside grew anxious, moved in smaller circles still. He waited there among the group of men, their uniforms starched, meticulous, everything in its place, and he watched in disbelief as they discussed their hasty options, opened the portrait—time slowed, stopped, as they removed the eminent frame, the untouched glass—and asked the janitor for his Exacto knife. Then—at normal speed now, perhaps even a bit fast-forward—as quickly as they had ushered it away, the dignitaries and military officials and Moe, trailing behind, whisked the photo back out, propped it on the easel, and christened the building after Jose Aragon, Vietnam Hero.

After our meeting at Culver's, Moe emails me a picture of the portrait. In this case it is actually a picture of a picture of *the* picture. The portrait at the ceremony was too large to hang in the school, or perhaps too discernible? Someone took a photo of the tampered portrait, and that framed 8x10 conspicuous or inconspicuous version hangs on the wall of the school today.

It was noticed, upon closer inspection of the portrait the day of the dedication, that the gold insignias on the lapels of Jose Aragon's Army-issue, button down shirt were facing the wrong direction. While citizens would pass the photo and linger on Jose's strong jaw, his graceful nose, his unwavering gaze, the military officials could only see the blaming, indignant glare of the gold insignias. They say "U.S." on them, and they should be situated very specifically, the letters linear in a way designated by the military. Jose's insignias were instead turned inward 90 degrees, the left turned in away from his face counter-clockwise, the right clockwise—moved just enough for anyone the wiser to recognize that in this slight turn, Jose is (almost certainly) in stealthy, silent protest of the war in Vietnam. Certain or not of his insubordination, his possible, individual, assertion, those other men in proper uniform saw fit to correct this problematic representation as Moe looked on—they cut with Exacto knife in hand and rotated the insignias. The corrected golden circles, each surrounded by a faint circular line, can be seen in any picture of a picture of that picture of Jose.

The crowd dispersed as quickly as it had filled out on November 10, 1987. Fountain citizens went back to their blue collar jobs, officials went back to closed-door meetings, teachers brought students back to the classrooms, Hispanic citizens left with a sense of inclusion and recognition they'd been lacking for some time. Jose Aragon's family went back to their lives without him, back to a home no longer in Fountain. They had left their father's hometown some time before, and now they would leave his legacy,

theirs, on a sweet red brick school in the middle of a humble, trying-to-thrive community. Military officials left the pomp and circumstance, hoping no one would realize the cause of the delay. Moe, a young teacher at the high school then, went back to his students armed with a different view of history.

Without Jose's word, Moe cannot prove culpability—but no enlisted man we know could afford the demerits or demotion a sloppy uniform would cost, or the association with those whose insignias winked in quiet, subtle rebellion.

In a time when it was a symptom of weakness or blatantly unpatriotic to express distaste for an unpopular war—when it was inconceivable for a service member to even think such thoughts—signs of protest were best kept silent and clandestine. In a small dry town, thought of as a "bedroom community" to the bordering military bases, where many are dependent in direct or indirect ways on the government's contributions—be it as service member, as inevitable future service member, as former service member, or as place or person serving service members—in a small town such as this, it is better to support than negate. It is better to come together and survive rather than question and talk back and change. It is better to keep dissent to yourself (on your lapel, perhaps) than to say it aloud. Better—or at least easier. Isn't history only relatable, only kind, when one allows the self, or is allowed by someone else, to take part in it? Isn't it more

comfortable, more intentionally fortuitous, to take on the rhetoric, and accept it as one's own?

In September 2009, Moe had to attend another naming ceremony. The new Fountain-Fort Carson elementary school was named Ian P. Weikel Elementary, Moe made sure of it. Ian was his favorite, most beloved student: Ian Weikel, the 1993 Fountain-Fort Carson High School Valedictorian, the Quarterback, the Student Body President, a Student School Board Member, a Community Volunteer, a West Point Graduate, a Captain in the United States Army. Captain Weikel was killed by an improvised explosive device, as my brother was—you may find both their names on bricks in the Fountain Wall of Honor now. Captain Weikel left behind a wife and a son, his parents, and a heartbroken history teacher who would cut the ribbon at his naming ceremony.

A historical accuracy: Fountain is overwhelmed by naming ceremonies because of a past full of duty under fire, the genesis of these the legendary blast.

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Lester L. Williams describes Fountain of 1888 as "a village of perhaps two hundred people living in about forty homes…bounded by railroads. The broad gage Santa Fe tracks ran along the west edge of the town, while the narrow gage Rio Grande bounded the town to the east." On May 14, 1888, seventy-seven years and two days

before Jose would try to outrun another set of flames, one-hundred twenty years and one day before headlines blared my brother's own fiery destiny, Our City of Fountain burned. Eighteen tons of explosives blew a ten-feet-deep and thirty-feet-wide hole in the ground. In the center of a fledgling town named after a thirsting, near-vacant creek, the night sky turned sunset, turned blackest black. The booms were heard for miles: windows shattered as far as Colorado Springs, more than fifteen miles north. The citizens of Monument—another fifteen miles north of the last shattered windows—were awakened by the trembles in the earth. Back in Fountain, the Baptist Church caved in on itself.

Here is a history of grit and gratitude: a frontier town loses a capital city bid, finds itself leveled, then left behind, by the rolling, railing industry that gave it life; a small, indistinct city eventually gives way to the government, offers itself up as a *bedroom community* to a military base or two or three; an All-American City is a place where bootstraps are not just a metaphor to tug on, a place where pride is assumed—it is demanded; it is so easily, so readily star-spangled.

It should be said men like Specialist Ronald J. Tucker, twenty-one-years of age at his death, brother and son and Fountain native, would balk at the suggestion he was doing anything but making his own choices, though perhaps he only knew, discerned, one exit out of Fountain, Colorado. His life could, would, be re-written by a uniform and what they say in Fountain is "the ultimate sacrifice." And yet—Ronnie would never consider his life manufactured. Would Jose? Weren't they surviving, simply and only? It's hard to

dismantle, to dissect, a prescription like bravery. But what of bravery's often twisted motivator, patriotism? At its core, patriotism is appropriated, Red, White, and Blue, pride. It's pride of survival, pride of endurance, a pride that promises something bigger—something lasting. And even in basic pride or promise of it, there is complication, circularity. Pride is often projection, and what dead men did, once upon a time, in moments of death and history, is usually generated by something more like endurance.

Let me reassemble: The tattoo on the inside of my wrist is both faint and loud. It is the tiny, small-scale image of a Gold Star Flag, known as a Service Flag when first introduced in WWI. The border of the rectangle is blood red and outlined in the softest glow of yellow. At the center of the flag is another, stronger glow, a burning yellow star traced in that patriotic, vein-like blue. It is a flag you should never wish to see or comprehend, but in my hometown the flag, or variants of it, are hung from picture windows and plastered on Ford truck bumpers. If the star on the fragile side of my wrist was blue, like most of the stars in my hometown, it would mean our loved one still endured whatever war he or she heroically encountered. But our loved one died, and my family's star is gold.

I regret, at times, placing the tattoo in such a conspicuous place, having to explain again and once more my brother was killed in Iraq. I often think it is *in*conspicuous, both because people don't recognize the flag, but mostly because I have never had a handle on

either version of that word. And though I can't remember, conspicuous or inconspicuous, which means easy to see and which means hidden, out of sight, in any case, the tattoo is both. It is glaring in placement, and yet discreet in meaning or social proximity outside of my family, outside of Our City of Fountain, Colorado. Most modern GI's don't recognize the symbol themselves. "Gold Star Family?" the guards at the gate of Fort Carson ask, eyebrows raised, when we assert the title their leaders have bestowed upon us. We have a special pass, a pass which means we have sacrificed more than most. Our story is one that must resonate. Those in uniform, at least, they should know, shouldn't they?—we've been promised reverence is due.

Lester, Moe, and me, well—I suppose we seek to perpetuate that reverence. Moe started the Who's Your Hero Project, and biked 2200 miles from Fountain to Arlington National Cemetary, in rememberance of his three students who *made the ultimate sacrifice.* This, Moe's humble, bodily tribute, to Captain Ian Weikel (KIA - Iraq 18 April 2006), Sgt. Adam Wilkinson (KIA - Afghanistan 18 February 07); and SPC Ronald (Ronnie) Tucker (KIA - Iraq 30 April 08), once rowdy boys in his student government classroom, now cast in bronze and representative of unfathomable loss. Dr. Lester L. Williams, once a medic in the Army, once awarded the Bronze Star (like Jose, and Ronnie, after him), once chief of staff at a Colorado Springs hospital, wrote countless books on the history of fires around, near, in, our military communities. There's a fire

museum named for him, and so while Lester Williams worked to capture the lives of other heros, he has succeeded in being recognized as one of his own.

Me? I got a tattoo. I write. I offer this transitional sentence: Our Fountain is a city that has known literal, explosive change, and the damage, the fall-out, that comes in its wake. I promise Jose Aragon is commemorated, is not to be forgotten, though we aren't sure he's remembered correctly. I cringed through the delicate, searing tattoo needle to commorate, to make a commemoration myself. Most accurately, I got the tattoo because a few months before his deployment Ronnie sat hours getting two of his own. They were scrawled across his forearms, the cursive gothic and timeless; I scolded him for the ink, asked how he would ever get a job after he left the military. He laughed his throaty laugh and hugged me, his shoulders broad and certain, his blue eyes ever earnest. He told me not to worry about stuff like that. He had established himself with the military, a job he was good at, the best friends he'd ever had. He was happy, fulfilled even. He held up his arms and bared his teeth at me and I could only laugh with him: his right arm read "Fightin to Live" and his left "Livin to Die."

It took months to uncover the cause of the collision on the tracks the night of The Blast. An investigation by *The Rocky Mountain News* discovered two vagrants had argued with another man named Frank Shipman. The men murdered and left him on a train car they then disconnected, sending four train cars rolling off to Fountain, unmanned but for poor Shipman's murdered body. And so we are, each one, a cog in the

assembly line of heroes. We warily are, or we reluctantly record, or we stand by and witness and learn to expect more. Happily, until our deaths. Those runaway cars hurtled south, straight for those passengers traveling north—and the rest is Fountain history.

Highlights from the Apocalypse

Sorting Through: The End

There's more than one way for the world to end.

Isn't that a line from a movie? Some back-alley herald? It must be.

It has to be. Or, at least, it should.

As We Know It

My family's world would end in 2008. Looking back, there were certainly signs, but no one prophecy spoke of the inevitable.

Wikipedia's first of "Dates Predicted for Apocalyptic Events" is 634 BC, when Romans feared the end of Rome due to a dozen so-called prophetic eagles. The source or *claimant* via Wikipedia? "Various Romans." Roman or no, many have since taken up the mantle, continued the legacy of predicting doom. The "incomplete" list contains one hundred and fifty nine predictions to date, and the eighties, a significant decade for my family, were particularly busy with "end-of-days"; there were lulls in 1983 and 1986, but near-death prophesies picked right back up about three months after I was born in '84, and continued on through most of the decade. My sister, Daisy, arrived in '85, the year Lester Sumrall released his book *I Predict 1985* and asked his few readers "Who will survive 1985?" (Lester's guess was no one, naturally.) My brother Ronnie showed up two years after that, in '87, when Leland Jensen promised apocalyptic doom by Halley's

Comet. As for my family's tragic end, Lester and Leland were off by approximately twenty-one years. Still, I'd like to congratulate them on their audacity, their certainty, their very public insistence Re: their own personal beliefs.

Recent years have been remarkably lacking in tales of Apocalypse, unless you happened to speak with my maternal grandpa, Steeler's fan, hater of communism, Vietnam Vet, lover of God's wrath and regular Armchair Nostradamus—he predicted his own death in 2014. In all likelihood the lack of predictions is a response to 2012's abundance of imminent divinations.

The widely anticipated 12/21/12 prophecy was based upon a misread or (over-interpreted) Mayan calendar. Mayans were in the business of calendars, and would have given the Barnes and Noble calendar aisle a run for its money. The Mayan long-form calendar, on which this prophecy was based, ended a significant cycle of time on 12/21/12. It certainly didn't help that all of the numbers in this date were ones or twos, as conspiracy theorists and dooms-dayers love a good pattern. The website www.december122112.com admits defiantly, "NO the world did not end on December 21 2012" but it is quick to add "you can rest assured that the prophecies have been fulfilled." Those who gathered at Mayan ruins on the fate-less December day would leave with little more than a sunburn and a t-shirt declaring "The End of the World: I Was There."

My brother Ronald asked me about the Mayan calendar prophecy once. He called me from the barracks of Fort Hood, Texas, at the start of 2008, just before he deployed to Iraq for the first and last time, about when he began contemplating his own fragile mortality. Did he have a premonition? Did he suspect a world could end in more ways than one? Could our small, working-poor family harness such power?

"Do you think it's real? Are the Mayans right? Is the world going to end, Sammy?" he asked, his voice newly adult, octaves lower than his baby-faced intention. "Nah. No. I doubt it," I said, answering him as best I could from my studio apartment in New York City; our sister wondered the same from her naval post in Spain, and meanwhile we all wished our conspiracy-loving father (another Ronald—all of them gone now) were still alive to pick up the conversational slack.

Linchpins

There is a sort of glory in remembering where you were when the world changed forever, when the world ended—just before it began again. I ask my mother where she was when the Wall fell, when the Challenger exploded, when JFK was assassinated. "I was in high school when Reagan was shot," my mother offers feebly. She doesn't remember how she felt, or how the adults reacted, or a feeling of impending doom, just he survived and she was in high school and it happened then. Yet—she remembers many other things, and has a tendency to invoke a colorful past: "When I was pregnant with you, I ate a lot of corn, straight from the can"; "I used to walk home from school and birds would dive at my

frizzy hair"; "Your dad came in and bought a pack of Marlboro's and the other 7-11 clerk said if I didn't date him, she would." But my mom's not keen on reciting tragedies, at least not aloud, or outside of her room where she cries behind closed door.

It is like naming a child, the near-holy recitation of death and destruction: you name this to bring back life, you name this to call it home, you name this to remember and never forget. "Never Forget," the bumper stickers exhort, and I cringe at the politics and pain; because it is both, the slogan works—it propagates a vague but undeniable agony. *Never Forget*: it's despondent and cloying, like a widow's perfume. For my generation, 9/11 is our linchpin: our lives remembered are before and after, cause and effect. This is a day we learn there are *many* ways for the world to end. We discover that there are many worlds, and many ends more.

I was driving Ronnie to school the moment the first tower fell. We watched the world burn on TVs from the safety of our classrooms in Fountain-Fort Carson High School and tried to memorize the tingling in our bodies, the expressions on people's faces, if only to recount the day for those who missed it or those too young to understand, though we were both.

"You went down. Like the Twin Towers," my melodramatic friend said about the day, the time, the moment my husband called and told me my brother was gone, he was not coming back. We were eating at a Chili's in Colorado. I hate Chili's. The bill came and the phone rang and the sound of my husband's voice was doomed. I left a credit card

on the table and croaked "Not yet," before I hustled to the parking lot to accept or deny whatever dreadful thing was coming. I would not take it in the restaurant, surrounded by bottomless chips and salsa, by gourds of margaritas.

"Ronnie…" he said that moment into the phone. *I dropped the phone and the world dropped me*, I told someone once: the predictable line plays in my mind like a broken record, a fucked-up melody. The world ended—or it should have. But the ground was still there, the black gritty tar, sun-soaked and radiating, and my best friends were there, running from Chili's. This, a hysterical sight—run! Run from the shitty Tex-mex and threats of queso!—had they not been running to hoist me back up. Had they not been insisting on existence.

The limbo, there: the end, the linchpin, the semi-colon, the prophecy realized and true. It hovered, still hovers, between the second I fell and the moment they yanked me up. There is a sanctified switch, a wrinkle in time—a white noise. The death; the resurrection. Before, I am the oldest of three children. We are funny, loyal, freckled, all three. After, we are two. We are imbalanced and lost. That kind of grief—that limbo between—is a high because it is a point of no return, and then a return despite. It is the edge of a flat, flat world, and then the stumbling back.

"You saw him! You saw him!" they wept from all sides as we drove to my mom's house, the Chili's a punch-line, hallowed ground, behind us. I had seen him three times that day, April 30, 2008, and I had told my friends this just an hour before the horrific

phone call. The day he died I saw him three times before the two men in uniform came to my mother's door, before my husband let them into the house, before my mom had only two children left. I saw him once at the 7-11, standing behind me in line, tall and broad-shouldered, grinning as he always did; I saw him in Wal-Mart, casually ambling out in front of me as I left with a bag of mascara that should have been waterproof; I saw him speed by in a blue Honda Civic, and he glanced at me through the reflection of the passenger side mirror, gave a slight nod, and then flicked a cigarette off into the sun.

He was hours dead in Iraq and at my every premonitory turn in Colorado. Why he chose to show up in convenience stores, in discount aisles, in some GI's government-funded street racer, I cannot say. Had I not told my friends—just an hour before the call in the parking lot—that I'd seen him, three times, I would not have believed it was true.

I don't believe in omens or prophecies, but I believe in the last of days. And when it gets too sunny in Colorado (300 days a year), I rewind—I watch myself walk out of the Chili's. I observe the clouds race in, then halt. I see my best friends flee from chips and queso, and I try to get back to that fateful or fated car ride to my mother's home, everyone gathered there but our Ronnie. The tragedies, the end-of-days, are slower and easy to pause, examine at length. They demand it; they are holy.

I watch my April 30th self through the windshield, convulsing in the passenger seat and clawing at the glove box, the seat belt, the suffocating oxygen: I chant his name

like a password or prayer, I name him and my sister and me—three, three, I'm the oldest of three.

Inevitabilities

When you grow up in a military town, it's easy to point to who is prescribed as "hero." They are your grandparents and parents, or your friend's parents, your teachers who retired their camouflage and took up business casual. Your classmates are likely to be them some day, and perhaps your spouse—hell, if the recruiters who lurk the hallways or the cafeteria of your heavily government-funded, almost half military/half civilian high school are right, it could be *you* someday.

It could be *you.*

Let us linger:

- Both of my grandfathers were in the Army, having fought in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. My father and his brother were both enlisted. Three of these men are buried in the Fort Logan National Cemetery, though one against his will.
- There are two ways out of my hometown, two exits off of the interstate, one of which leads directly to an Army base named Fort Carson.
- Just north of our city is another city featuring two Air Force bases, one of which is home of the prestigious Air Force Academy.

- The official colors of Fountain Fort-Carson High School are red, white, and blue.
- The west-facing wall of our high school library is all glass. Through it one must gaze upon Cheyenne Mountain, and nestled at the base of the mountain is Fort Carson. A little higher up the mountain is NORAD, the North American Aerospace Defense Command. NORAD gives local news stations sanctioned updates on the whereabouts of Santa on Christmas Eve. Santa is a patriot if nothing else.

But my brother Ronnie wasn't a patriot. He wasn't looking to be a hero. Ronnie was an average student. He didn't like sitting still. He wanted to *do* things. Ronnie was not searching for rebirth or holiness or for a heroic, prophesized end. His decision to join the Army was a means to a different end—away from the impoverished small-town life of continually dropping out of and re-enrolling in community college, of smoking weed and sleeping through alarm clocks. His joining the military, fighting other people's wars, certainly became the means to an end.

WMDs

Improvised Explosive Devices are common enough to be known in acronym form, and can be detonated by cell phone or computer, remote controls, magnets, all from a distance. They are designed for use against armored vehicles, and so designed with

enough power to penetrate the formerly indestructible, to get through personnel carriers and tanks, to the people inside. An IED can wait, hidden, by the side of a road in the desert. It can be set off by a 21-year-old "insurgent"; it can explode beneath the armored vehicle of a 21-year-old "soldier." It can start a chain-reaction, where whole blocks of cities and lives are disintegrated, clay and mortar and ash and bone, so people can tell other people, "We caught him, we got the *bad guy*."

Seeking: White Male Prophet

The majority of failed predictions have come from aging (or aged) white men, zealots in their own right. Perhaps for some the uncertainty of death is only soothed by all-encompassing declarations. I'd ask my father why so many men have these sorts of needs, but he, like so many men in my life, predicted his own early and fated death; he'd raise his glass and slur the future. A man without platform or power, his zealotry was contained, and died with him.

And so we must consider those with clout, the war-makers and the life-takers and the faith-spouting men in between. Let us examine the host and producer of *The 700 Club*, and loyal supporter of misogyny, Pat Robinson. Mr. Robinson goes by 'Pat' but is legally named Marion, none of which is relevant to his prediction of doom in 1982, the last year my mother would be a mother to no one, before she had one, two, three, a trinity of children (for those searching for signs). Robertson was also a Marine and a Senator's son and self-proclaimed war hero; of those three titles, only two are true. Marion 'Pat'

Robinson never saw combat. He never fought in a war, and so, he never died in war. He instead lived on to promise some kind of salvation to millions.

Harold Camping served, but only his God, and his legion of listeners. A Christian radio host and evangelist until his death in 2013, Harold was unable to go long spans of time without making an "educated" or at least Biblically-motivated guess at a coming Rapture and succeeding Apocalypse. On May 21, 2011, when I was hiding out in South Korea—avoiding the reality of my brother's death in Iraq, the echoes of my father's end not long before—dear Harold promised mass large-scale earthquakes and the taking of God's most loyal. It was a Saturday, an inconvenient day for a Rapture. Mondays ring more appropriate as one's last day on Earth, assuming you are one of the chosen, though my brother's last day on Earth was a Wednesday. The Korean weather report did its part and forecasted rain, but the morning began sunny, "as Hell," my husband claimed. I called my mother long distance. "Did you call to wish me a happy Rapture?" she asked. I wondered then, about poor Harold—what is it like to live and see your prophecy fail?

Some Revelations

My Companion Bible (King James Version) is heavy, like a brick or a weapon, and has those lovely gold-edged pages that flutter like a gilded dove when you flip from cover to cover. Grandpa gave it to me in 2010, two years after Ronnie died, months before I fled to Korea to teach English, to start over. One sunny afternoon I accidentally participated in

one of his religious rants, and he grew agitated and prophetic. “The red dragon will rise,” he droned, “but, you know, not an actual dragon,” he sputtered.

“Yes, like metaphor,” I should not have offered.

“Metaphor!” he shouted. It’s hard for him to get back to an inside volume once he’s stuck on rant, but he calmed himself, and muttered approval at my understanding of complex words like “Metaphor” and “Sodomite.” And later that month he gifted me The Companion Bible.

It was expensive, surely, as it arrived in its own sturdy box, though I doubt anyone would question its sturdiness outside of the box. I have opened it five times now, in as many years. It is a self-referential Bible—that is, not to say humorous or reflective, but instead full of foot-notes and numerical references. Thanks to Grandpa, I have a Bible with its own in-page Wikipedia. *Revelation CHPTS 1-6* is scrawled on a yellowing scrap of lined notebook paper waiting in the glossary, below *John 1:1,* and above *ROMANS, GENESIS,* and *EZE CHP 40.* He was delicate, deliberate, in choosing the passages I should read. His handwriting is steadier here than I am accustomed to seeing—it is obvious in the clarity of this particular sample of penmanship he took great care in assigning these passages.

But I couldn’t bring myself to read The Companion Bible, just like I couldn’t bring myself to tune into the “That’s not my ARMY!” rants, the easy mixing he did between his God, his Past, his Country. “In my day the commissary wasn’t full of these

men holding hands, wearing tutus!" he'd growl. I don't know what commissary he shopped in, but those, *there*, I could bring myself to. It would have been thrilling to shop in the commissary with him and apologize to some imagined tutu-flaunting gay men than to listen to his preaching in the den. It would have be simpler than entertaining the Agnostic hill from where I watched—because where I'm standing, it's a teeny push and a short roll down to the Atheist plains below.

Instead of reading through The Companion Bible, I Googled "Revelations," incorrectly, it turns out. The term is actually "Revelation." More mushroom clouds. Definitions: *the act of revealing or disclosing.* A map and directions to Revelations Steel LLC, and a dexknows.com customer review: "Great service, able to get all the pipe and angle I need." One painting of the four horsemen of the apocalypse, who at one time I thought were four Norse Men. The horsemen are gaudily dressed, and I note their flamboyant attire: caped or shielded or flaming. I put The Companion Bible back on the bottom corner of my dustiest shelf, kept blankly smiling and nodding through my grandpa's rants and prophecies.

What would he say to me now, his eldest and faithless grandchild? Does he finally, in his death, know I was harboring more than a bit of doubt? I can hear the harsh challenge from Grandpa, his tough love stance, as though he were here beside me, his quivering lips pursed and uncompromising:

"If there is no God, where is your brother then?"

End-of-days

Ronnie is in Times Square on his first and last visit to New York City. It is 2007, and he wears a huge black parka in the December cold, the coat puffy and making him twice his already large size. He is 5'11 or 6'0, and husky, not fat. He is solid. He can carry my sister and I like babies, and we laugh, hysterical at the thought of our little brother now hulking, of him, carrying us. He is always, always grinning, his squinty blue eyes made smaller by a smile that reaches past his eyelids; he is open-mouthed and always laughing. This is the look on his face as we walk out of the 42nd St station, as the Broadway bulbs and the pulsing crowds overtake.

We rush to the center of the lights, where the ball will drop on New Year's Eve, and he thrusts his hands into the air in a V for Victory, reaches up toward the glittering heights at the heart of NYC, his arms flung open as if ready for an embrace. He shouts then, "I'm rich, bitch!" or something else as ridiculous, and I snap a picture of his delight. I struggle with his abandon, struggle to let him be wild because that would be an admission he may have little time left—that he is going to war and who knows how, when, or if he'll come back. I hold on to caution, scold him for taking a seventy-five dollar black SUV from JFK to my apartment instead of a fifty dollar yellow taxi. I fret over his new tattoos, the insane, stretched cursive on his forearms pronouncing he is both "*Fightin to live*" and "*Livin to die.*"

I need you to know Ronnie's momentary—that our fleeting but captured—happiness overwhelms the picture I take of him in Times Square. It moves past the glossy edges and into some long ago night in December 2007, two months before he leaves for the desert, four months before his 21st birthday, five months before the end of the world.

Flash Fires

"When Revelation was written, only God had the capacity to end the world. But now man does too," Bill Maher says in the opening of his film *Religulous.* He proselytizes his atheist shtick from Megiddo, Israel—the spot many Christians believe Christ will return to in time for the grandest finale. Maher's speech is spliced with images of blossoming mushroom clouds on a horizon, with flashes of glorious reds and yellows and oranges burning out the blue sky.

Julius Robert Oppenheimer, father of the atomic bomb, creator of such colors, such hard-won beauty, died from throat cancer in 1962—a very natural death in his very own home, his very own bed. Many quotes are attributed to Oppenheimer, perhaps none more famous than the dire, "I am become death, the destroyer of worlds," a phrase taken from the *Bhagavad Gita*, a sacred Hindu text excerpted from the epic *Mahabharata*. In the *Gita*, as it is often known, the god Krishna has a straightforward, 700-verse conversation with the mortal prince Arjuna on the simpler things in life: human nature, the purpose of existence, doctrines of self-less action, the killing of one's own kin.

Krishna says that life is not what matters. Krishna says that there is no need to worry about killing kin if it is, in fact, in the name of some—or someone's?—higher purpose. *The New York Times* wrote of Mr. Oppenheimer's death (note: they did not write of my brother's):

> A brilliant nuclear physicist, with a comprehensive grasp of his field, Dr. Oppenheimer was also a cultivated scholar, a humanist, a linguist of eight tongues and a brooding searcher for ultimate spiritual values. And, from the moment that the test bomb exploded at Alamogordo, N.M., he was haunted by the implications for man in the unleashing of the basic forces of the universe.

These days' war explosions manifest in smaller-scale ways, but Dr. Oppenheimer's colors stain the same. *Flash fire,* Specialist Marcus Brown calls it. Marcus was the gunner in the Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicle that day. I ask him, what's the first thing you remember after the blast, and he answers, "Right after the blast I really couldn't see. I got hit in the face with flash fire—like a big bowl of light that's extremely hot—whatever it touches it singes. It singed my eyes shut. Some of my eyebrows got singed off. It took me—it took me a moment to realize…"

That was the day Ronnie drove with the captain of their unit at his side in the front, Captain Pearson, who was also killed in the blast. In the back with Marcus was Rafi Delgado, the medic, and Steve Herbel, another "grunt," as they would say. Their

vehicle had moved to the front of a convoy after the lead vehicle turned down a wrong road, and soon after the bomb went off.

Marcus, in his Staten Island twang, calls us his family. He is patient with my questions, generous but careful with his answers.

Are you able to tell me this kind of stuff or is that going to fuck you up?

Nah. I'm good.

What is an I.E.D made of?

An IED? They just gather the most random things and put them together. They make it out of just about anything, cardboard boxes, toys, underneath all that they hide the actual device, under the street, they bury it, cover it up, have someone watching and then they signal and have someone else detonate.

What does that kind of bomb sound like?

Sounds like dynamite.

Why didn't the vehicle withstand the blast? Ronnie said it was heavily armored—the name, MRAP, indicates a certain level of indestructability.

Liquid copper—it was an EFP, the new thing that they use now, an Explosively Formed Penetrator. [Made of] liquid copper and the accelerant to help heat the liquid copper so

it can easily penetrate the vehicle better. The MRAP was impenetrable to IED's…they got smarter and started using LC. They noticed the IED's weren't working as much on the MRAPS so the moved on to the EFPS.

The roadside bombs got more sophisticated—what were they using…

That day put a whole new perspective.

That day was the day the bombs leveled up.

That's when they started, came out with the second generation MRAPS, the Max-Pro. It's got a extra layer of armor on the outside that has volcanic ash inside the armor, so the liquid copper doesn't penetrate the vehicle.

Marcus, where were you when it happened?

I was literally standing six inches away from where they were, back where the gunner stands.

He [Ronnie] was usually a driver but me and Ronnie made a deal, we would switch off every mission. I was supposed to drive that day.

Does that make you…sad?

It does—it does—it's fine…he said, "I have it." I said you sure it's my day to drive, but I was putting the gun on the truck for him and he [Ronnie] said, "I got it."

[I start to cry.]

C'mon, Soldier, stiffen that upper lip.

Marcus, what happened after the flash fire?

At that moment, like at that point I was caught off…it felt like I lost my legs. I couldn't feel my feet, anything from my knees down. After maybe five, maybe ten seconds, I was holding my face thinking what's wrong? What am I missing? Then my leg hit the gunner's stand, I gotta get the fuck out of the gunner's hold, so I have to get my feet moving and drop out. Rafi and Herbel in the back gave me a quick look over. Herbel was helping Rafi check me out and making sure I was good. Then Rafi proceeded to front of the truck to Ronnie and Captain Pearson and we gave him everything that he wanted whatever Rafi needed we gave it to him.

But it was too late.

It was hard to see—the smoke—

They exited through the back hatch.

You opened that. You got them out. Is that why you got the Bronze Star?

Yes. I got the Bronze Star Medal with the Valor device for saving the lives of Rafi, Herbel, and one other gentleman near the back of the truck—I had to pop the escape hatch, get through the smoke, had to get the back hatch down so everyone could get out.

Marcus, what does the desert feel like?

It's always hot. 130 degrees in the shade, about 140-150 in the sun. Sky always blue, no clouds, and when you're wearing an extra fifty pounds of gear that adds ten degrees of heat…sweating all the time, absolutely. But we had trucks full of water.

What does it smell like in Baghdad?

Desert smells? Southeast Baghdad smells like trash. I'd be out on patrol, it's just it just smells like—still like trash; you'd watch guys cut lambs open on the street and there'd be dried up blood…you'd smell blood on the sidewalk. It was horrible.

Who was Ronnie to you guys?

Everybody loved Ronnie. He always knew how to make everyone smile. He was always a friend to everyone. If you needed something if he had it he'd give it to you—

What do you want civilians to know about war?

I would want people to know what war was like, what soldier's experience, the brotherhood, the bond that brings men closer as friends and brothers and sisters in

arms—can't forget about the ladies—war is just…in my eyes, war is just hell. It just really is. There is no other way of explaining it. It just sucks in general, it keeps people away from their families, loved ones, children.

Are you angry about the war, about you having to go?

Course I'm angry at war. No meaning for war. Just have your two best soldiers fight it out then the loser goes home. I would love to do it like that, Roman times, or back in Greece, your best warrior vs my best warrior. Like in, uh, Troy.

Were you guys patriotic? Or just doing a job?

Most of us felt like we were just doing a job. I looked at it [enlisting] because it was something different, a new chapter, I needed something to do—get out of my home for a while.

If Iraq was a mistake…what does that say about Ronnie's death?

To me it doesn't say anything. I honor Ronnie's death as any brother in arms should—he died, we died, doing what our country asked us to do. It was still a stupid way of how they made us do it…but we had to do it. At the end of the day it was our job.

Have you ever heard of Dr. Julius Robert Oppenheimer?

No, I haven't.

The apocalyptic film genre has nearly doubled in every decade since the fifties. Apes have prevailed in some, air-borne viruses in others, and throughout all the nukes have waited in the wings. Some are lazily literal (I must say, my brother and father would have delighted in Mayan prophecy come true in *2012,* with dizzying 3-D tsunamis and a collapsing Everest), while most fail without Will Smith at the helm.

It is, perhaps, an obvious thing to trace apocalypse movie plotlines through the decades, as they act as projection or reflection of their surrounding realities. And yet, in all their distorted portrayals of the world they were borne of, there is something to be said of each generation's version of imminent doom. Nineteen-fifties classics like *The Day the Earth Stood Still, Invasion of the Body Snatchers,* and *War of the Worlds* improbably sent extra-terrestrials in to do the job, but managed subtle (or not) thematic revelations under style; these films offered waves of Christ parallels, McCarthyist commentaries, and Nature, with a capital 'N,' set to prevail over Martians rather than man-made atomic bombs.

In subsequent decades, threats of Earth-bound Armageddon surpassed science fiction. When war became the norm and not the exception, the apocalyptic film genre—yes—exploded. Kubrick himself managed nuclear satire in *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb.* In the classic film, a man rides the bomb like a cowboy on a bull, a desperate new cowboy on a frantically changing frontier; at the

finale, the good doctor miraculously walks out of his wheelchair—just prior to complete nuclear holocaust.

Bombs and aliens are dated these days; zombies are Hollywood's newest It-Girl. George A. Romero's iconic black and white *Night of the Living Dead* was only the first cult classic in a long line of the reanimated. The Z's have moved from Voodoo-resurrected corpses to the slightly-intelligent, brain-devouring infected. They can run fast now, and are at times capable of regenerative romance. They recruit most of us in twenty-eight days, and sometimes they force us to kill our loved ones, watch them die once more. In pop culture the undead lurch in comic books, actual books, literature (*Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*), television shows, board games, video games, pop music, and zombie-themed 5k charity runs. It is troubling to analyze what they reflect about us, those walking dead. It is a rotten thing, and yet, a thing we have numbly embraced—we are the zombies—and a thing, a place, wherein we ourselves are the end.

Most apocalyptic movies—be it monster, bomb, or man—focus their plot just before the destruction of mankind, or else—more commonly—they roam the aftermath. I suspect audiences want to witness the effects to assess their own chances of survival. While some men may want to watch the world burn, I'd venture most of them are more interested in putting the fire out— or, perhaps, we seek the cause, the precursors, the signs.

We long for that which might have been prevented.

Self-fulfilling

Under Wikipedia's "List of Dates Predicted for Apocalyptic Events," there is a warning, in wary italics:

> *This is a dynamic list, and may never be able to satisfy particular standards for completeness.*

Wikipedia suggests I remedy this, that I can help—I must expand this list with my own *reliably-sourced entries*. Others have done so since I first visited the page—I can no longer find my prophetic eagles, my various Romans. There has been an addition of "Various Christians," and the earliest predicted apocalypse is now 66-70 CE. April 30, 2008, is not listed.

I visit the veteran memorial, The Wall of Honor, in Fountain: my red-white-and-blue hometown. I cannot deny the veil of fate I must brush out of my eyes to see his name carved in stones. That low brick wall with all of their names on it, those who served and retired and passed, those who served and died while doing so. Who else comes to visit? Who are these anonymous persons who watch and recognize our loss, our end, who validate our need to question and despair—else, who suffers this, themselves?

And so the loss is not our own. Precision is difficult when calculating ends. What I offer is precise, but perhaps too close to be reliably-sourced. I use bland rhetoric when what I mean to say is I cannot carry this hurt, this life, by myself. What I mean to say is the worst day of my life is still happening, somewhere. What I mean to say is my family

is permanently dismantled and rebuilding. The list of loss must belong to many people, and many others still. It will not be satisfied.

It is yours, if you will have it.

Progress Report: Imposter Syndrome

I am far enough away from my childhood for it to often seem like someone else's. The distance is self-inflicted; how could I cope, move forward, without holding so much pain an arm's length away, at minimum? Why would my mother want to relive any of the times my dad was shit-faced, with a gun, or shit-faced, with a car, or shit-faced, and hopeless, and seething? Of course it's easier for her to ask, "It wasn't *that* bad, was it?"

I forget it was. I forget until I offer a family tale to late-in-life friends, those who arrived to now via a simpler timeline. Not painless—never painless, no one's is painless, I know this, I know—but their well-adjustment was easier to come by. And I don't begrudge them that so much as accidentally remind them, and myself, that we are not quite speaking the same language.

The world is classed for me in bizarre, destabilizing ways. I have not read the books my better-educated friends have, though they promise me *literature is democratic.* I have leveled-up enough in my life that I encounter this question, time and again: Where did you go to school?

Where I come from, that question is: Did you go to school?

I straddle an ever-widening canyon. I am both lucky and grateful for my privileged view, my social flexibility and resilience. With either party, with members of any class, there's an opportunity for loads of thrilling shame and embarrassment. Mesa State College is not Northwestern, it is not Wesleyan, Smith, Princeton, Oberlin, Notre

Dame, Brown, what have you. It was free, for me, which is a massive accomplishment where I come from, but something I've no right to brag about. It was not DeVry, and that's the most classist thing I've ever said. I was privileged because teachers paid attention to me. They gave me what I needed, and then some, and I was stubborn enough to imagine anywhere but Fountain someday. I am also introspective enough to know my wanting to leave Fountain is loaded with superiority, ego, and self-satisfaction. There is one "I" in win. There isn't room for much pride on either end of this spectrum. I went to a low-rung college, but I went for free. Many people go to better schools, many go to worse, many go not at all. I'm unable to brag, and horrible if I lament. I got the education I could afford, and this is not equal or opposed to the education everyone deserves.

While I'm busy justifying what I've learned, mostly to myself, I slip up and remember. My grandparents did not graduate high school. My grandmother cannot read in English or Korean. My mother put herself through college, whichever college she could, while my dad was off drinking and scheming. She gathered us all together on one sofa to read *Where the Red Fern Grows,* and this was not long after, or perhaps not long before, an episode of him, furious and high; in any case, here is a space where it was *not* that bad. A universal moment, I hope, of happiness, of familial contentment, four young people huddled together on a big doughy couch, wailing about dogs, life, recognition, unfairness, and love.

Bull's Heart

Though I am only eight I know instinctively my grandpa is full of shit. I am a logical child, and I devour *Nancy Drew* and *Goosebumps* and write my own stories about Big Foot, but I pride myself on knowing when something isn't real, no matter how badly I might want it to be.

I am curious but cautious, and when my grandpa tells me, "Sam—I saw a man rip a bull's heart out," I want to ask: Does the bull fall over? What does the matador do with the heart? What movie have you stolen this from, Grandpa? Why do I imagine the matador takes a bite out of it, the blood dribbling down his chin like juice from the reddest apple?

Like juice from the reddest apple.

The way he tells it, he is there in the arena, so close he's nearly the matador himself. The embroidered jacket hangs heavy on his shoulders, the beads glittering, swinging like pendulums at each nimble flick, swish, of the *capote*, the marooned matador cloak; his shoulders reach like monuments, the thickness of the fabric accentuating his swagger, his dance around the arena and out of reach of the snorting bull. The arena and the bull breathe as one, deep panting breaths moving in, out, a steady swelling tide of air, hunger. The bull scrapes the mud off his hoof and charges the man—this matador-by-extension sitting across the kitchen table from me. Just as the horns reach

him, he drops to one knee and thrusts his gathered fingers, his clawed fist, right into the bull's chest.

Except, of course, that's not the way he tells it—the way he *told* it. My Grandpa grew up poor on the streets of Pittsburgh, became a loud, ungracious, ruddy Vietnam vet sporting a Pin-up tattoo on his forearm. He was an incessant talker; my grandmother began talking to herself to maintain sanity, her dam against his relentless stream of chatter. Grandpa was blunt in demeanor, but sharp in mind—smart and well-read, always reaching past his working class life with gruff, appropriated ideas (often prejudiced, always grandiose), holding court at his kitchen table, pontificating over his weary, loyal family. He believed himself a truth-teller. "You're face is looking round, Sam," he offered once. "Ya oughta take up jogging. I only say this because I care." I was twelve, average-sized, and absolutely round-faced. "My face *is* round," I said, defiant, and cried quietly on the way home. My grandpa was critical, judgemental, stubborn, even callous, but he was mine.

Around the same time he told us the story of the bull's heart, Grandpa got cancer. Melanoma, in his early sixties, briefly turned my cigar-crunching, beer-guzzling Gramps, into a meeker, puzzled, and scared old man. His brush with mortality led him to zealotry—he dropped the vices, even his dedicated cursing, and took up the Lord instead. We watched Grandpa get baptized at a pristine Baptist church, and one of the happiest days of his life was just months later, when he participated in the baptism of my mother.

"He told tall tales," she likes to explain, "He wasn't a compulsive liar or anything." Now his tales took on Biblical proportions—all his energies spent on ensuring our eternities, and his own.

❖

Full disclosure, now—he's not the only one bullshitting. The *flick, swish*—my words stand in for his, add shine, the story all mine now. My version of his version, tall-tale, embellished truth, outright lie, lifted from some book or movie. He never described what the matador wore, did he? What if the beads were just glittering fabric? Did he even mention a crowd?

What if the arena was empty because the townsfolk turned their backs on the aging bullfighter, because they refused to see their legend undone?

Both of us, then—full of shit. Storytellers, eager to paint the world a bit brighter. I was a logical child, but it's a lie to say I wasn't—I'm not—longing for proof of the Bermuda Triangle. Like my grandpa, I've long searched for everyday miracles, shimmers of that which inspires awe. The truths of our lives have been epic, if devastating—he ran away from an abusive stepfather to join the Navy at sixteen, and later, enlisted in the Army; my alcoholic father, in and out of jail, car accidents, bar brawls, left my mother, siblings, and I, stranded in the wake of his destruction. My grandpa and I shared the traumas of childhood, though we never discussed them directly. Poverty was something

other people suffered, something we quietly endured. Mental and Health were buzzwords, agendas, not the cause of our familial trappings. He substituted hellish realities with biblical rant. I hid my ambitious (problematically female) nature by asking questions I'd long held the answers to. We sat at his kitchen table and argued politics, or traded unbelievable stories, and recorded them in our own, secret ways, used them to rewrite the past, present, future. We recognized each other early on, and though our sparring may have shown otherwise, I suspect we respected each other too. Grandpa was quick to pick on me, his eldest grandkid, accuse me of things like "Feminism" or "Atheism," while I questioned his preachings and teachings as deferentially as I could manage. Our few full-blown arguments were never amended with apologies; they were ignored, forgotten. He was determined in his righteousness, and I could only pretend to not feel smarter for so long.

The man owned over fifty types of Bibles. His handwriting, a jittery cursive scrawl, covered the opulent pages with annotations, questions, and references to other passages. He was a still a hard man, but now he had brimstone to back him up. "Step out and meet Jesus," he said to a man who jay-walked in front of his Oldsmobile. Stacks of journals stood among the books, his dedication to understanding, to cracking the code of the Bible, unmatched. He sent me letters in college, updates on Grandma, advice, the word of God scattered throughout. He was a man of ideas, my Grandpa, and though he ceded me my own ideas, like the delicate drain of water through a pasta strainer, he

wasted no time demanding my agreement, my consensus—"A female president, what a disaster that'd be!"—and barely allowed a fleeting amount of space for my own chance at swaying him. The times we agreed were almost too real to be believed. "The war is bullshit," he said, not long before my brother was killed in Iraq, "just a political power play." When the Army came to my mother's door with news of Ronnie, Grandpa arrived almost immediately. He asked the men official-sounding questions, but with a dignified, no-nonsense air. He always knew when to turn down the gloat, his bombastic pride. I wonder if he only hoped the same for me.

❖

"Now, Sam, in my day the bullfighting was a sport. I'm telling you now—*raised hand for emphasis*—this bull was big. He had these horns! And I tell you what, when that bull charged, that man fell to one knee and he thrust his hand in and pulled that heart right out. Like this—*raised fist with fingers bunched together in a single point*—and just reached in and pulled that heart right out. Put it in the air so we all could see." He laid his hand flat on the table then, patted the table once, to emphasize the end of the story and the validity of it, too.

This is the trick of storytelling, of inheriting and recording family histories—uncovering where the emphasis lies. I mean both lies and lies, untruths and where it all comes to rest. I have spent a lot of time deconstructing the reasons my grandpa claimed

stories that may have not been his own. The kind of hard-scrabble life he led was more pained than adventurous. Perhaps it was easier to bear when bedazzled and swashbuckled and offered like fable. *I ran away and joined the Navy when I was fifteen. Or sixteen? Well, the officers thought I was eighteen, and I stole away on the ship*. And/or: *My stepfather was a man who yelled and used his fists, and my mother let him. Meals were hard to comeby. I considered running away, dreamt of a life on the water, though I never made it past the ghettos of Pittsburgh.* I can only guess at the whys of my Grandpa, or, more grimly, the who. Who is the man who swears he saw another man rip a bull's heart out? Who is a man if he is only just collected stories, fabulist leanings? He is a bedazzling memoirist, perhaps, an ephemeral person who does not know himself, though he recognizes the whos he may need to be, and when.

And who is the self-indulgent grandkid who spends her time worried her enduring grandpa didn't *know* himself? Would my time be better spent considering the ways our lives reflect one another's? My mother believes he "embellished truths" or "told tall tales" perhaps because the lack of attention paid to him as a kid. The irony, there, my mother's accidental validation of my own childhood—where the focus was on a drunk dad and an overworked mother, rather than the frivolity of youth and play. Propelled by our rough, too-real childhoods, Grandpa, like me, was a story-teller, and, it turns out, a writer too. My mom, as a young girl, found notebooks filled with stories he'd written himself, stashed away in a cabinet of a coffee table. Vivid stories, rich and complex and

surprising coming from a man whose creative outlet seemed to consist of shouting half-truths at his loving, loved, family. The most significant difference between Grandpa and I is he demanded a smaller audience, just the attention of his progeny, while I've inherited enough of his pride to hope for, expect, a readership. Who, then, is more inclined to bombasticity?

❖

He waits for us in his armchair, the late afternoon sky filtered through slats of the dust-free blinds in the den. Grandma opens the front door, a bit reluctant to let us into the cozy kitchen, directs us to remove our shoes by the door. "Honey, *Yobo*!" she yells, and we can hear him mute the TV, pull the lever on the foot rest of his ancient blue chair. He leaves a permanent imprint on the faded fabric, a solid outline, and his footfalls echo ahead of his sturdy walk down the hall. I can always hear Grandpa before I see him. They expect us most days, even if we do not call ahead. We walk after dinner, a ten minute jaunt from Mom's house to their trailer, and Grandpa is happy to minister for twenty minutes or so, the length of time it takes to eat watermelon or coffee ice cream served by grandma, who then takes her leave on the couch in the living room. But he is in rare form on this day, as we lick our spoons, scrape the bottom of our bowls. I am wary of the cadence of his words, his staccato delivery of every crucial detail. I watch the rise and fall of his chest as he takes infrequent breaths, the way his neck reddens if we seem to doubt

his tale, the light sheen of sweat across his bald head. I recognize I am in the presence of someone legendary, or someone who has decided he, himself, is. I recognize this as something I long for myself. “And he held the bull’s heart to the sky,” he bellows, and I shrink away, then glower, from the opposite side of the table. Or did I? Is any of this my grandpa, or just the way I’ve come to conjure my memory of him? My grandpa, Retired 1sg Robert S. Santo, told many stories, most of them repeated, but I am near certain he only told us about the bull’s heart once, at the kitchen table, with the sun glowing through the flowered curtains, my grandma bustling from the oven to the sink to the fridge, my siblings and I sneaking incredulous glances.

And of my own need to record and add a final flourish: Grandpa died in March 2014. I can’t ask him about the bull’s heart. I don’t know that I’d want to anyway. At his end, the biggest, loudest man I ever knew shrunk. His stomach flattened, and he got so damn quiet. After his death, my mother found an inexplicable photo of Hillary Clinton, cut out of a magazine, stuffed in a pocket of good ole Bob Santo’s wallet. Was the Bull coming around? Was he imagining a woman president? Was he considering feminist notions, was this legend capable of change?

And could I have had something to do with it?

Grandpa loved polka music. I surprised him at my wedding with the “She’s Too Fat for Me” polka by Authur Godfrey. Neither of us had forgotten the day he suggested I was chubby. I skipped to his table, dared him to dance. He feinged feeble for all of five

seconds, then bounced to his feet and twirled me around. *I don't want her! You can have her! She's too fat for me!* For once, our versions of life aligned, our self-seriousness suspended in air. The cruel lyrics fazed the crowd. Some attendees put their hands to mouth but the joke was ours. We delighted in each other.

Our last Christmas together, not long before his first stroke, he stood, his stomach lolling over his spindly, eighty-year-old legs, and bellowed another polka song over the shreds of wrapping paper: "Roll out the barrel, we'll have a barrel of fun! Roll out the barrel! We've got the blues on the run!" He worked himself into a bit of a frenzy, and so I helped seat him and Grandma at the kitchen table, and I served them Christmas dinner. "Well, then, Sam, thank you," he said, and stared up into my face as though I were a stranger. Later, my mother said this had shocked him. "You never did that before, and he kept talking about it. He always got his own food." She didn't ask me why I did it. I didn't have an answer. This, one of our last exchanges, makes for easy symbolism, I suppose. This scene, just the moment a storyteller would hold on to, one she'd exploit for emotional impact: me, shoveling mashed potatoes onto his plate, asking if he wanted ham or turkey, and him, holding up his plate, accepting what I had to offer, detailing his appetite as, together, we stacked the food high.

Grandpa was a hard man to love, a man full of difficult love. He boomed, "Roll out the barrel!" to warn, to threaten our gathering as his last Christmas; we didn't correct

him, though he dared us to, and that grouchy old man died just three months later. It turns out Grandpa'd been telling the truth all along.

I'm Depending On You to Tell Me the Truth

She is on a boat.

It's a ship, not a boat, and everything is Technicolor because it's 1962 and though my grandpa and my newborn uncle should be with her, she's by herself, risking the depths, and she's wearing a fuchsia scarf, Korea at her back.

I know they must have come by plane. The Army would not have sent them on a boat, my grandpa and his war bride and their new American boy. But I cannot ask them for clarification, and I can only infer the year. He would get angry and tell me to stop prying. She would stare up at the ceiling from her place on the couch in the den and say, "Yah. That's a long time ago." We don't discuss the dreadful past in this family. That's a long time ago.

So she is on a boat. Her family must see her off: "Bon Voyage," they yell, though they are haggard and war-torn and not remotely French. They clutch white handkerchiefs in their hands at their sides and surrender their daughter to America—or perhaps they negotiated a trade? They can't be asked for confirmation. They never will be.

Perhaps she makes eye contact with her mother then. Perhaps their fated eyes lock. (They did. They must have.) They do not speak a word; they say too much.

My grandma's mouth is set and so is her final destination. She suspects she will never see her mother again, or Korea, and she is right.

❖

We didn't know our grandparents had parents of their own. It turned out—in 1995, when I was ten—there was still one left, waiting in Ohio. "Ruth. Your great-grandmother is Ruth," our mother explained from the driver's seat. She couldn't tell us more than that because she had never been allowed to meet Ruth. So we stole away to Ohio, a covert haul our Korean grandmother would never—will never—find out about.

I perched in the front with our mom because she is our first, and she needed a second. Daisy and Ronnie found a barrel full of monkeys in the back of the rented sedan, something the previous passengers may have left behind as a warning or plea. They hooked the monkeys over the safety handle above the window, the "Holy Shit!" handle my dad would have called it if he were driving. If he had been driving I would have been stuck in the back between my siblings. He wasn't there though, he was somewhere with some other woman, and the divorce had been final for over a year.

It was just the four of us in the rental car we would never own in real life. Our mother was rail-thin but not frail, and young but not naïve, and she needed something more, a touchstone, a definition, so we drove east, towards the sunrise.

❖

I've deduced Grandpa and Grandma were stationed at Fort Carson, Colorado in 1972, around the time my mom entered second grade. She went to Mesa Elementary, and

was taught by Mrs. Allen. I would also be taught by Mrs. Allen. We often ate lunch together because in class I kept enacting my parents, who were always splintering or gluing themselves back together, as families do. Mrs. Allen and I shared Symphony bars at a tiny table in her goldenrod classroom, a chocolate token of gratitude sent in with a scrawled napkin note from my always trying mother.

Colorado was a neutral place my grandma and grandpa could settle in, a safe little shoreless square wherein they bought a brand new trailer and parked it on a tinier square lot. They created new traditions and dressed their three kids with clothes from the Sears and Roebuck catalogue. They could convince themselves they didn't need their own mothers, that family was amorphous, that common ground and understanding were decided upon if not inherent.

Their own version of family was a melting pot on a stove in a trailer with a solid trash-compacter, a cheerful mustard-colored dial-phone. Their girls slept in bunk beds and their son had his own room and the den could be wall-papered with a promising mountain landscape. The cuckoo clock could tick forever next to false blue sky.

❖

Mom drove us nine hours from Fountain, Colorado straight through to Lawrence, Kansas. Instead of making it to Missouri, Mom pulled over at a tiny convenience store, steeled herself against the steering wheel, and sprinted out into the rain. The day started

sunny in Colorado—it always does in Colorado—but it was getting late. The sun burned off the last of the blue and the rain tried to carry us off the road into the cornfields. The *Counting Crows* CD lost its charm somewhere back at the state border, and the barrel full of monkeys rattled around at my siblings feet. We were quiet. We are never quiet.

We watched the rain cascade down the windshield and waited for our constant mother to appear. She did, choking the neck of a two liter of Mountain Dew with one hand, shielding her wet eyes with the other. Mom teetered on the first of several road-trip near-breakdowns, and her anxiety lingered between us above the arm rest and gear shift, a fuzzy static electricity, until she broke: "We're staying at the Holidome."

We didn't stay in 'H' for hotels; we stayed in 'M' for motels. I knew this because I latched onto our dos and don'ts so I could anchor or tether. I clung to them, those "Holy Shit!" handles, because my mom is flexible and changing, and I am more like my Korean grandma, who is resolute, like a dam.

Once, on another road trip through Kansas, in a different decade and a different car, my mom listened to her own parents bicker over the speed limit and the law. Grandpa chose ninety in a seventy-five while Grandma insisted *they* would know: "Through the radio, *they will know*."

Minutes later they waited on the side of the interstate as the trooper left the patrol car and sauntered to the out-of-towner's window. Grandma sat reluctantly vindicated.

She heard *them* on the TV too, sometimes. She couldn't trust anyone, anywhere, and she certainly couldn't trust *them.*

"They listen in the TV," she informed my mother at a wide enough distance from the screen to prevent eavesdropping. Grandma didn't, never will, explain who "they" were or why "they" would care.

She held back the flood.

❖

My supposed or supposedly great-grandmother Ruth lived in either Pittsburgh or Virginia when the newlyweds, her son and his foreign bride, came to her in 1962 from Korea, a baby boy in tow.

My own mom has collected these incidentals, hoarded them in her heart, memorized any accidental omission of her parent's past—but she cannot say if the beginning in America was Pittsburgh or Virginia. We do the math: Mom was born in Virginia in 1964, "I don't know why I was born in Virginia," she admits; Grandpa grew up in Pittsburgh; Ruth was involved in their lives for three years. But math can't determine why or where, and we start to wonder if it really matters.

Upon his return Grandpa was immediately deployed to Germany, and left his young wife and son near his mother, Ruth, and her second husband. 'Left' is unfair because the Korean girl was—is—nothing if not enduring. He 'left' her with a house, and

a car, and her convictions. But he also 'left' her speaking Korean and little to no English. What good are convictions if you can't speak, read, or write them?

And so the two women did not communicate. Ruth wouldn't understand her Korean ways of child-rearing, the way the Korean girl strapped the baby boy to her back with a *podaegi*, a quilted blanket wrapped under her waist and back, tied so tight beneath foreign breasts. Ruth questioned the Korean girl, offered intermittent help or criticism. Ruth let her husband monitor the bank account, the account the Korean girl could not access without him. Ruth let her husband control the checkbook her son had left his bride. Then Ruth let her husband dictate the use of the car her son had left as well.

Perhaps that's how the baby boy ended up blind in one eye, a Tonka truck-inflicted injury, with no one stepping up to drive the war bride and the baby to the hospital. Someone, perhaps Ruth, called Social Services on *Ko Won Soon*, the Korean girl whose name means "Best and Strongest Water." "Ruth" means a feeling of grief, distress, or pity. The mother-in-law, my great-grandmother Ruth, had none of those for the Korean girl, the stranger, and so the blame was shifted and scattered. No one was blamed. Not legally, anyway.

My mom uncovered the following, held onto it: Grandpa's tour was three years. For three unaccounted years his wife and her babies lived near but without the care of his mother and stepfather and as a result they suffered a lifetime of unknowns or unspokens.

My mother does not prescribe the following, but she harbors it quietly: *Ko Won Soon* must have needed her own mother. The word need is insufficient; it lacks exigency, it lacks desperation in circumstance, but she must have needed to talk about the mewling baby on her back and the missing husband and the intrusive, judging, hateful white faces.

My grandpa returned to claim his new family from his old, and found them both in tatters. Just before he came back, Ruth was admitted to a mental hospital, perhaps in part due to delayed pity—or just guilt. The psychiatrist dispensed free medical advice, suggested to my grandpa that he take his family and leave, and never come back.

"No good," *Ko Won Soon* whispered to the second-grade version of my mother, in the later safety of Colorado, my mother just home from the sunshine of Mrs. Allen's class. By then Ruth was more than half a country away, but my grandmother would never shake her fully. "She is the bad woman," she would say to my mother if asked about grandparents. "Never talk to her."

Grandma often gave my mom warnings in place of affection.

❖

My mother was sixteen when she got her period. When she told Grandma, *Ko Won Soon* rushed away down the hall and returned with a huge box of Kotex pads. She opened the box and flung them at my mother's head, one by one, a flurry of thick cotton and misplaced rage. The story is funny the way my mom tells it, pink pads flying at but

just missing or grazing her frizzing curls, feminine products as weapons in my grandma's hands.

When mom and I both grow up, when we fight as two adults, she will rage at me, jab her finger from her chest to the air in front of my face. She will want me to change, and I will be stubborn, resolute. She will admonish instead of validate, and many times she will be right. She will give warnings in place of affection. Sometimes she'll shout in gasping breaths into the phone, choking on her own words until the point where the tears overcome and she has to hang up. She will get me a Hallmark card and write things like, "I'm sorry I can't give you what you need. I can't give you what I never got." I should tell her I understand.

❖

We were still three states from Ohio, Kansas plus three states from our history and our future, three states from a legacy of trying women, from a woman tried named Ruth, and because we were young, all four of us, we were quick to recover from the Kansas downpour. The Holidome was not a football stadium but a Holiday Inn, and the first hotel my siblings and I ever stayed in. The warm indoor pool waited just below the expectant navel of the dome, and we were happy, Daisy and I in our matching modest two-pieces, Ronnie jumping off the deep end, Mom dry and safe in a lounge chair.

There was something wrong with the air outside of the Holidome the next morning, a wet and sticky lingering. I noticed this before realizing the mountains were missing.

"Where are they?" I begged. "What's wrong with the air?" My brother and sister and I had never left Colorado before. We were eight, nine, and ten, and we only knew imminent mountains on the horizon, invulnerable piles of stone, reliable trees. We only knew arid skies and thirsting skin. We left those things, geography that anchored and tethered, because of a woman named Ruth.

❖

I have never seen my grandmother cry. I have heard her keen and wail, but never seen any tears on her face. Her face is set, and her happy face is the same as her thinking face or her hungry or sad. My mother is someone who will not cry in the times that demand it, and someone who cannot stop crying at the most inconvenient of times.

I don't remember anyone crying when Grandma went to California; I can't remember if she went there before or after our journey to Ohio. I can't locate the when and the why, and it's not as though I could ask.

She had hoarded money for months in the top drawer of her dresser, hiding the bills between panties and knee-highs. She bought a ticket to Korea, and stole away in the night. When she'd left Seoul in 1962 the streets were dirt and the people were starving,

rebuilding after war. She'd never seen it renewed—she never will. Her passport had expired long before; America took her in and now kept her and wouldn't let go. She was forced back on a sunny day to the Colorado square she and my grandpa had built together, had settled in.

When Grandma came back from California, Grandpa had her committed, checked into some mental hospital, mumbled guilty words about "a break," although he's not a mumbler. Someone suggested it was the "Only way to keep her from leaving him," but that was a conversation I was not supposed to hear. "I'm not crazy," *Ko Won Soon* insisted. I asked why she left, but no one answered.

I watched my mom start searching for what my Grandma had presumably left Colorado for. The long-distance number she got from the Red Cross was correct, and the Koreans who answered the call knew my mother's name—"Sujin!" they cheered, "Susan!" she cheered back—but the language barrier kept everything dark. Eventually my mom stopped calling, or perhaps they stopped answering.

I've asked them if Grandma ever called her mom, wrote her family letters from America over the years, and if she did, why did they stop? "Yes," they say, and hold the rest back.

The most I ever got on her was from her. Once I asked Grandma how they met, and she mentioned the market stall. A slow grin widened to her high cheekbones, gave permission to her voice. "Yes, you grandpa, he gonna buy socks from me."

"Was he handsome, Grandma?"

"Well—he lookuh very clean."

That was enough, all that was offered. She stayed resolute, and someone changed the subject. We don't talk about the past in our family, that's one thing we don't.

She stayed in the hospital for less than a month after California and met us out front with dry eyes and depression. She went home medicated and leaned for hours against the kitchen sink, bewitched by something in the distance outside the window, lingering long after the dishes were clean.

She's hovered there since, light and empty.

❖

Missouri was all truck stops, fireworks stands, preaching billboards, and porn warehouses. The only safe place for us in Missouri was a Stuckey's. Mom said she used to stop there with Grandma and Grandpa and her own brother and sister on road trips through the middle of America, though a part of me doubted my family existed outside of Colorado. Stuckey's was exciting, though they were only convenience stores with Dairy Queens tucked inside, and cheap state memorabilia haunting the aisles. They were A-framed and in disrepair, and comforting in their sameness at any location. We were given a set amount to spend on items for our friends—we didn't fail to notice the strain on our mother's face each time she used the credit card—and I chose four porcelain clowns that

would be terrifying to behold in a few years: their tufts of hair fell out in neon colors, their harlequin attire, satin in sheen but roughly hewn, would fade and thin. At ten I mistook them for beautiful.

We could not see the difference between Illinois and Indiana. They were the same but for a huge Converse high-top on the side of the interstate somewhere near Indianapolis. Our dad wore Converse, clean and white, but the immense side-of-the-road shoe was classic black and well over ten feet tall. It was an advertisement for a basketball museum, or perhaps it was *the* basketball museum, and Mom finally agreed to stop there either on the way to Ohio or on the way back from Ohio, which made a difference because we were different people coming and going. The museum was not well-lit and smelled like a library book that hadn't been checked out in some time. We hurried through, ready to move on from the displays and old photographs that didn't quite live up to the promise of that shoe. But now that I try to remember the museum, perhaps we didn't really stop there at all.

❖

There is this picture of my grandma and me, but I don't recognize us. She is wearing a striped, summery blouse, her lipstick is strawberry stain, her hair is permed and perfect. The mustard-yellow dial phone hangs on the wall behind her, and she sits next to that trash compacter that no longer comes with every house and mobile home. It is 1984

and she is beaming. I am the first grandbaby in her arms—mid-flail, a wild-eyed, translucent baby—and I am the promise of new, though I look like her husband, or perhaps her husband's mother, the white woman who rejected her for not being white.

"Yes, I watch you, you cry cry cry for mommy," she used to tell me. "When you walk, she leave you, you run to door, you cry, cry, cry. You throw your arms at the door, you cry till you throw up."

There is another picture of her, her lips always red, her cheekbones biting through her cheeks, and I put it in my wallet when I am an adult and I decide to be flexible and move to Korea. I need to look for her and I need to look for my mother and for me, though we are all standing in a room together in Colorado. My mother salutes while my grandma scoffs. "Yah, why you gonna go to Korea? Why you wanna go there?"

Because I am needing something more, a touchstone—a definition.

"To teach. To explore and learn," I say, and leave it at that.

❖

Ohio had a grocery store called "Kroger's." We wanted to know where the Safeway and Albertson's were, King Sooper's or even Cub Foods. Mom explained that different parts of the world had different stores, and Daisy and Ronnie and I understood this but refused to accept it. Every state, from Kansas on, had been missing mountains

and that lighter Colorado air. It seemed unnecessary the states also had incorrect grocery stores.

We discussed this for several miles and Mom, whose frame varied between wilting and rigid, wrestled a renewed energy or foreboding.

"I am the black sheep," she said to the car, to the humid air, her children's ears incidental. "I am the trouble-maker, and no one understands why I need to meet her. They won't understand why I don't just leave it alone." We rallied around our mother through contemplative silence or arm pats and hand squeezes or by changing the radio station to a kinder tune. We tried very hard not to ask the questions burning in our bellies.

When we found her, Ruth was ancient, in her 80's or 90's. I didn't feel as though I could call her "Great-Grandma," whether it was out of some unidentified loyalty, or because she was a stranger. We also had a great step-aunt, who was only in her forties, who was very eager to be family, to atone for sins no one was—or ever will be—willing to excavate or take responsibility for. Mom waited on the old floral and plastic-coated couch and held Ruth's veiny hands in hers, and I couldn't tell who was fortune-telling. Ruth didn't have her teeth in, and that was the only thing recognizable about her, the way her lips caved and quivered. My grandpa's did that too when he left the dentures out.

She fed us macaroni and cheese from a box and covered it with ketchup, and our mom looked over her shrunken body as she plated the mess for each of her great-

grandchildren. Our mom’s look was a warning or a plea and so we ate and spoke only polite things and Ruth’s empty mouth creased into a deep-cut smile.

We slipped away from the table and they resumed their hushed chat on the couch. Ruth’s body sealed to the plastic and disappeared into the cushions. She kept mumbling, “I don’t remember. I don’t remember,” though they said in her younger days she was not a mumbler.

We moved our hands over the fading wallpaper in the hall, and peered into faces we didn’t recognize behind glass frames. Her bedroom was dusty. The shower stall had a chair in it and a safety bar and I was afraid of the thought of showering in such a space, of wilting over a chair beneath the stream, of being too tired for washing yourself clean.

❖

Before I leave for Korea, I ask Grandma for her Korean ID number and birth certificate. She knows why. "It's too late," she mutters.

"They are dead."

That's all she says from her spot on the couch in the den in the back of her trailer on the little square lot. Her hair is not permed anymore. It is salt and pepper, jagged at the back because she abuses her follicles with Grandpa’s razor, refusing to pay a stranger for small-talk and style.

I know she's lying there on that couch in the den now, under her massive Bengal tiger portrait, watching a Korean drama or resting, dead-eyed, through some raging Evangelical program my Grandpa is taking notes on.

She lies there, deciding between Popeye's Chicken or Applebee's for dinner. She is staring, empty, the Best and Strongest Water beside their nature-scape wall paper, the green firs or pines rolling on mountain sides, the Cuckoo wall clock forever ticking next to false blue sky.

❖

It was one in the morning outside of the cow fields of Limon, Colorado—and the end of our voyage to Ohio—when I first heard "Papa Was a Rolling Stone" by The Temptations. My mom had to finish the remaining two hours back home to Fountain because we did not have enough to stay another night in another town. My little sister and little brother slept in the back of the rental, and though she didn't ask me to, I stayed awake with Mom.

The Temptations pulsed through the rented speakers, *"Mama I'm depending on you to tell me the truth,"* and despite the time, or perhaps because of it, Mom turned it all the way up. The fields glowed nuclear green under the scattered highway lights and the harmonies glided out of the windows and reverberated over the fields and into the black. My brother and sister dozed through the reverse fairy tale: Papa's chasing women and

drinking, him laying his hat all over town and dying. I felt more awake than I ever had before, appreciative that he'd at least left his family "a loan," but wondering why the song was about him when he was the one who had left, and she was the one who stayed on.

❖

Ruth died two weeks before my eighteenth birthday, nearly a decade before I sought out Korea, and when she died my mother charged a plane ticket to a credit card and flew to her funeral alone. I don't have to ask or remember this because I have a letter about it that I can hold in my hand.

> *Happy 18th birthday! You've made it and you're "it." When I went to Ohio two weeks ago, it was as if the gods were against me to go…I felt like I was disobeying my mother and her wishes, that I was causing trouble and stupid for doing so. As soon as I got off the plane I knew I did the right thing and I began to heal something so deep inside me that I cry/cried those pitiful I-can't-even-talk tears every time the subject of my family origin comes up…Today I think how the potential that my mother, father, and his family could have reached was soiled by the ignorance and insensitivity of another human being. Although I grieve for that, I am so thankful for the realization and knowing why the people who have*

helped shape and mold who I am did what they did. Learn to let go, surrender and move on.

My grandpa left some letters out on his reading table in his den for a few weeks after his mother died. *Dear Son*, they began. I don't know how they ended. My letter from my mother, printed on confetti-framed stationary, ended like this:

When I tell you that you are "it" I am saying that the talent and the gifts that you have been given through all these generations were used but not to their fullest potential, and they are in your lap…I am excited for you and your journey. I wish you well.

My mom laid a charge on me.

I've since kept the letter in my top dresser drawer, with the rest of the Hallmark cards and my passport, stashed between the panties and knee-highs.

No one told my grandma that Ruth died.

❖

There is no legacy to be found in Korea, no dock where our long-lost family has been waiting. Grandma promised that. She knew.

There is, instead, a beautiful elderly woman on a bus. She is not my blood but her lips are red and her cheekbones high. She does not speak English, so we do what we can while communicating. Every day I jump to give her my seat, and in return she holds my

bag: this is our routine. One day I reach for my bag, bow my head towards her, and she clasps my wrist and hand in both of hers. Her hands are so soft. Our eyes lock while she rubs my knuckles as if to say, "It's ok. You're ok." I swallow hard, and hold the flood back. I come from a long line of women who do not cry. I think of my mother, of watching her drive across America out of the corner of my eye, mouthing the words *Papa was a rolling stone*. I didn't realize until I was in my late teens that The Temptations meant "alone,"—as in separate, as in without—instead of "a loan," like cash from the bank you would eventually have to pay back. Our mother, snapping her fingers, rolling her shoulders, and the way the streetlights hovered on her brave young face—I was so afraid if she noticed me watching she would stop and the moment would cease to exist.

Progress Report: Late-Stage Drug Use

I was straight-edge until I wasn't. My sister, too. Our father's legacy was overshadowed by what he could drink, snort, eat, or shoot, and so in his honor, we refrained. Friends hid parties to avoid my "Gateway drug!" rants. Ronnie was expelled from middle school for buying a Ziplock baggie of weed, and I did not speak to him for a week after. If booze and I were both at a party, one of us had to leave.

Me. It was always me who had to leave.

I did not drink until I was twenty-one, and it was Smirnoff Ice, so it barely counted. To be wholly accurate, it was five Smirnoff Ice's and I drank to allow myself permission to make out with a boy whose girlfriend wasn't me. Later, I puked a crater in his front yard, and even later, I married the guy, so that drunken escapade left most of us unscathed. To Jesse's ex, I'm sorry. That Smirnoff-fueled kiss-off was the most exhilarating if least feminist thing I've ever done.

Booze and drugs were a thing of my family's past, a hinderence to getting over, getting out. The shame people feel on my behalf when I announce, "My Dad OD'd on meth," has worked as its own micro-D.A.R.E. program. This proclamation is a nice, shorthand way to address a lot of questions. It's a step up from "He was a drunk," though this was true, too. We would not repeat the sins of our father. We dared not imagine some kind of moderate relationship with anything chemically altering. We wanted nothing to do with that sort of life.

Weed is kind. It is generous and as common as smoking cigarettes, something I've still not done to this day; both parents smoked and threatened murder were we to follow suit. Cigarettes aren't stylish. Weed *is*: so stylish, it's common; so trendy, it's vintage, and trendy once more. Weed is always in the midst of its own Renaissaince, reestablishing its relevance, so mainstream it's a bit rude when everyone gathers and no one has love to spread around. It's legal, man, and if it isn't, there's even more of it to be had.

Pot is smoked across class-lines, but the implications are varied. Show poor, high school me, a Snapchap of thirty-something, grad school me, packing a bowl, and watch the color drain from my round freckled face. I thought drugs were what poor people do, succumb to, struggle to outrun. I believed drunkenness akin to classlessness, meaning, ugh, how common. (Grad school me: Ugh, how quotidian.)

It is classless in that a drunk is drunk, wherever it is they sleep or work. They are sick and addicted and in need of desparate help, but when I was young I could not imagine the very thing my dad needed, to cope with the weight of living, to ever be used recreationally.

Here are my adulthood friends, taking LSD in the woods, working towards *radical acceptance*. Bourbon is classy, A.F., and smooth, and drunken tour-worthy. It is fancier, more acceptable than a fridge drawer packed with Miller Genuine Draft or chilled, bottom-shelf vodka shooters. Writers who tell people they're writers sample

Adderol. Students pop it on the regular. Drug use is classless, but drugs are thoroughly classed. Heroin is to Poor White as Vicodin is to Celebrity White. The line between coping and recreation is fine and easy to cross; it is much harder for the poor to cross back.

So weed it is. Oops! I'm a recreational and occasional imbiber of pot, a universally available and generally accepted drug. Dad had a real hand in my generalized anxiety disorder, and so, why shouldn't his aesthetic have a hand in modifying that anxiety? I smoke like a pro. I can rip a bong and also say that aloud in a convincing way. I can show up to a party and share a joint; I can't roll it myself, but I will hit the shit out of it.

Daisy drinks wine now. We sink Patron shots, possessed by our brother's liver. I drink Bourbon, and sometimes (sometimes, Mom!) smoke weed. I count the days I smoke or drink in a week, a month. I ask my husband if he worries I will have a drug problem, and he scowls, rubs my back. When I smoke, I do it to see the moon with added clarity. I smoke, and marker in a mandala coloring book. I muse at the stereotype I'm embodying. I'm terrified of crossing the line, of moving backwards, of repeating the past. I take another hit and scribble in a journal like I'm writing for my life, or his, or *his*, scrawl it all down as though pen to paper is the only thing ensuring these lives happened. We are so far from them, so close to now. What would those Ronnies think, seeing A-type me light one up and linger?

This Is the Story of Someone You Should Know

C'mon you stranger

you martyr

you legend

and shine.

--Roger Waters

❖

My Dad is a series of mythologies. Or a myth.

❖

My Dad was eighteen in 1975. I know this to be true because he was born in 1956, although others have suggested he was twenty in '75. He was living in Germany at the time (it's been said), selling hash on the street (unless he wasn't). Where ever he was, he would have been listening to *Dark Side of the Moon* religiously, or perhaps just spiritually, for two years. Maybe in 1975 he was on his second album of *Dark Side of the Moon*. He would have bought the first copy when he was sixteen, or perhaps he may have stolen it, and in any case, he would have meditated on it until it was too deeply grooved, too overused, for optimal play.

Wish You Were Here, Pink Floyd's ninth studio album, was released in 1975, just two years after *Dark Side of the Moon*. At the time of the album's release, Pink Floyd was four members: Roger Waters, David Gilmore, Nick Mason, and Richard Wright. Original lead singer Syd Barrett left the band in 1968.

I'm not sure how my dad interpreted *Wish You Were Here,* an album Roger Waters conceptualized as a "universal expression of my [his] feelings about absence." Dad was partial to the open-ended chaos of *Dark Side,* with its tornado-like songs that dealt with, as Waters described, things that "make people mad," grasping songs that longed for any resulting empathy. I have always favored the former album, its need to understand, to explore some abiding hurt; my dad was partial to that latter, singular, that infamous—obvious—Pink Floyd album, which began and ended with someone's heart-beat.

The year 1975 was nine years before my birth, ten or fifteen before he would introduce my brother and sister and me to the cosmic howls of the British band from across the sea, to the swirling psychedelia he unleashed into our wood-paneled living room. *Dark Side of the Moon* replaced him when he left us for days, and then weeks, when he moved in with another woman, when the leaving was finally made legal. We'd remember being four, five, six, and careening around the house in a frenzy, in circles around him and the kitchen and my exhausted mother, the dark sounds of "On the Run"

inciting a riot in our chests, this chaotic insistence that we were bigger than the shrinking house and our neighborhood behind the 7-11.

When he left us forever, finally succumbing to his own dark sounds, to the buzzing in his head, to the drink in his hand, I decided I had never really wanted him to leave in the first place. With some need to cancel out a secret, complicated wish for his absence, I sanctified his death with *Wish You Were Here*. This has failed to mark a return.

❖

"Shine On You Crazy Diamond" is the first thirteen minutes and thirty-one seconds and the last twelve minutes and twenty-seven seconds of *Wish You Were Here*. The song is broken into parts, equaling a nine-part composition in total, parts one through five and then six through nine bookending the album that ponders absence.

Both parts of the song get rare radio play. When they do, only one part is played, usually the second half, usually as I drive through Colorado, the day parting, the mountains holding up the tangerine sky; always just as I wonder at how fleeting life is, wonder at infinite long a red traffic light can feel. Encountered separately, as the record intends, the songs act as a slow burn heading into and then creeping off of the climax of a story. They are the songs skipped on the album, weak as exposition, unsatisfying as denouement, more an echo of grief. They are the calmer times one cannot recall,

lingering in the shadows of the event, or the moments much later when the trauma feels as it may have been a dream all along.

"Shine On You Crazy Diamond" takes nearly four minutes of heavy but meandering instrumental to reach the instantly recognizable, the haunted four notes that are the foundation of the opus. The beginning sounds like synthesized church organ, a fabricated holy throbbing beneath a guitar's questioning wail; when those four notes finally arrive, the insistent, disjointed, Bb-F-G-E natural, the listener is wondering if the lyrics will ever come. The listener is sure things can be prevented if the lyrics never come. But there, a sprinkle of chimes and the four notes again, the listener's father is just out of reach. The warning roll of the timpani and the four notes again, her father is fading so fast. And then cymbals, an echoing bass, a howling saxophone, her father, my father, the four notes again.

The song is softer, and softer still, but for Gilmore's interrupting blues guitar solos, until Waters finally takes the mic eight minutes and forty-one seconds in and asks, *"Remember when you were young? You shone like the sun."*

❖

My dad was living in Germany before he enlisted in the Army the first time. His mother was German, and she had moved back to Germany then, although when asked no one ever specifies the *then*. It is only certain that he lived in Germany two times in his

unstable life, at some point between and during his time there he had two different enlistments in the army, and before any of that he sold hash.

There is a picture of him standing in a vaguely German-looking street, where roofs are stoned and windows are shuttered. His age is indeterminate, but his shining blue eyes, his careless hair, his strong set jaw suggest late teens or early twenties. The sky is overcast as I imagine it to frequently be in Germany, a darkness always coming or going. He is leaning slightly, toward a brick wall, and there is a lovely blonde girl near him. He is wearing an olive green, Army issue-looking jacket over casual 70's clothing. He is not my father here, but instead a handsome young man in some European country, posing, acting at belonging. He is a reverberation of my dad; a distorted reflection; a question with an unsatisfying answer. Maybe just before the picture was taken he was flashing smiles, and practicing German on passersby, and trying to sell them the supposed hash.

He never talked about Germany, as though he didn't have a life before us, though he struggled to maintain one with us in it. But I knew he had to have been a person before; as my dad he would speak exaggerated German to female German clerks in grocery stores to make us laugh, to cause embarrassment. He rolled his tongue and choked on phrases to force and mock the guttural tones. He would make butter and salami sandwiches on rye and call them "German Sandwiches." He told stories of his mother, working in factories beside Jewish women, stealing food on their behalf. He cut his portion of the movie reel out.

❖

"…Outgoing, charming, wonderful, friendly, you name it, a wonderful man." Richard Wright's nostalgic description of Syd Barrett was of a young, talented man before his mind broke.

On June 5th, 1975, the band gathered for the final recording of "Shine On." A man wandered through the studio, with watery blank eyes set beneath a white and hairless brow, accompanied by a protruding potbelly. Richard Wright captured the incident, his realization like a slowly developing Polaroid:

> I came in and I saw this guy sitting behind him…it took me a long time, and then suddenly I realized it was Syd, after maybe 45 minutes…He just, for some incredible reason he picked the very day that we were doing a song which was about him. And we hadn't seen him, I don't think, for two years before…And then, for him to pick the very day we want to start putting vocals on…

Roger Waters and David Gilmore both recall crying at the shock of their friend's appearance, his once lanky frame and long dark locks, his creative genius, barely an echo in the large, looming man who was there, in the studio, present without being there at all. There is clear remorse in the men whenever they speak of Barrett, his drug use, and the linear self-destruction.

My father referred to his own in death in a fated way, as if never truly tethered to the world. No matter how hard he loved his children, he fought against liking himself. At the end, my mother swore he'd been looking healthier, though his overdose was truly an overdue surprise. "I thought he was getting better," she said, confused, as though he was a different man than the one she'd once been married to for a decade. It started rain, and she ushered my brother and sister into the hall as the doctors entered and took him off life support. I pushed through his family's greedy grief, and waited for a squeeze from his leathered hand, for last words, for a closure I would not find as a sixteen-year-old who was still observing her father's slow death. I'm still looking for the finale now, fifteen years post-mortem. On the documentary, Rogers Waters in particular seems to carry the weight of Syd Barrett's end:

"[We] tried to hold onto him for longer than we should have done."

❖

Welcome my son, welcome to the machine

Where have you been?

It's all right—we know where you've been.

❖

They say it was during his second enlistment when Dad crashed his Volkswagen on the *autobahn*. He was driving drunk, as he would many times in his life: long after the

first crash in Germany, when we were seven, eight, nine, he hit the side of a Colorado mountain. He sat in the hospital bed, and offered his Jell-O, let us get close to examine his spliced eyebrow (it would scar). Later he drove us by the mountain—a tall red sedimentary block, a side of a cliff—and there was the bent green mile marker, and we giggled because there was nothing else to do.

In Germany, they say, he hit the other car head on. He broke his pelvic bone and was hospitalized for months. He got chummy with nurses, the gossip implying sex with an eager one in his hospital bed. Even in the hospital bed his charm was infectious, perhaps necessarily so under the fluorescent lights. Some remember multiple broken bones; others recall him being unstoppable on the crutches.

My aunt recalls, albeit briefly, something else:

"He was concerned that the other person or persons were seriously injured and potentially dead, but I don't know if he ever found out." She doesn't recall more than that.

❖

"Welcome to the Machine" is a pulsing, synthesizer-heavy, and much angrier sounding song than "Shine On." It is part one of an arc completed by the next song on the album, the mocking, sexy, guitar-riffing "Have a Cigar." Both "Machine" and "Cigar" slam the music industry, "Machine" implicitly so, and "Cigar" with a snarky, unwavering

gaze. I will not reference the grieving process here, though I would have at the time of his death. As a young adult I referenced the process not just as a coping tool, but a metaphor for every coming life experience—I brandished it like a weapon, a demonstration of my wisdom and strength. I will not reference those five stages directly, though I fully recognize the biting, cynical, rage of this song. Waters, always one to prefer more abstract explanations, says of "Machine" "…it's about all of our experience in the face of the monstrous, grinding thing that chews us up and spits us out."

❖

It's told four black men jumped my dad in the barracks in Germany on his second tour. It's uncertain whether this was before or after the autobahn, but the involvement of drugs or alcohol is likely. No one says "black men" in an accusatory way when the story is repeated; instead they say "black men" in a "Just the facts, ma'am," sort of way. He never tells details except to promise it didn't make him racially charged, it didn't change the fact that his "best friend Dave Humper was—is still—black!" This he'd once faintly offered as proof that if there were racist motives, they were not his own.

The men surrounded him in the barracks and took turns beating the hell out of him, bruising his face, body, and ego, and no one says why or how, or suggests Dad was once more "talkin' when he shoulda been duckin'," which had been the case before and would be several times more. He was beaten and then reassigned to drive the colonel

around the base. He was relocated while the men were left marginally punished, a slight that Mom says left him "disillusioned" with the army.

He told her this, months later, when he met her in the States, just before he decided to end his contract with the Army early without letting the Army know. He wasn't keen on communication, our Dad, as the man we barely knew him, as the man he was before.

❖

Thematically, both "Machine" and "Cigar" contain lyrics portraying a necessary rebellion in the face of successful mediocrity or blatant record executives who promise, *"You're gonna make it if you try, they're gonna love you,"* while making simultaneous demands on what the members of Pink Floyd saw as a compromise of art and self.

❖

We're just two lost souls swimming in a fishbowl, year after year,

running over the same old ground.

What have we found? The same old fears.

Wish you were here.

❖

My mom was young, nineteen, and hid him in the closet of the small trailer they shared. Men in uniform came for his gear and Mom shook her dark curls, answered "No,"

when they asked if she'd seen him. He waited in the closet in the bedroom, listening, perhaps sweating, or even grinning, the adrenaline always getting the best of him. He was AWOL for thirty days, drinking and ducking behind closets or perhaps the thin frame of my soon-to-be mother, and on the thirty-first day he was ready, so she dropped him off to be dishonorably discharged from his second enlistment with the United States Army.

My mother says she always knew it wasn't right. She went on vacation somewhere with her family around this time, perhaps to some place like Yellowstone, where geysers wait to blow, where Old Faithful smokes and simmers, and she planned to come back home and end it. But when she returned he had printed the marriage proposal in the small city newspaper.

"He needed me," she said. And while the words made sense, the sentiment was too complicated for me to understand. She told me this, so young, both of us; it felt wrong and profound to try and grasp my father as someone in need. My mother recognized him as no one else could, and showed him in a translucent, damning, light. I'd been looking for so long, it was necessity when I began to see him as she did. Often my greatest wish has been to know him as he knew himself, though this may be the answer—that which he could not see, or know.

❖

The title track of *Wish You Were Here* began with David Gilmore just strumming notes on a twelve string. Roger Waters wrote the lyrics, and though the two failed to agree on many things, their collaborative efforts created one of Pink Floyd's most enduring and heartfelt songs.

❖

My most tangible memory is of his back.

He would take us grocery shopping, ten, eleven, and twelve, and the minute we entered the store, he'd bolt. He was less *Rebel without a Cause* by then, three children later, and his shin-high white socks, the sparkling white Reeboks, and the khaki shorts mirrored that.

The booze hidden in tomato juice mirrored that.

We'd howl and creep along a main aisle at the front of the store, listening for the promising squeak of his Reeboks on the linoleum, or a flash of the white leather he had scrubbed with a sponge and shoe-whitener.

He was too fast, and we were too obvious. He'd glimpse our trio at the opposite end of the cereal aisle, and break into a sprint across the paralleled back of the store. I knew then, as the oldest, only I could truly catch him. I understood it as my responsibility to reel him in, to keep him from shaking loose of us. He used to take us on drives in the countryside, the county roads hilly and unpredicatable. We called them belly hills,

because as he surpassed the speed limit near the crest of each road, then swerved just a bit as the bottom arrived, our bellies would rise to our throats, and drop without warning. As hard as I tried, he was always on the move. We were always playing catch up, just missing him, his soft hair always just out of focus at the end of each aisle, the sequence of him and the colorful cereal boxes and canned foods flying like a flip-book, like time-lapsed photography.

❖

For some, those opening notes of "Wish You Were Here" are the first they learn to pick on a used guitar, on their dead dad's Fender. The song begins with the sounds of an old radio, of stations tuning, a man and woman talking, and transitions into an orchestra of violins rushing to the end of some other classic, just before someone can be heard coughing in the background. The plucked notes enter and it feels as if one were on the finishing side of a heavy breath, a pure moment of release, as if one had gasped moments before, and now had discovered the optimal moment to push the air out, not in short puffs, but in one elongated sigh. The notes seem to signify the beginning after the ending, or, in the least, the beginning of an end.

❖

I keep my dad's license in my marooned Marc Jacob's wallet, next to his *Tucker Investigations* business card. The '*I'* in *Investigations* is not an *'I'* but a spyglass. I helped

design the logo. He was a private investigator once, after he quit piloting classes, before he worked construction again.

His license is a truck driver's license, and it indicates he could drive a big-rig with thirteen gears. It also says he was only 5'9, and that can't be right. He is simply dour in the photo. There is no trace of his sneaky grin, or his toothpaste-whitened, cigarette-dangling teeth. His hair is a light brown or a dark blonde and there is no indication from the photo of how soft his hair was, like tufts of baby bird feathers. He would run a self-conscious hand through it again and again, a near tic, would push the hair off of his forehead with hands brown and cracked and scabbed to varying degrees. They were blue-collar hands, whatever his current occupation.

He looked like Harrison Ford. Or Jack Nicholson. Or Bruce Willis.

I drew a picture for him in fifth grade, or traced it. I checked out a book from the library, an orange hardback that instructed on how to draw celebrity faces. I put a piece of wide-rule notebook paper over the *Die Hard*-era Bruce Willis face.

I accidentally traced their face upside-down so that the hole-punches were on the right of Bruce/Dad's face instead of the left, and that devastated me. It had taken such exacting work to trace each craggy, handsome line that I signed it and gave it to him anyway the next weekend we loitered at his bungalow. I wrote, "I love you, Dad (Bruce Willis)," underneath the portrait of the famous man, my dad. I folded it in a perfect white square, and gently placed it on his splintered kitchen table.

❖

Waters says his songs, including “Wish You Were Here,” often ask very similar questions. He wonders, “Can you free yourself enough to experience the reality of life as it goes on before you, and with you, and as you go as part of it or not? Because if you can’t, you stand on square one.” His vague assessment taps into the accessibility of the title track, with listeners interpreting the lyrics on vastly different scales. It is a song about broken relationships. It is about a lifetime of unrealized potential.

It is about the complete absence of another.

❖

Can you tell a green field from a cold steel rail?

A smile from a veil?

Do you think you can tell?

❖

My dad was forty-four in June of 2001. I know this to be true because he was born in July of 1956, and he was forty-four when he died.

My grandmother took his ashes and didn’t let go, though he had wanted one last adrenaline rush, though his wish was to be sprinkled like confetti off of Pikes Peak. She kept him in a bronzed urn next to her kitschy German porcelain dolls on some shelf in her smoke-filled house. She kept him on a shelf, and when we came to visit his ashes she left

the curtains closed. She didn't open the door. He was our father, the legend, the myth, but he was her baby, her Ronald, her Ronnie. She needed someone to blame, and we were good enough.

When my uncle died, he was buried in Fort Logan National Cemetery. He was honorably discharged from the Army and had earned the right to be there. My dad earned the right of her smoky living room, and that was too much for her to bear. When my grandfather died and was also buried in Fort Logan cemetery, she brought my father's bronzed urn with her, held it like a football under her pasty white arm, and after making sure no grave diggers were watching, she dumped the contents of the urn in with my grandfather.

So Dad found himself reenlisted, once more.

Wish You Were Here, and the process of creating what every Pink Floyd member considers their most complete, their favorite album, was also the start of the group's undoing. The creation of the album invoked differences in artistry, work ethic, band direction, and led to Roger Waters' ultimate departure from the group in 1985.

In many ways the concepts explored in the making of *Wish You Were Here* resonate within the inevitable dissolution of the group. "It's full of grief and anger, but

also full of love. You've got to see beyond the grief and anger to the possibilities of love," Waters says.

❖

He had collapsed in the basement of their ranch-style home. I once witnessed the demolition of an old casino in Atlantic City, the façade faded and worn, the interior maddeningly empty, but so full of history, of possibilities. I imagine Dad went down like that, a slow, defeated crumbling, his feet folding beneath him, until he came to rest underneath their beloved pool table, facing his collection of vinyl, including that storied *Dark Side of the Moon*. I visualize the moment in past, present, and future tense. He collapsed, is collapsing, will collapse. I wonder, in what tense did he live his own life?

There I am, the oldest: miming dutiful, staying until the end, my blurring eyes focused on the starched white sheets instead of the tubes in his nose and his mouth. His handsome face was no longer his. It swelled from the speed, the resulting brain aneurysm.

He made us promise, the three of us, once, that if he was ever "hooked up on some machine," or if he ever "wound up in some wheelchair," one of us "better yank the cord."

"You better take me into the woods and shoot me," he laughed or threatened. It was effortless for him to mock the future. He did so as often as he shrouded his past.

As he took that last breath, a rattling gasp, a cosmic howl, it started to pour outside and the thunder clapped as if on cue.

There is that saying, "Out with a bang," and he did. He went out with a bang.

❖

The album that went on to sell 19 million copies worldwide was sent out covered in black shrink-wrap, the band only recognizable by a Pink Floyd sticker slapped on each shroud at the insistence of the record labels. The black shrink-wrap, slick and hard to remove, acted as a square, personified, tangible void.

❖

The last day we saw him conscious was Father's Day because it had to be a day we couldn't possibly forget.

He grilled burgers, fat orbs with garlic butter gems hidden in the middle. He looked quite slim. We had not seen him in months because we had decided that at fourteen and fifteen and sixteen we wanted stability, an end to the machine. We didn't trust his easy smile anymore. We couldn't stand to guess which Dad he'd be, charming or raging or trapped in the snap shot of some long ago established despair, some echo of grief.

We had bought him a more accessible, a benign album for Father's Day, the light and frivolous sounds of Paul McCartney's *Wings*, their "Greatest Hits." We sat on the

back porch and savored half-pound burgers as “Silly Love Songs” wafted out from the den.

Dad had watched me pull up that morning and said “That’s good *he* can do that for you, that *he* can give you a car.” He did not say stepfather. He didn’t smile, and then he did despite himself. Before the burgers and silly love songs he helped me rid the previous owner’s cracking bumper stickers with WD40. He shook the can and promised, “It will always remove everything.”

For months after that day we took turns calling his answering machine, just to hear a verbal memento of the man who had gone. We clutched at each word, hoping for a different answer, a slight change of tone in his voice.

One day we called and the number was disconnected.

❖

Underneath the slick black wrapping was another classic Floyd cover, designed by Storm Thorgerson. The cover captures the image of two men standing in the empty lot of a Hollywood studio. The sky behind is blue and forever. They are wearing business suits and shaking hands, sealing the deal. The man on the right is stuntman Ronnie Rondell, and he is on fire. I know the image like I know my father’s handsome face—definitive, distinct, but startling all the same.

The photo shoot was shorter than most. After several shots of the two shaking hands, a wind whipped up through the lot. Ronnie jerked his face away from the flames reaching off of his back and ran out of frame where he was covered with a blanket and proclaimed to the photographer, "That's it, I'm done."

The photographer kept shooting through the wind, through the reckless flames, through Ronnie's terror. The result is a man ignited, moving out of frame, first his back, then his legs, the bottom of his loafer, and then nothing. Just an empty studio lot.

In each shot Ronnie is going, going, gone.

Encampments

"We weren't rich, we weren't poor. If we lacked some necessity, I couldn't name it; if we had luxuries, I couldn't name those, either, without comparing what we had to what others had, and nobody had more or less in our middleclass neighborhood."

-V.C. Andrews, *Flowers in the Attic*

And from a lesser-known classic:

"In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since. 'Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone,' he told me, 'just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had.'"

-F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

I grew up in a library, where books are free, and computers are free, and homeless people are, also, free. I grew up in the paperback aisles of Wal-Mart, where books were often five dollars or less, stacks upon stacks of beach-reads, though the beach for me was littered Fountain Creek. I grew up on the microfiber-shedding couch in the back of my seventh-grade algebra teacher's classroom, reading any Reader's Digest or People

Magazine I could get my hands on. That Algebraic bastard played Snood all day on his computer. He instructed us to open our text books and study, and these were the limits of his instruction. I was given permission to sink into the couch, the sagging, hefty cushions of the second-hand sofa, which kept me from fuming at a hard, metal desk. My math was sound and I've always been a tattletale—our "teacher" was clever enough to keep me quiet with easy living and the teetering book shelf beside the sofa. There, among James Patterson and Mary Higgins Clark and maybe an unopened Austen or two, I found it: *Flowers in the Attic*, with a keyhole cover and a pale, blonde, beautiful face peeking out. I devoured this revolutionary work in two class sessions as the man at the front of the room made students practice x's and y's on the chalkboard under his limited supervision.

A few years after my parents split for good, alongside my idolatry of V.C., I developed an unabashed obsession with the homeless. Fascinated by those I assumed had only strangers to turn to, *if anyone at all*, I'd daydream leaving my life behind, my mother's food stamps, dad's drunken meltdowns, my needy siblings. I'd create plans and checklists on my seventh grade algebra couch, Mr. B playing on his computer again, pretending not to notice we were pretending to self-teach math. It was in his class I heard about a 20/20 or a Dateline segment featuring homeless who aren't, people who begged because "the homeless thing is their job." Someone knew someone's cousin's ex-best friend who had seen a news program featuring people making over $30,000 a year by

simply asking for money with cardboard signs, in tattered clothes, waiting on the peripheral of off-ramps. This seemed a substantial amount of money, but again, we weren't getting a lot out of math class. We discussed homelessness as potential occupation. We wondered at the possibility of long-lost, affluent relatives. We fed each other's whimsy at a long cafeteria table as sage teens, self-segregated by gender, the boys gulping down extra milk cartons, the girls pretending to be full, moving food around the trays, feigning dainty.

❖

The man weaves his shopping cart between throngs of people. His hair reaches out through the air in thin white strands, his skin either tan or dirty; his eyes burn into the sidewalk, his gait unsure and wavering. He is in slow motion and we are at normal speed. He stalls through couples holding hands, mingling intimate groups, all crowding his sidewalk, as he, alone, really suffers the frigid Colorado air. My husband grimaces, not because he dislikes homeless people—he just hates attention called, and he's readying himself for wifely interference. Folks look out the window of the art gallery we are supposed to be inside. A friend is playing classical guitar for the opening of an exhibit of quilts and crotchets, of vibrant scarves and blankets. I begin to follow the man. He is someone's father, I think to myself, because father's missing in action is sort of my bag, because I'm nothing if not infinitely nosey. He was someone's father, once, I'm sure, and

he keeps dropping his cardboard sign and apologizing to no one in particular. He slurs his name, says “Michael” when I hand the sign to him without pausing to read it or understand its Sharpie scrawl. I separate from the herd to ask if he wants some food. He nods, and I gesture to a nearby bench and ask him to sit, wait a minute. He says he has all the time. He is from Detroit. He worked in the auto-industry back then. He has no answer to how he ended up in Colorado. I tell my husband to go pilfer from the free coffee and snacks table inside for Michael while I order a pizza.

Next door to the art gallery of domesticity, the pizza parlor is shabby, all dark 70’s wood-paneling and faux-vines on wood columns. It is a sad excuse for a parlor of pizza. The girl at the counter is young and has her whole future ahead of her, so her smile is careless and incessant. No, we don’t sell pizza by the slice for dinner! Yes, we can do takeout! Well, it will only take about fifteen minutes! That seems a long time for a homeless man to wait for a pizza, so I tell her I will be back and go to Michael. I ask him if fifteen minutes is ok, and he tells me again, “I have all the time.”

He is wringing his hands. They are brown from dirt and sun and chapped by the winter wind and lack of shelter. They look like my dad’s hands, although my dad was never homeless, as far as I know. My dad had classic blue collar hands. Hands that changed jobs quickly and easily, hands that also knew how to grasp the bottle, hands I clasped on his death bed—though, this was to be expected, yes? V.C. Andrews never let

fathers get very far; their ends were symbolic, a break from the past. I give the homeless man my gloves.

Jesse will be frustrated when he returns with hot coffee and M&M's because this is already the second pair of gloves I've gone through this December. Of the first pair I bought, identical to the gloves that are now Michael's, I lost one glove after cocktails with the girls. Now if I give this second pair away I am back to the lone glove. It waits at home on the antique vanity my dad gave my mom many years ago, not too long after the divorce, after he moved into the bungalow downtown. I had previously thought bungalows only existed in my gothic books, where secret relatives loitered on family compounds, but they are real homes where people eat and sleep, where children visit their near-sober fathers on weekends. Dad took the vanity from an estate sale on the rich side of town. He was doing odd jobs as a mover or construction worker. I say he 'took' the dresser instead of 'stole' because the details escape me, as they likely escaped him, and the vanity and its mirror are mine now, all soft blonde wood and accenting painted roses, with pictures, jewelry, abandoned scripts, and the lone Target glove on top—all black, like Michael's, but for the tips of each index finger, which are a slightly ribbed gray so that they can be useful on touch-screen phones or iPods. The gloves are much too small, but Michael thrusts his hands in as fast he can, as if I might change my mind.

❖

My first V.C. Andrews of many showcased a young girl suffering innumerable losses, the romanticized-worst life had to offer: parental abuse and abandonment; grandparents, favoring coporal punishment; a dose of incest; no real place to call home. While I did not identity with this list in even the most tangential way, I was enamored with these fictional beauties, who always came out the other side wiser, and somehome, more beautiful. They endured. They emerged, generous and giving and tender. Oh, yes—and stunning. Gorgeous. Undeniably lovely.

My childhood lacked access to so-called "classic literature," unless *Little Women* counts—I read that five times, at least. I reached for genre, pulp, and horror. I read Zora Neale Hurston and *Canterbury Tales* in English Literature classes, but spent 90% of my time reading Stephen King and *Harry Potter* and *Sweet Valley Twins* and popular-populist works, like *The Red Tent* or anything Oprah's Book Club. I was known, by family, by my community, as an insatiable reader. It was not until I reached my small state university, after entrance exams and scholarship applications, did I understand I had almost completely skipped the cannon. It was not until university did I realize I had not read the books I was supposed to—and when teachers asked, incredulous, "Who's not read –insert white, male, author-?" I felt extreme shame for my years of reading off-list, or shame for not realizing there was a list to begin with. I was a girl who ate trashy books for lunch. I decided it was too late; to also excise my shame, I decided those books were destined to be terrible.

I did not read *The Great Gatsby* until this year, as a 32-year-old graduate student, but I found it happily familiar. The book is glamourous and troubling, and creates profound, conflicted portraits of class and poverty and levels of power. Nick Carraway, our narrator-turned-writer, our stand in for Fitzgerald, both glorifies and problematizes wealth, interrogates societal positions and the moralities designated by him. Which, as far as books go, is exactingly like my first love, *Flowers in the Attic*.

I sped-read books to discover the answer to every tragedy. I was too young for V.C. Andrews' gothic cult classic, for the recurring, inherited incest, for the child-murdering, for the poisonous, religious zealot grandmother. And so I read the book, again, and again, and its sequels, its prequels. When Cathy, our ballerina narrator, ran out of narrative, I sought Andrews' other series, featuring heroines named Heaven Leigh and Dawn and Ruby. Their hair color changed, as did the region of the country, which determined each protagonists brand of suffering—swamp-adjacent, Appalachian-aggrieved, oppressive tudor-style manse-living—but the books of V.C. Andrews were the same at their core. They moved to portray the trappings of class, to capture a polarized America: one of opportunity, another of exclusivity, both fraught with greedy great-uncles and vengeful sister-in-laws. V.C. lit the American Dream afire, and I warmed my hands at the blaze.

I could attempt logical connection between my obsession with the homeless, my parents' tulmutous, drawn-out, at times violent, divorce, and my addiction to V.C.

(*Heaven*, who had the most daddy issues and most poverty and most siblings to watch over and, most of all, a desire to give back to her community after she'd "made it," was a particular fave.) We could talk escapism—my imagination creating places to thrive in, despite so much *despite* in my life. Perhaps these obsessions just fed my need to feel as though someone's life was worse than my own. I sentimentalized homelessness as what I projected to be a harsh but less complicated life, a tragic life V.C. promised would arrive to some eventual, terrific place. Or I used what I determined to be another person's pain as greater than my own, and somehow, still manageable. My thirteen-year-old hormonal brain mixed glamorous/grotesque novels, my family's myriad of issues, and, inexplicably, homelessness, into absurd, self-indulgent fairytale.

I began to picture men and women, waking up to alarm clocks in their queen-size beds, stretching, putting on dirt instead of rouge, choosing from a large closet of disarray, and driving to work: a spot under a bridge. I still recall this image when they approach my window at an off-ramp. I picture them with dirt-stained families, a husband and wife and two or three kids, eating casserole, drinking Coca-Cola, reading less miserable books, living with a version of contentment—something I was determined to relate to.

❖

"They'll just use the money for drugs. Or booze," someone told me once. "They don't buy food. It's better to just give them something to eat." And so I began purchasing food for the homeless. My teenaged voyeauristic fascination evolved into something I felt

we could all better stomach. I carried extra bananas, greeted people on sidewalks outside of grocery stores and took their order. “Do you like chicken, or beef?” I’d inquire, and Jesse usually took it in stride, didn’t begrudge me spending money we didn’t quite have, didn’t scold my perverse charity—my questionable motives, my urge to present some kind of twisted solidarity, or even give a strange, backwards sort of praise for their bravery, their gritty realism, the obstacles they were overcoming, their grace approaching the horizon. To be clear, I was not their grace. And I’ll still encounter homeless people at off-ramps, and choose, instead, to imagine them sitting around an American Furniture Warehouse dining table, eating a meal with family. Maybe to alleviate any savior-based guilt? Did I still need to feel as though someone had it worse than I did? If I didn’t have food, and I didn’t want to lie about having cash, I’d look away, avoid eye-contact, study my mascara and what was behind in the rearview mirror.

My husband returns and hands Michael the hot coffee and snacks, and shoots me a look about the gloves. Jesse is a bit cheap, which should not be mistaken for unkind; he shuffles back into the pizza parlor with me so we can order Michael from Detroit a pizza.

There are smiling clusters in there, generations, grandparents and parents and small grandchildren, eating carefully out of sturdy wooden booths. I imagine they do this every Friday night. They gather in one or two vans or Suburbans and then eat pizza together, the same toppings and the same diet soft drinks, and perhaps when they’ve finished their traditional, weekly meal, they walk around the mall together and window

shop, talk about Baskin Robbins for dessert and Christmas presents or pending summer vacations. I often begrudge people theses public displays of bland happiness. My own family's joy always teetered on the cusp of something awful or was forced upon us at the bottom of a decline.

The smiling counter girl has so many questions. I'll bet she's never even heard of V.C. Andrews. Do you want organic wheat crust or organic thin crust or the traditional pan? Is that with a pesto sauce or an Alfredo or perhaps the marinara? Salami or pepperoni or prosciutto? What organic locally-grown vegetable would you like on this pizza? I can't stop buying meals for the homeless, but I examine my want to do so. I scrutinize the world in ways that are tiresome, self-aggrandizing, humbling, troublesome. I am a graduate student now, the first of my family, and everything is worth analysis. I contemplate the palate of a homeless man, surrounded by circles of oblivious generations eating their pizza dinners, laughing, probably bonding, and I worry I've become even more entitled in my ideas of the world.

I cannot equate homelessness with the deaths of my father, my brother, with childhood poverty and a shattered family and books brimming with glorious misfortune, but I decide to see Michael as having my father's hands. I decide I recognize a loneliness in his eyes, a deep realization of American foolishness—our impulse to reach, to grasp for more, to imitate and long to be like people our culture spotlights, those who seemingly achieve, through simple hard work, what we frenzy for. I project all my

bullshit on Michael because he needs food and I am able to buy it for him. It's an exchange of goods, really.

❖

America is a place built upon extremities: the reality of vast difference between individuals, but the promise of equal opportunity. The very fabric of America, of anything democratic, is contradictory—always, forever, just out of reach and cohesion. If we can agree books, just as America and its poor/lower/middle/upper are stratified, then we can surely agree categorical barriers between books reinforce class stratification. I cannot reasonably argue that literature be counted as anything written down in any place; but I can, and do, suggest we consider: a book is a book. And narratives are narrative.

There this thing called Freytag's Pyramid, a pervasive model of dramatic structure divided into five moments. It's a fitting model for our All-American stories.

1. Life begins moderately
2. We chase a different, shinier life
3. We get a taste of said life AND IT IS NOT AS WE EXPECTED

In terms of dramatic structure, Freytag's Pyramid offers an immediacy, accessibility, and universal approach to understanding narrative forms. At its most basic, the pyramid's five points of entry and analysis act as guide to mapping the movement of many, if not most,

narratives, however varied in media, modes, and style. The Pyramid is a blueprint, a formula for stories, lives, those we construct or are constructed for us:

4. We move to reconcile the old life with the new, successes with failure

5. We've learned many lessons, and hopefully we survived.

While exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement, are the five definitive standards, iterations of Freytag's Pyramid include specific narrative complexities like reversal, complication, and other variations. This is a fancy way of saying we allow our stories a limited amount of nuance. Once more: American Dreamers prefer a simpler narrative, a readable road map with definitive x-marking spots.

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In the winter of 2010, not quite two years after my brother was killed in Iraq, and almost nine since my dad had passed away from a cocktail of drugs and the quietly swelling blood vessel in his brain, Colorado Springs had an explosion of homeless. The economy was collapsing or recovering and my family was in tatters and I thought I'd grown out of the long-surviving-V.C. Andrews phase and the homeless were setting up camp. Along the downtown stretch of I-25, across from the shining vehicles of "Motor City" (or "Car Town" or "Vroomsburg" as my dependable husband calls it), dozens of tents were pitched. Colonies of homeless were being erected along the banks of the thinning Fountain Creek. The tops of each tent or hastily tied down tarp flashed as drivers

drove by at sixty-five miles per hour. I drove fifty in the furthest right lane for a better look. The homeless camps were colorful, orange and electric blue and a green not found in nature. They looked like carnivals or fairgrounds. If I hadn't convinced myself different, they'd have looked inviting.

The city was panicking. Every night my husband and I watched council members and proposed ordinances and police officers on the news, all advising against bringing food or supplies to the campers. A group called *Keep Colorado Springs Beautiful* made plans to "clean up" the camps. On the news, we noticed they were called "camps" and "campers."

Little fires sparked and glowed, visible as we drove home from rehearsals of Arthur Miller's "All My Sons." Jesse and I were cast as another husband and wife in a play about defective military engines and disintegrating families. I still planned to be a movie star, a newfound beauty rescued from the wreckage, even though we'd just barely survived two years in New York City. Here we were, back in Colorado, playing at being married in the 1940's: we wore pressed trousers and gingham aprons, practiced blocking and lines at the Fine Arts Center, while little fires were backlighting long bulky shadows, people wearing layers of pants and second-hand jackets and worn blankets.

The city passed a "No Camping" ban and police went in to physically evict people, to warn them of arrest if they didn't move on, if they didn't stop trying to keep warm and sleep on city property. One Tent Town stayed. I found it on the outskirts of

downtown, in an industrial section next to railroad tracks and the sewage treatment facility, on the back of a sloping hill behind an alternative church. I began frequenting the downtown library, where most of city's homeless spent their waking hours, and discovered V.C. Andrews' brand new generation of wilting women. My infatuations came hurtling back, as if nothing had changed, and maybe nothing does.

Trash and debris scattered along the sides of the interstate, left in a hurry upon eviction, mostly wrappers from McDonald's or Big Gulp cups from 7-11, a few blankets, a wooden crate as chair or two. Behind the church the last Tent Town, a small haphazard city, remained intact. I saw the tops of weather-proof fabric peeking through the trees, imagined them full of people I would never actually see. Along the road the trash stayed and I wondered where those people went. Behind the church smoke rose and I wondered where those people came from.

The church claimed the camp sat on their property and insisted the campers were not littering or "marring natural beauty" or "keeping tourists away." A mile from the church loomed the cemetery where my brother, killed in action, waited. I didn't need to drive past the camp to get to him; there were much easier ways to get to the iron gates and the headstones beyond. But I found myself driving slowly past the camp, at least once a week, even on days I didn't get to Ronnie.

Sometime in April 2010, two years after Ronnie had died, the days grew warmer, the smoke signals stopped, and the tents were just gone. Less and less homeless lingered

in Colorado Springs. I'd envisaged so much of them, the tents of the wise if faceless. I even expected communion. I idealized their need, their hunger, because it allowed me to idealize my own. Soon after, I also stopped haunting the downtown library—I gave up on ole V.C. It turns out she'd died of breast cancer in 1986, had only written the first few in the infinite collection of her books. Her family had hired a ghostwriter, Andrew Neiderman, who continued to churn out the deplorable lives of dazzling women long past V.C.'s death. This awareness, that V.C. herself had not been cataloguing the stories I so loved, that her family had used her name as a brand and I had bought in, 1000 percent, felt something like betrayal. This is not to say I dumbly believed her stories, her dark and towering fiction, so much as believed *in* them, or in what I made them represent. Ghostwriter Andrew Neiderman is better known as the author of *The Devil's Advocate.*

As if the devil ever needed one.

❖

I order the best for Michael and the minutes tick by. The pseudo-gourmet pizza is taking too long, and my homeless man gets restless. I watch him through the parlor window, languishing in the night. He rises from the bench and shuffles into the restaurant, pushing his long stringy hair back off his beard with girlish gloved hands. My husband has panic in his eyes as my homeless man moves to a sturdy but tacky wooden booth in the middle of the near-empty restaurant.

The staff in the back takes instant notice. A girl with tattoos and a pizza cutter is already rolling her eyes and making disgusted comments. I try to remedy the situation. The counter-girl's smile is wilting, and showing less of her unbearably white teeth, so I lean close and tell her, "Look—I ordered the pizza for him. Can he please just sit there for a bit while you finish the order?" She nods slowly and backs up into the kitchen to complain to the gathered crowd of disgruntled pizza employees. They shoot me nasty glances, and Jesse stands by me but looks towards the exit.

A young man comes out of the kitchen with some pizza scraps in aluminum foil and a paper cup of Sprite. He nods at me and takes them to my homeless man, who begins eating immediately. I wonder if the kitchen staff doesn't comprehend that I ordered the pizza for him. Did the incessantly smiling girl misunderstand and instead tell everyone I demand my homeless man be fed scraps from the kitchen?

If they had paid any attention, they would see I'd already taken care of it.

Of Michael.

A different homeless man wanders into the pizza parlor.

He must have seen Michael through the parlor window. He looks like a one-man jam band, save the instruments. Every item he owns is reaching up in a perilous stack. Articles of filthy clothing, a fraying hat, some shining keys, they are all tied on to or stuffed into the gaping pockets of his hiking pack, and it's difficult to make out his dirt-stained face from under all of his things. His nomadic look makes it impossible to

imagine him ever having had a home, or a place to rest his pack, or someone's shoulder to rest his head on. He brings in the freeze and a waft of heavy liquor. The kitchen staff is in a quiet but undisguised tizzy. They are staring and their eyebrows are smashed together. My loyal, steady husband is getting twitchy.

"Coooooold," the homeless man moans. "Feel it! Feel my hands, so cooooooooold." He draws the word out like the chorus of a sad song. He shoves a filthy hand into my husband's face, a hand more dirt-caked and cracked and sinister than other hands. My husband barely flinches, and motions at the door.

The young man who had offered Sprite and pizza earlier comes around from the kitchen to inspect.

"Look," I whisper. "My intention was not to bring every homeless person in town in here…I just wanted to get Michael some pizza." I gesture toward my homeless man's booth only to find that he is gone. I search out the window, past the one man jam band, who is now muttering in an angry tone, who is swaying on unsteady legs, and I see Michael's shopping cart is missing too. The gourmet wheat crust, pesto sauce, organic meat and veggie pizza has been cooking for more than half an hour. Somehow he slipped out the door without my husband or me saying goodbye, slipped past the families eating Friday night pizza, slipped back out into the frigid Colorado night. I am slightly devastated, but keep up appearances, a useful skill I've long perfected.

The One Man Jam Band is whispering now too. “Look, I just need some money. For a hotel room. And a bullet.”

It is as if the parlor pauses. I am singular, forced to drop the dangerous pretense of empathy. Bullet. The word was *bullet.* I have offered many things to the homeless, and this was not something I’d been prepared to offer. I made it all terribly easier than that. Look, Homeless Person I’m Not-Exactly Exploiting, let me see you! Please, don’t you see me? I’m a good person. Let me act like a good person. Let me show you I might be close to or maybe not so far from understanding the depths of your pain—the struggles of Life. I offered many things to many homeless people over many years, and explained my decided generosity with many reasons, but the awful truth was, I’d invariably been looking for what *they* had to offer *me*.

“But the pizza is almost ready,” I say.

Progress Report: Politiking Mom

This nightmare is not specifically about my brother in Iraq, though every nightmare is about my brother in Iraq. It occurs in Cowboy's, a very real, wood-paneled dance club, brimming with un-ironic Wranglers and G.I.'s gifting shots, even though it's Ladies' Night and our drinks are free. In Colorado Springs, where many a young man sports a shorn head, disposable income and easy reminders of mortality, every night is a frantic sort-of Ladies' Night.

I am here in this nightmare because of Donald Trump, or Donald Trump is here because of me. I asked my mother who she might vote for; in real, waking life, I asked—and the conversation deteriorated like a body in high desert heat. I called her a bigot. She hung up on me.

In my nightmare, I arrive at Cowboy's in a forest green, sequined gown, to watch Donald Trump address the people of where I grew up. A handsome enlisted man is wearing a digitized-camo tux, and he compliments my dress so I tell him I must speak with Trump, it's an emergency. He says this is impossible, so I add my brother was a soldier. He says he is sorry, I must get in line to ask Donald a question, just like everyone else, and so I am forced to be vulgar and blatant. He was killed in Iraq, I say—he was killed in Iraq. The G.I. apologizes and stands at attention. He is approximately six feet, seven inches tall. He rushes me to the stage, at the center of the dance floor.

Couples two-step around the slight grandstand, and Donald Trump wears a white cowboy hat the size of a garbage can lid. The handsome G.I. is named Ted, I know this to be true, and he lifts me, his hands secure beneath my armpits. I rise with a ballerina grace I am only capable of in nightmares about my brother. I float to Donald Trump, make like I am going to shake his hand—he is unfettered as always, as though he's been waiting for my arrival—and as he extends his short-fingered, pinky-ringed mitt, I say, "My brother did not die for this."

Donald Trump smiles as though he does not hear me. His teeth are terribly gorgeous, so perfect I may cry. He gladly passes his microphone to me because he is an idiot. I turn to the giddy crowd, my friends from high school line dancing, their veteran parents in rhythm beside them.

My mother would never vote for Trump, though she said she might vote for Trump. And there is no easy explanation for this; any defensive response on her behalf would be patronizing, indicative of the very thing that's made her undone. The politicians are to blame. The people who vote or do not vote are to blame. War is to blame. The system is to blame. Every one of us, to blame. Her son is dead, and there is no one to blame, to hurt the way she will forever hurt.

"MY BROTHER DID NOT DIE FOR THIS," I holler at the crowd. Cowboy's is a place for hollering. The people keep dancing because my subconscious mind is unimaginative, obvious at best. "MY BROTHER DID NOT DIE FOR DONALD

TRUMP." The only person who hears me is Ted, the beautiful G.I. in the camouflaged tux. He looks alarmed, and crosses the stage to remove me. I try one last time. "WHAT DID MY BROTHER DIE FOR." It's not a question anymore—it's been a statement for years now. Ted picks me up with both arms and carries me offstage. Donald waves goodbye like an old friend. It was unfair to ask my mother who she might vote for. It is unfair to ask any political thing of my mother, who, herself, has always been an incredible dancer, in any arena—though, since his death, she does not quite move the same.

There are people in my life now who ask questions like, "Why would your mother vote against her own interests?" They are not from Fountain, or anywhere like it. These people mean well. They are scared, confused, clawing for recognition. They couldn't possibly comprehend her impervious grief. And they will never have a fucking clue about the interests of my mother.

I struggle with Ted as he pulls me to the exit of Cowboy's, grasping for the lapels of his war-or-ballroom-ready attire. "You are better than this, Ted, you are," I say. Our eyes sparkle with tears. "We can only dance," he says, and I understand this is nightmare now, or perhaps just a dream. I find it all rather peaceably embarrassing, and I choose sleep over waking. Ted stoops down and we glide away, together.

Dry

"Your mother is strong," the pastor said. "Almost…*too* strong."

"Fuck him," my mom spits when I tell her. "He doesn't *know* me. He can't *judge* me."

She didn't cry at my brother's funeral. She stood there in a stone-gray dress at the pulpit of the church, buttons of his face on her breast, her dark curls coiled, so tight, on her head. She said her speech in a world-weary way, without tears or heaving breaths. Her neck was blotchy from the effort, stained with angry red lines and circles: a map of collected blood in expanding vessels; a dermal topography of grief.

"He doesn't *know* me! He doesn't *know* my life," she huffs, then stomps away.

She's stopped wearing mascara. She hasn't been sleeping; she's been sleeping too much. Her pillow, covered in a baby pink satin case, is hardened by the camouflage notebook she keeps under it now. The notebook is filled with articles from Fort Hood, Texas, from *The Army Times*. It is filled with three or more copies of the obituary we wrote together, she, my sister, and I. It is filled with a clipping from the front page of the local news, taken by a sneaking photographer, a picture of her doubled over at the cemetery, my sister in her US Navy uniform, her sailor cap, clutching Mom's hand, our

mother's face crumpled, my sister's face twisted in feral pain. It is filled with pictures of him, unsmiling in his uniform, the American flag at his back.

The house is a shrine. Strangers send quilts with his name stitched in. Plaques come; more personalized blankets; ribbons and medals; a letter from George W. Bush; a triangular, stoic mahogany case that holds the folded flag they handed to her after each boom of the 21 Gun Salute. The memorabilia is hung on every available surface, across the backs of chairs, on shelves, on delay in a quiet wooden hope chest, or on the table beneath the four clocks she hung when we were still a whole, each set to a different time zone: Colorado, New York, Spain, Iraq.

His personal items come back from the desert in large plastic black bins. They wait—they will for years—in the basement.

They came to my mother's door at sunset that day, those men in uniform. As the screen opened, their dress greens filled the room, expanded past the frame of the door, reverberated off the family portraits on the walls, echoed through the bedroom where my brother's sports clippings still, will always, hang; their medals glinted hard in the last light of that sun. Our mother gazed at the men, put her hands in her curls, clutched her proud head as if it were about to roll.

The Tour of My Mother's House You Wanted

Kitchen

A few months before his death in Iraq, my brother told our mother this: "If I don't make it back, you better not be one of those moms standing and screaming in front of the White House." Though he had it right—she is that kind of mother—it's been six years now, and all is quiet. Our mother is in her own suburban white house, finally remodeling the kitchen that needed it long before Ronnie was killed in Baghdad.

She paid off the mortgage on that white house with some of the half a million received as a kind of sheepish reparation, some gross financial apology. The first $100,000 appeared in my parents' bank account just hours after the men in uniform made the announcement at their door. A series of endless zeroes greeted my stepdad at the bank the morning after, and he stepped away from the ATM as though he'd done something wrong. Less than a week after the I.E.D. erupted through the truck Ronnie drove across the desert, my parents were half-a-million-aires. They paid off their student loans, covered the mortgage, bought a car, and gave my sister and me each an amount we'd give anything not to have.

We burned through it, all of us—got rid of the money as fast as we could. The money has been spent for years, is not a part of the funds our mother uses to replace the kitchen flooring, to paint the cabinets a soft, faint yellow, "like a faded banana," she says.

My mother has spent thousands of hours in this room, prepping turkeys and Crockpot meals, furious no one but her seemed to be doing the dishes. In this room she'd give in to those dishes, hum at the sink as her own mother did, scrub every last stain from the counters and stove. This kitchen has seen two fires—a tablecloth one started by a candle-curious friend's daughter, and a Christmas Eve grease fire, when the adult kids took pictures on our phones as our parents sprinted through the house looking for the fire extinguisher. In the end Grandma shuffled in with a towel and slowly whipped the fire out of the stove as if she were practicing some ancient meditation.

The kitchen is ready for a renewal, and Mom is resolute. The process has been arduous. First, she had to sand the surface of the wood, erase the layers of grime and worn, splintered façade, by hand. Next, she primed it. Then she painted one soft coat, and one more. Now she'll distress the cabinets by using another layer of paint called "Asphaultum." I like to imagine her distressing them by standing and screaming at the cabinets: "You are old and you are bad! I wish I could just replace you!" My husband prefers to imagine she is *de*-stressing them, rubbing their sides and telling them they are good, they are worthy, they are improving. In actuality she and my devoted, exhausted stepfather, have spent a week of renewal only to make the cabinets look old again, or "vintage" or "antique."

It is fashionable for things to repeat themselves. The news this week seems a decade old or more. The headlines say "IRAQ" but maybe they've never stopped saying

that. I swear it's 2001 again, and I must be in high school—which means my brother and sister are, too, which means our brother is still alive and there is time to keep him from the desert, time to convince all of America that there is no reason to go there. There are no Iraqi links to 9-11; there are no Weapons of Mass Destruction; it is not our duty, or my brother's, to plant metaphorical seeds of democracy. But I am wrong. It is 2015. And that list of things that never existed in Iraq is a list I can only make as a person who has lost a brother at war. I've just turned thirty but still I have this adolescent urge to erase the past rather than accept it.

Do you think it's that? An adolescent urge? Or is this what growing older really means, wondering each night if I will fall asleep and wake up sixteen, if the night will trigger some magical reset button—could I wake up tomorrow with a different past?

The "Asphaultum" isn't working. "Yeah, this is actually the second distressing we've tried," my mother admits into the phone. "The first distress paint we tried was a reddish color," she sighs, "and it just looked like a handprint, like someone swiped a palm across the cabinet."

They are running out of warm, sunny days, when the doors can be left open to let out fumes—the kitchen remodel is a warm and sunny kind of enterprise, hopeful and promising. Until they finish, the fridge is plugged in but hanging out in the living room. The white house is littered with takeout boxes and take-out-dirtied dishes, the clutter whispering behind my mother's back. It is a relief to find my mother busy, distracted,

because in moments of stillness, where life is not in-progress, the depths of her camouflaged despondency are unbearable. The sorrow of my life is I cannot mitigate her own. How long can it take for a kitchen to be remodeled? The floor hasn't even been started, and the wood planks my parents will install themselves wait in the garage because the fool who owned the house before us put carpet in the kitchen. He didn't realize a carpeted kitchen is neither logical nor stylish, but only disgusting—the carpet hoards every last crumb, acts as an In Memoriam, a hideous metaphor, for anything the kitchen once held, no matter how many times my mother vacuumed, got down on her hands and knees and scrubbed.

Basement

The basement of my mother's house had been Ronnie's bedroom. It's where they put my stepbrother's and stepdad's music equipment now. The exposed cement floor has a gaudy leopard print rug on it, a cushion for the keyboard stand and the heavy speakers and the four or five guitars, a bass, a six-string, things electric and acoustic. Ronnie's queen-sized bed is long gone, but his sports clippings still hang from the finished white walls, fading newspaper cut-outs on The Denver Nuggets and The Colorado Rockies and his Denver Broncos. There are huge, hope-chest-sized black crates stacked beside the glittering red drum kit, crates that hold Ronnie's personal items from Iraq and Fort Hood. The crates have been sorted through a few times, but they contain too much: Elmo sheets Mom bought to embarrass him in front of his bunk mates, a little silver Mercedes symbol he

must have ripped from someone's car hood, a plastic baggie full of dust with the words THE FAJA Sharpie'd across. The faja? My mother wondered, and laughed when she realized it was a portion of my father's ashes—Ronnie had taken a little bit of Dad with him to the desert. The loaded crates are sealed, and they and the drums rest on thick blue mats from my stepdad's closed karate studio.

My stepbrother Brandon was just a kid when Ronnie died—hell, twenty-one-year-old Ronnie was just a kid when Ronnie died—but poor Bran of 2008 was only thirteen, losing his homework and learning guitar, devoted to Green Day long after they were cool.

His middle school (my middle school, our sister's, and our Ronnie's) gave Brandon a camouflaged guitar at his eighth grade graduation ceremony, about a month after Ronnie was killed, not as reparation, but in show of solidarity. Brandon played trumpet in the school band, left most of his rocking for home, but at graduation he was allowed to strum and sing the first song he ever wrote, "Doesn't Matter." After his performance, the faculty presented him with an olive green and brown electric Ibanez, a guitar brand that present-day Brandon says is "the middle-ground between affordable and good quality." At thirteen, Bran stood up on that stage as the auditorium erupted, strangers rising and clapping and radiating a proper amount of pity, and Bran shoved a rogue hand through his shaggy hair and let his face relax into a confused, hangdog droop—should he smile? Might he cry?

Scott and Brandon have jam sessions in the half-finished basement, amidst a room full of things that can't quite be thrown away and have nowhere else to go. Tacked on the wall below the old sports articles is a yellow poster, a sign-post to my wedding venue featuring my sister's dainty scrawl, "Sam and Jesse Tie the Knot!" You should know I was in the midst of wedding planning when it happened. We left a gap in the lineup of groomsmen where he should have been, placed a stand with a golden Gerbera daisy on top. There's a red, white, and blue lei hanging from the wedding poster tack, the lei Ronnie wore draped over his robe the day he graduated from high school.

In the basement they play Led Zeppelin and Blink 182 and Foo Fighters, a nice assortment of punk rock, some originals, but I feel like they always land on Green Day's "Time of Your Life." Sometimes they pull me in to sing a June Carter/Johnny Cash duet, but when we're all home, often only for Christmas these days, I'd rather watch them pound the music out from the basement steps. A picture of my movie-star-handsome, long-dead father hangs prominently above the keyboard, another remnant from the time Ronnie still lived, and I find it amusing and necessary to sit among them, the men I love, and grasp for some sense of completeness. I look at a collectable box of Wheaties on Ronnie's old dresser, a champion on the front I don't recognize. My stepdad and Bran really wail, and my dad's fixed smile in that picture is slight but wry—the simple, ridiculous anguish of all of it.

The Den

My mom is not one for tchotchkes, but they are what she has been given. I'm certain they were given by people who believed their offered gifts showed great kindness and sympathy; it would be wrong for me to consider them tokens of other people's near-parasitic grief. Perhaps it was even your mother or grandmother from Kentucky or Tennessee, one of those southern states it's hard to say without a derisive twang in my voice, who sent my mother a "Comfort Quilt." I'm sure she is a lovely woman. Her stunning quilt ought to be the center piece of someone else's bedroom, the heaviness ought to be draped over someone else's queen-sized bed. The intricate red-white-and-blue blanket must have been stitched in complete earnestness, star-spangled and moving in the most blatant way. She worked so hard on it, whoever she is. I bet she cried on it, even.

The quilt is down in the den, folded, unused, where we have often gathered to watch and jeer *The Biggest Loser* (lights out on your snacks!) or *Dancing with the Stars* or *The Amazing Race* (your stepdad and I are going to win this show someday!) or *American Idol.* We watch T.V., surrounded by emblems of Ronnie. There are camo'd scrapbooks, bursting with obituaries and memorials and the front page news stories misquoting our eulogies, and there's a large, wooden, decorative arrow pointing up that says HEAVEN. It's sepia-toned, with an old-timey font, and I suspect my mom may have added it to the collection herself—it's also a fair assumption she got it at Ross. There are many framed photos, Ronnie's face false in its stoicism—if you squint you can see a faint

mustache on his lip in one portrait, and we would have dogged him in person for that fuzz, *what's on your lip there*, we'd have said if we only had the chance, *what you got there Ronnie, widdle baby got a milk mustache*? And he would have laughed so loud, *naw, man, get off my case,* he would have said. He would've told my sister and me to shave our own mustaches, he would've wished Bran luck with puberty.

We sit with him and his half-assed mustache in this room, this in-house memoriam, and watch *Antiques Roadshow* or *Survivor.* My stepdad always mutes the television during commercial breaks, even when there's nothing left to say.

Bedrooms

Ronnie got the sprawling never-finished basement, Mom and Scott the upstairs master, and Bran the smaller adjacent room to theirs. My sister got her very own room downstairs, beside the den.

She painted it lavender, a choice I would've never approved of. Before I left for college we shared a room for seventeen years, longer than our dad was in our lives, longer than I've known my husband. We spent a lot of time throwing Barbies at each other and cursing our annoying little brother, the kid who ripped each doll's head off, our personal Bart Simpson and future War Hero. (You can never look back from tragedy without forced realization.) When Daisy gained a space all her own, she didn't have to confine her porcelain pig collection to one side of a dresser. She could leave her laundry scattered across the carpet. She could sleep late without an uptight-sister alarm clock. The

end of an era, I say. In the days we shared a room, we did things in reverse: as small children we had two twin beds at opposite ends of the room, but a red metal bunk bed just in time for our teenage years. I am the oldest so the top bunk was mine, and she liked to shove her feet up into the mattress, lift me higher and then let me come crashing back down.

My parent's room is the only one occupied now, but there are remnants of the rest of us. Brandon's door still has KEEP OUT signs posted and anarchist symbols drawn on the wood with permanent marker. This is where my husband and I sleep when we come to visit, in The Room Once Punk Rock. Daisy's room is now storage, but it is my hope it will be forever purple. The basement—well, things seem to just settle down there.

I've never had a room in this house, not officially. They bought it during my first year of college, a year after my parents married, were moved in before I would get the chance to see it. This is the first house my mother has owned, the first house where none of us had to share a bedroom. I had dreams about the house before I saw it in person, dreams where my dead father met me on the front step, and he gave me a silent walking tour through it. *Here's where a family can start over, a room each for your sister and brothers, your stepdad and your mom.* In my dream, he didn't say these things, or seem to say them, even—he just walked a few paces in front of me, upstairs and down, and he glanced back at me and I found what he offered—*this is what we do, we move on, we keep going*. I don't want to tell you this was an omen or a premonition, and the things he

didn't say mean something different now than it did then, but the house looked just as he showed me.

Upstairs Bathroom

There, maybe that's where some of the money went: a bath remodeled on Ronnie's dime. I can't remember what it looked like before. Many things before his death are blurry now, and I spend much of my time grasping focus.

My feeling is it must have been hideous before we made it new. I do remember coming home for a weekend to help the remodel, to paint it a lovely chocolate color. It complemented the woodsy wallpaper my mother chose to match the new oatmeal counter-top, the pearly sink. I remember being covered in paint and feeling desperate for something sweet.

Here is where I tell you that this is the only place in the house with a skylight. Here is where I linger over the way the sun beams down over the tub. Here is where I say something about natural light and washing ourselves clean. Here is where I succumb to the relentless urge, this awful pulse to make symbols and allegories from *tragic knowledge,* from a room that is otherwise where one finds the toilet.

Living Room

It's not a metaphor for grief, it's a house. And my family has lived in it.

Yes, there are mirrors all over the living room, my mom has a thing for ornate mirrors, and the ornate mirrors reflect everything back into the room and then those reflections reverberate and echo off other mirrors.

Yes, those foot-long golden letters on the wall say *PAZ* and *FE* because my mom is a Spanish teacher and a whimsical decorator and she hammered peace and faith into the wall a long time before those words became unwieldy.

Why can't I just tell you, without making metaphor—this is the plush arm chair my mom sunk down beside when the men in uniform came to the door to tell her that her son was never coming back home?

This is the cream-colored arm chair that she leaned against from her spot on the cream-colored carpet, *this carpet color is all wrong*, she'd come to decide, though she'd chosen it herself, her life in constant remodel.

This is the spot on the floor where she sunk deeper and deeper and asked for a cigarette, though she hadn't been a smoker in more than a decade, someone get her a fucking cigarette, please, and it's also where we put the Christmas tree in December.

Out Front

Here, look inside, let me exploit our inner lives: I'll leave the curtains open for you. Look here, at this staging ground for so much grief and countered happiness. Voyeurs, all of us. I promise that not in condemnation, but in recognition.

When I visit, my mother and I take long walks around the neighborhood, attempt a moment of reprieve, and we pray for open curtains. It's as though we've earned it. We want more than a glimpse or suggestion—we want a bare-boned view inside your homes. We need to see your bougey chandeliers, your Sears studio portraits, your sectional sofas and which news you watch on your big screen T.V.

My mother's white house was once the end of the road. This is not metaphor, please, this is fact. The street stopped just after our house, until they leveled the small hill the side yard ran up against, and they built stucco house after stucco house, adding street and suburban sprawl and enough homes to support the military families moving in, space for soldiers enlisting/deploying while the economy and war burned, while their loved ones stayed behind. And so we walk, long past the place the road used to end, and we try to see into the lives of others. We judge your cluttered garages, we admire the colors of your gardens.

My mother feels entitled to every rose in the world. She crouches and picks flowers from bushes beneath windows, even if you're home watching the news, wading through the world at large. If she is in a certain mood, either caring too much or too little, she'll stand straight up beside the bush. With brazen hands on hips, she'll gaze right into your living room, a stolen rose clutched in her fist.

The bush beneath her own living room window is lilac, and the heady purple smell fills the doorway in the summer, hovers like so much fleeting time beneath the

waving American flag. I love the lilacs, and the wild neighborhood rabbits do too. They hide beneath the purple, or on infrequent braver days, they sit beside the tree in the yard. Once or twice I have come to visit and found several large orange carrots scattered through the grass. My mother leaves them, whole, on the front lawn, but the rabbits leave them too. I let myself into the house, she never locks the door, never has, we just let ourselves in, and I ask my mother about the carrots, and she sighs. “They’re for the rabbits. They won’t take them.”

Is there meaning to make here? Should you linger on abandoned carrots? Can I promise you they mean something more because the green lawn is thirsting, because we are in a drought? Can I force metaphor to render our pain tangible for you—for ourselves? You want to see the spaces where we crumbled, the gifts meant to help us back up, the way a home is both sanctuary and stifling. Instead, I offer you carrots.

It’s just—I didn’t want to have to convince you there is heartbreaking weight to any of this.

Though that doesn’t mean it’s not true.

Progress Report: The Trouble with Empathy

I'm taking a break to look at www.Zillow.com. This feels like a very early-30's, white-girl-in-yoga-pants, moderately-educated, gendered, thing to do. This is not a brag, but an admittance of guilt. I'm owning this. It's not like I can own anything else.

I tell my sister I don't believe in empathy. This is not true. It is only half true. I believe in the reach for empathy. I don't believe people can manage actual, accurate, empathy.

Daisy knows I am being snotty, unreasonable at best, academic at worst, moving to problematize every single thing I encounter. "How could you say such a thing?" she begs. We have this conversation several times, and though we both argue in general favor of empathy, mostly we just argue.

I'm looking for like an old house, but updated. I'm really into porches/windows.

Me: "What are those windows I love, picture? Bay-windows? With the seat below, a 3-D window?"

Jesse, shaving, readying self for night of bartending/wine-pouring on behalf of soccer moms' ladies night out: "Uh. I don't know."

Big yards are important because our dogs are lab-mix rescues. If you're a dog person you'll understand what this means and if you're not a dog person I don't fucking

trust you, and this is why I tell my sister I don't believe in empathy. I don't trust most people to 1. Really try to listen, to hear where someone is coming from, because 2. Too often people earnestly believe they can *put themselves in someone else's shoes*, and the thing is, 3. Not everyone has shoes.

I seek a south-facing house. Is that the side getting the most light? I can never remember. My friend whose family has homes for various seasons once learned me, but it hasn't stuck. Maybe a detached garage turned office with a paint easel I don't use. One and half bath is enough because I clean like an old-school Korean woman, I clean like my grandma, and my mother, and my sister, on my hands and knees, sporting rubber gloves, I scrub the entire toilet—you could eat off the seat—and more than two toilets is too much for my back.

I think I am hurting Daisy's feelings, announcing she couldn't possibly manage empathy. "I can't, either," I say, and I am cruel.

"It's not that black and white; it's all gray," she says, and she is lightly mocking me—the way I have to know everything so I may feel safe in the world—and she is right.

We'll never be able to buy our own house. We have no chance at a down-payment. Why buy if the mortgage is as much as a rental? I do not have a single friend my age who has bought their own home without assistance from their parents. I like to

remind myself of this when feeling particularly low, which is also when I really like to kick myself in the crotch.

I'm a shmuck. I have a lovely rental and my fridge overfloweth and I buy gluten-free dog food because I swear to you my dog is allergic to wheat and my husband is a pro with chicken thighs on the George Foreman and I've got this badass sister who calls me on my shit.

She secedes maybe, *maybe empathy is a selfish act.* "Maybe it's selfish to want to understand what someone is going through. But maybe we're just trying to make someone feel better."

I am throwing my own pity party, sponsored by Zillow. I focus on kitchens, though I hate cooking. I can't remember if this developed from a baby feminist place, wherein I proclaimed "I will never cook" to boys in high school, boys who never asked, boys who weren't bothered whether I did or not, boys. I needed them to know I would never cook for their misplaced arrogance, their unwavering self-confidence, their unearned ease in the world. *The problem with men is they've all had a mother,* I said once, and a thousand times more, though it means nothing, though it's a circular, woman-damning, man-infantilizing, a nonsensical statement, not unlike my preoccupation with kitchens: kitchens I don't want to cook in, either because I decided not to like cooking, or because liking cooking has felt like some kind of polarized philosophical betrayal.

Kitchens must: Have an island; Be pristine, light-filled and white; Offer a breakfast nook. Nook. I want a fucking nook in my imaginary house. I like to use the F-word when I feel like I'm getting too far away from my roots. Which is stupid. I've long been the only kid in any group with a potty mouth.

"I don't remember us really arguing over empathy," Daisy says. "We talked about it, and didn't exactly agree." My sister is always quicker to forgive and forget. She is so tender, so careful, so loving.

"Sammy—I think we both know it's a path to kindness. Or, I guess, to grace."

One, Two.

I am, was, for the duration of my life so far, the oldest of three. This is slightly inaccurate—I have an older half-brother, and a younger stepbrother, and I love them, adore them, as full-blooded siblings—but for most of my life, I was raised as the First of a Second and Third. Our parents were busy between the years of 1984 and 1987; Daisy, Ronnie, and I were born just months apart, with fifteen of them between Daisy and me, and eighteen between her and Ronnie. And so the natural order of things is Sammy, Daisy, Ronnie. Red, yellow, blue. We are the primary colors. We are supposed to be three.

Instead, we are two. Daisy and I were headed down a Colorado interstate in early 2013 when she announced she did not like me. It had been five years since our Ronnie died, and she and I had spent most of those five years on opposite sides of the globe. We were in her sleek, black, Hyundai Tiburon, a predator of a car. She bought it with some of the money our mom received from the government when our brother was killed in Iraq. I used some of the money to buy a dull, silver, Honda Civic. Ronnie would have liked her car much better.

I was telling her to slow down, to take it easy changing lanes, and though months later she'd say that's why she exploded, because I was bossing her around as always, in truth this was something simmering for years, a more loaded thing than straightforward

sibling rivalry. This moment had been in the making, and we both knew it—when you share a room with someone for seventeen years, you're bound to shore up some resentments—but it was an inopportune place and time for a statement like this. "I DON'T LIKE YOU," she shouted, the two of us side-by-side, trapped in bucket seats and the claustrophobia of her sports car.

We can't afford to have breaks or cracks in our relationship. This is something I think about at least several times a day, that I can't afford strife with my loved ones. Our dad died when I was sixteen, she was fifteen, and our brother, Ronnie, was fourteen. Ronnie was killed just seven years later. And so the "I don't like you" feels more catastrophic than a cat-fight between sisters. It feels like there is no air to breathe in the car; it feels like the next lane change she makes will be the last one we ever make; it feels like this could be the final thing she ever says to me, the final thing I ever hear from her, the final thing either of us will have of each other.

"I don't like you," Daisy shouted, her freckled cheeks a mirror of mine, and I wondered if Ronnie had ever felt the same. I have always taken my big sisterhood too seriously. When our parents divorced, I stepped into a Lieutenant role beside our resolute mother, though I was never asked. I herded Daisy and Ronnie, my reluctant sheep, and when they grew too old for herding, when "the three Tucker kids" started high school, I insisted on being an example. I earned all of the A's. I was president of all of the clubs. I

kissed all of the asses. “They have to live in your shadow, you know,” my mother warned.

Truthfully, most of it wasn’t about being an example. It was the way I coped. Our parents would divorce, we would struggle on Welfare, purchase groceries with Food Stamps, and our dad would die from a drug overdose. I could be perfect at everything besides. I would control. I would make the world, myself, believe we were worthy. I would force the same unreasonable, and at times, unhealthy, expectations on my Second, and Third. I couldn’t control the past, but I would control our future.

Daisy and Ronnie coped in other ways. Daisy slept a lot. Ronnie got expelled for buying weed at school. Their grades suffered. My mother smoked a cigarette in secret every few months, and tried as best she could to temper her responses to each of us. Teachers asked why they couldn’t be more like their sister. Maybe my siblings weren’t given as much empathy as they deserved, and maybe it was my fault. Maybe they would have had a better chance if their big sister, the control-freak perfectionist, wasn’t looming around every corner.

Somehow we all made it out. I went to college. Daisy joined the Navy. Ronnie joined the Army. In 2008, we were twenty-three, twenty-two, and twenty-one. We were global, even, and our unceasing mother was proud. I was writing up reviews for awful off-Broadway theatre in New York City. Daisy was one of very few female Navy medics in Rota, Spain. Ronnie was a 4th Infantry Mortarman in Baghdad, Iraq.

When your childhood is more difficult than most, there are touchstones you desperately hold on to—things that instill a sense of normalcy, or at least, demand an acceptance and sanctity of the pain endured. Perhaps for some it is a group of life-long friends, or for others, a hobby that soothes as a much-needed outlet. For us, it was each other. It was one, two, three.

Our last Christmas all together was in 2006. We hadn't seen each other in months, and so it was a mini-reunion. We did our group hug thing. After long periods of absence from each other, we needed the recharge, needed the reassurance of each other, of our past lives, as people who knew us better—and worse—than any other people in the world. So: tight circle, arms interlocked over shoulders, hopping up and down, delighted squeals. For a moment, we could be those three kids walking hand-in-hand to the 7-11 for a Slurpee every summer day. We could be three kids huddled together, jumping on a bed behind a closed door, while our parents fought World War III in the living room. We could, for a moment, forget that we were suddenly adults, with ever more faults and issues and fears, and instead, just be three. A puzzle, completed. Though our sibling camaraderie may have lasted for just a few days—because Sammy is controlling, Daisy is melodramatic, and Ronnie is irresponsible—it was enough to keep us going in our separate lives, enough to strengthen the ties to our tenuous childhood, enough to remind us of where we were going because of where we had been.

But we lost our way when Ronnie didn't return from Iraq. Our past grew foggy, best captured in photos—my five-year-old birthday party and him, standing on a chair to blow out my candles, his face covered by our father's hand, or the three of us posing in pajamas, his baby face covered in a massive Batman helmet. Our present was hideous. Daisy was alone in Spain when the call came in. She was summoned to her commander's office, and feared she was in some kind of trouble. They asked her to sit, and she said thanks, but that she preferred to stand. They insisted she sit, so she did. She said Yes, Ma'am, and No, Ma'am, and she wondered if she was allowed to break down in her commander's office. She wasn't sure if she could collapse to the floor so that something, anything, please, would hold her up. I was with a group of friends at a restaurant when I got the call, and I had the luxury of not having to ask for permission. I just went down, crumpled to the floor, no questions asked.

That awful present, with Ronnie gone and ocean between Daisy and I. We both had the same thoughts that day. We thought: there is supposed to be three. We were so sure we had survived the cracked tar of the street we grew up on—behind the 7-11, beside the interstate, the shadow of it looming over our HUD home, promising a way out—and that enjoying each other's company as three adults was our reward. Three. Now two. The natural order was unbalanced. We coped in the same ways we always had, but this time we were apart, because of physical distance, because of our very separate adult lives. We coped in the ways we'd learned how—I would live in a ceaseless, worried

frenzy, she would bury herself in bed for three-fourths of each day—and we grew further away from each other.

It is easy for me to tell people that April 30, 2008 was the worst day of our lives. It is easy to say "our," though we've never made a consensus—there's simply no doubt it's the truth for us all. If people ask "How do you go on?" I can nearly guarantee we'd all answer, "You just do." Mostly, people want to know about our mother. This is something I struggle to answer. She too is coping, has coped. She is strong, and she is private. But it's an ugly, ugly thing to lose a child, and it's too hard, too agonizing, to describe the times I've seen her face collapse, the way her shoulders sag from the weight of him, the way her eyes empty when each man in uniform is not him, the way her house is a shrine for our Ronnie.

No one asks about how it feels to be an incomplete number of siblings. No one wonders how it feels for three to become two, about the damage the subtraction does to the relationship of the remainder. Ronnie, with his mischievous grin, his barking laugh, must have been the salve for us, the big sister and the middle sister, and without him now, there's a rawness that's difficult to overcome.

But we try. We shouted our way down the Interstate in early 2013, shouted and cried until we arrived at my mother's driveway. Daisy lived with our mom then, and I was just visiting for the weekend, and though I would continue to stop by, we didn't speak again—or even glance in each other's direction—for another three months after she

declared, “I don’t like you.” I hope that we both reached for our phones often in those months. I hope that we both felt like we were missing another limb, but I won’t know for sure because we will never mention the incident again. For three months we were only children until the sunny day that one of us caved.

We talk multiple times a day on the phone now. My friends know her ringtone by heart, and when I answer there is a moment where I brace myself for tears—hers, or mine. We have each other’s schedules memorized. “Today you teach until noon, right?” “So you picked up a second shift on the ambulance?” We repeat ourselves, “Yes, you told me about the shoes you bought!” “Yeah, I know, Mom told me you took Grandma to the grocery store.” We discuss the Broncos often, our most consistent or least-loaded nod to Ronnie. The calls can be excessive, and we run out of things to say, but we keep calling, five minutes, fifteen, an hour and a half, attempting normalcy, offering advice and pep talks and a fragile but important love. We will never stop trying to weave back together what was once a braid. We are moving towards a new kind of understanding, a new equation that absolutely must work now that we’re only two.

Blue Collar Love

Class

I bake my students chocolate cake with the word PATRIARCHY in neon green icing scrawl. Eat the Patriarchy, I say, and howl. The theme of my rhetoric and composition class is "Representations of Gender in Pop Culture." I'm honest with my motivations, I tell them, don't worry, you'll all be little feminists soon. Below PATRIARCHY, the icing says: "Also, Congrats Janine. You fixed a loathsome wireless router problem." I explain one of my best friend's husbands is Air Force—this is the way we say it when you come from a military family, he is not *in* the Army so much as he *is* the Army or she *is* the Navy. Her Air Force Husband is often away, so she feels particularly accomplished when she does what is considered by many as "man's work." Let's discuss this phrase, *Man's Work*, I say. Then let us rhetorically analyze Nicki Minaj's epic, life-changing, black-body-representing *Anaconda*! I write it this way on the board, with an exclamation mark, like it's *Anaconda! The Musical!* My students think I am insane or the best teacher they've ever had.

On Halloween, I ask/demand Jesse to come to class with me. We dress as Dana Scully and Fox Mulder, and a student says, "Oh! I love CSI." I drag Jesse here to share his side of the story. He talks about coming to terms with that F-word, Feminism, about being an undergrad, the pressures young men feel to lift weights at the gym every day ending in 'Y,' and he talks more than I could've imagined, my quiet Jesse, my careful,

observant husband. And the young men in the room are talking, even the shy ones, and the young women have so many questions, and there is something important happening here: Us, peeling back the layers of our marriage, being transparent while fully in costume. I forgive them all for not knowing The Truth is Out There.

Work

Jesse just left for his seventh or eighth or ninth job interview in four months. It is for a position at a bank for ten dollars and fifty cents an hour. There's health insurance over there, and a nine-to-five schedule, and the promise of holidays off. Wells Fargo teased three interviews out of him before they finally said, "Sorry, we went with the more experienced candidate." Or perhaps they didn't say sorry. We hope today's bank will be different.

If it isn't, he has an interview tomorrow for a serving or bartending gig, and Target is waiting, drooling to see if they can goad him into eight an hour to battle Black Friday. We've talked about him joining the military once before. Once, and never again.

We've moved to this college town, where academics flourish, and spouses and partners come to flounder. Jesse is waiting for me to finish school, waiting for my career to take hold, patiently waiting—he is waiting for stability and a place where we can root a family. Until I finish, until we find a place to lay down stakes, he will work whatever job he can, unless there are no jobs to work. He doesn't resent me.

I don't resent him.

I *don't* resent him.

Thanksgiving is one week away.

I watch him slouch over his laptop, slogging through Indeed.com and Craigslist, reading and re-reading job postings, doubting his qualifications—sometimes too few, sometimes too many—his long, elegant fingers propping his head up, holding back the slump. My greatest wish is to lift it off of him.

I study Foucault and Marxist theory on our deceitfully expensive-looking thrift-store couch, or I grade freshman composition papers with claims like "the cost of college is no longer equal to its value." Our parents call every now and then, ask if he's made a plan yet; they ask when he'll decide on a career, and it's difficult to explain to them that he may never, and perhaps he shouldn't. We are feminists, he and I. If someone asks, "Is he just going to follow you around?" the response is, "Would you ask the same question if our genders were reversed?" What if I were a military wife? Would they want to know the same of me?

I remind myself, often, his flexibility—or apathy, on days I can't quite force perspective—is what has allowed me to accomplish what I have. I cannot, I *should not,* be angry at him for being less motivated than I. I should not, I *cannot,* feel anger at having the only paycheck. Jesse is sitting less than five feet away from my spot on the couch, but sometimes I fear it's more like a culturally imposed canyon between us.

Theorizing

I can't say this is a general rule of mine, but I often counter blood red lips with clunky black combat boots.

My identity has long been wrapped up in acknowledging my womanhood, and swiftly rejecting it. I'm assertive, and overtly so in a floral print dress. I will laugh heartily at your shitty joke and soon after demean its sexist connotations. In Foucauldian terms, by resisting my gender I also manage to reinstate it by accidentally acknowledging the existence of it. "Panopticon!" Jesse shouts somewhere in the distance. Incidental and unwanted grad school lessons are forced upon him by a lipstick'd, ~~bossy~~ assertive wife.

I have a blue collar upbringing, a new grad-school vocabulary to eviscerate it with, and enough need for self-preservation to keep quiet about every Ism around the holiday dinner table. I married a working class man who is comfortable with the inverse of socially-constructed gender-norms. My husband—oh, I suppose now that I'm an *academic*, I'm supposed to say *partner*—my partner has been spending his days slumped over the Want Ads, makes pasta for dinner, and folds the laundry, terribly. Jesse neither rejects established male-ness nor embraces it; he just *is*. He is a "man" who lets me be the "woman" who "I" "am."

So why am I so angry? Why do I comb through Craigslist ads, type hard on my keyboard and scour the Internet for jobs he said he'd look for? Why did I write his resume for him? Does it really matter whether or not he immediately folds the laundry? If he asks for help, of any kind, and has moved here because of my career, how could I tell

him I'm sick of feeling like his mother? How dare I both need him to be flexible and try to shove him in a box?

We have these androgynous names, Jesse and Sam, these interchangeable names that allow us fluidity. And he is fluid, without exploration or demand; he does not talk about gender as culturally-constructed, he does not insist I reproduce just yet or cook or embody "Girl Power!" He stands by and helplessly observes me trying to live outside of something I need to be constructed, and something I need to deconstruct.

The Face of Love, and His Wife

My husband is a beautiful man.

People stop and point, wonder about him; once, at a movie theater, he left me in the popcorn line and strolled to the bathroom, and the woman behind leaned over to her friend and murmured, "Isn't that Joaquin Phoenix? Or that one guy from that one movie?" I turned to her and flashed a triumphant smile. "No," I gloated. "That is my husband."

Is he Italian? they ask, or perhaps Greek? Those eyes! That hair. Lucky you, they giggle.

"Your trophy husband," he scoffs.

We are the inverse, of sorts, of the relationships we see on TV, appropriated on the streets: he is the face, and I am the personality. He is the looker, and I am the talker.

These are the things that stand out to strangers, which rude people have commented on, the way our attraction equation is surprising.

She is the smart one, and he is the pretty one, we say, and giggle.

But we are more the same than we are different. Our beginnings were trying and humble. We live to make each other laugh. We have nearly identical blue-green eyes.

We study the eyes sometimes, stare deep and look for differences, for varied yellow flecks or glints of green slicing blue. This is not romance, but science in these instances, a chance to determine how we can be so different and so much the same, a chance to solve the equations that make her and him and us.

Boys vs. Girls

In fifth grade I had this teacher, Mrs. Precious Broadnax. She had a stern kindness, an insightfulness about her that changed the direction of my life. Before our big talk, I had spent most of my time in the back of her classroom by the bookshelf featuring a series of easy-reader unsolved mysteries, short chapter books on the Loch Ness Monster, the crop circles of Peru, the disappearance of Amelia Earhart.

The day Mrs. Broadnax pulled me aside we had just finished a boys against girls math race on the chalkboard. I won for the ladies, and the boys booed and hissed, so I hung my head and stumbled back to my desk ala Charlie Brown, or, rather, the faceless, secondary, Little Redheaded Girl. The class headed out for recess, and Mrs. Broadnax stopped me, bent down so we were eye to eye. She laid a charge on me. “Samantha,” she

intoned, “the boys in your grade are a very strong bunch. They will run you young ladies over. You young ladies need a leader, and Samantha—you are that leader.”

I took what she said to heart. I knew it was my job to lead the fifth-grade ladies to the front of the pack, to keep us from being “run over.” We sat in the cafeteria and giggled at boy’s jokes and snacked in our girlish manner—no more. I don’t know where we learned to behave in such a way in the first place, but Mrs. Broadnax commanded otherwise.

It did not go down easily, my demand for leadership. With the adults it did; it was encouraged, it was applauded, it was promised and given. “Girl Power!” they cheered, and cleared a path. With the boys, it was disastrous. I became president of all of the clubs. I was the only eighth grader reading Gloria Steinem and memorizing feminist monologues on the rejection of traditional good-looks (though coveting the make-up of my peers and loathing my chubby cheeks in the mirror). The boys responded in kind. They carved the phrase “FEM-NAZI” into my yearbook. One tried to punch me the face in a National Honor Society meeting (conducted by Samantha Tucker, President). None of them looked at me longingly, or put notes in my locker. I forced “Girl Power!” on them, displaced them wherever I could, simultaneously demanding acknowledgement of my place on the totem pole while scrambling my way to the top.

What She’s Having

When we dine out he orders the greens and I order the bloody beef. And inevitably the server will bring the food to our table and set the burger in front of him, and the greens in front of me. It makes something bubble inside of me, but Jesse, good-natured as ever, just slides the plates to their proper places and tucks in without blinking.

A Declaration

We are at a margarita party. He is twenty-three and I am twenty-one and we are already sure-footed with each other. He has designated himself bartender, and mixes the drinks from the bucket, coats the red Solo cups with salt, keeps everyone laughing, and drinks his own margaritas in between. He has had five or six of his own when he grabs me in the living room and whispers in my ear, "I love you so much. No one has ever loved me but my mother."

Permission

"Is that ok that I just wrote that?" I ask him. We usually work across from each other at the dining room table, me and my laptop on one end, him and his on the other end. We collaborate. He asks for critiques on his sketched ideas for his web comic, I ask for feedback on stories I read or write. Someday we will have an office together, we say. One office, two desks, so we can always work together. Perhaps we *are* a bit codependent. Until then we work at the dining room table; we eat dinner sitting cross-legged, side by side, on the rug.

No one has ever loved me but my mother. "Do you see how people could interpret that? Like we needed each other? Not like we love each other because it's you, and it's me, but because we just *needed* love?"

"What's wrong with that?" he questions, and tilts his head to the side.

I cringe. "Well, some people may say that it's not right—like that's not real love or something."

"People are stupid," he says.

My Mother

She told me once, about my father and their love and why she married him when she knew it wasn't right, that it never would be. The phrase has echoed in my head for decades: "He needed me." She said *needed* like it was evil, like it was twisted and wrong.

She couldn't depend on him, so she certainly couldn't *need* him. In lieu of child support she worked full-time at Wal-Mart, accumulated over $50,000 in student loans—most of which we lived off of—and met the rest of our needs with Food Stamps and welfare checks that paid the rent. She did what she could with three kids to feed and dress and love.

"I don't *need* a man," she'd say, her head moving like a scorned snake. She didn't. And so I didn't.

And God help him if a man ever *needed* me. I decided this at an age when most girls were just experimenting with *Easy Bake Ovens*.

His Mother

It was just the two of them, really. Her at eighteen and him a chubby, gurgling baby. Her at twenty-six, and him in his second of three third grade classes, the two of them always on the move. She was a Colorado Cowgirl pageant queen, now saddled with a baby boy, and was wishing for a movie kind of love. What if the best man in her life, the constant in all the change, in all the moves, turned out to be her son?

Still, men helped the moves, or caused them. A few lingered longer than others. One broke into their home and wrote obsessive notes in her red lipstick on the bathroom mirror. Jesse was ten and found his bat and rushed to his mother's side. He was a quiet and observant boy, but that can be easily replaced with words like "stoic."

Suddenly, the stoic boy was the most stable man in her life. When he turned sixteen, she remarried and had another boy. The marriage didn't last, but she had her sons, and when Jesse left, his brother took over, helped prop up his lovely, dedicated, and in-love-with-love mother.

Our Mothers

There is something sacred about being raised by a single mother. Whether she is determined to do it alone, or in want of a partner, she is motherhood amplified—she does fatherhood as well.

There is gender-role fluidity in single motherhood. A single mother is—ideally—all things to her children at all times—provider, nurturer, protector, Savior. Her roles and

sacrifices do not go unnoticed by her children. Her children internalize them, feel guilt at an age before they know what guilt is, feel fear of lack, feel confused because what they see on *Home Improvement*, on *Family Matters*, at their friend's homes, what men must do—and they see their mothers do it instead, and also.

A single mother's children don't know a nuclear family, just one that formed after a nuclear war. And so the difference is the norm for them; there is flexibility in gender roles, or a merging—despite the insistence of their class, despite the tradition of blue collar life—a single mother's children don't see a mother *and* a father. They see a compromised, but somehow abundant kind of love.

By the Numbers

Four months into unemployment, and his self-esteem is more overdrawn than our accounts will ever be.

Our undergraduate student loan payments are, in total, $245 a month.

Our Bachelor's degrees appear to be worthless. Just get to school, they said. Do what you love, they said. You'll get paid in more important ways, they said. You're already doing more than your parents ever managed, they said.

I am earning a second Master's degree. The plan was to work as a college professor. Adjunct professors make on average $18,000 a year. I keep applying for degrees to ensure a future in academia. The applications fees cost near $500. Many PhD's still end up as adjuncts. I will be the first in my family with this much schooling.

Minimum wage is $7.25 an hour.

It costs approximately $15,000 to have a baby, including hospital stay, prenatal care, and postnatal check-ups. Estimates say it's around $250,000 to raise a child to eighteen.

If your loved-one is killed in Iraq, say, your brother—Army Specialist Ronnie Tucker, 21, roadside bomb—your family is given half a million dollars. You will contemplate putting the money in a bonfire. You won't, but you'll burn through it in other ways.

It costs time to understand and accept one's role in a non-traditional marriage. It's cheaper to realize that perhaps upward mobility is more like sideways mobility with a gentle slope or downward trot here and there—cheaper because there is such a thing as overeducated, overqualified, underemployed, and no matter how hard you work, you may never outclass your parents (and should have tried to anyways?). It's cheaper to realize that the new nuclear family is two absent parents, or opting not to be parents, because who has time for new kinds of families when there's work to be done?

Humble Pie is free. Being a white, privileged, consistently-if-not-thoroughly-employed asshole doesn't drain the bank account. Getting (financially aided) degrees in the arts is first a choice, then a sentence, whether a working class upbringing left us ill-informed or not. We are lucky either of us have work at all. We have food on the table

and a roof over our heads and the time to be inglorious and bitch about life never being quite enough.

Work

The bank job, for ten dollars and fifty cents an hour, went to someone else. This time they do say sorry—and ask if he will keep an eye out for other positions that will be posted within the month. They want to consider him for those ones too.

I cannot watch his shoulders slump in defeat again and again, because it is breaking both of us. Sometimes it's like he's shrinking, he's aging in reverse, and it feels like our heart is full of ever-widening cracks and fissures. I am frustrated by his depression. He is depressed by my frustration. I tell him a bartending job would be fine, decent, and something we'd know he enjoy. A year prior I scolded him for considering bartending jobs, and called it growth when he started working IT—a job that slowly ate away his soul, a job I made him quit because I knew he never would because he is loathe to disappoint, and so—here we are. It feels so good to be enlightened. I tell myself that as often as required.

Will someone please just give this Good Man a job?

WANTED: Job for a Good Man. He is a people person. That's a real thing, not some BS line you give an interviewer—he is someone people trust. He is someone the elderly request: "Yes, that handsome young man, I want his assistance."

He is an easy-going man. He is loyal, never wavers, and never calls in sick—he has never called in sick. Twelve years I've loved him, and he has never, ever called in sick. I begged him once—the snow was icing over on the roads, and his 1992 Ford Ranger had a busted heater—and he said no, others were calling in, he couldn't do that too. It is integrity, what the Good Man has.

He is kind, patient. He is the most patient man in the whole fucking world. Once we were on a walk in my All-American hometown and there was this rabbit trapped in a fence by the old bus barn and his instinct was no, and mine is always yes, that's how we work, you see, so he was ever patient and followed me over and he crouched down and grasped that soft rabbit's foot—though the luck was all the rabbit's—and he guided it through the chain link fence as delicately as he could and it took him fifteen minutes and our breath fogged the air but he never gave up and when the rabbit finally leapt into freedom the Good Man mumbled, "There ya go, little buddy."

In His Own Words

Jesse, why do you *need* to have a job?

Uh, I don't feel that I want to work—or, I guess, need to work—but it's embedded in me that I should work, to provide for my family.

Do you feel like, with our small savings, and what I pull in from teaching, that you could just hang out for a while and not get a job?

It's completely possible, but there's always that guilt—because there are no kids involved yet, I guess.

Do you care about what others may think of that, you cooking and cleaning and staying at home, while I worked and studied?

Um. Not really.

Do you think *I* care about what others think?

Yes.

Jesse, what about if we have kids?

When I'm working, it doesn't matter what job it is as long as I get the time I need to be at home as well—I guess, to be the dad that I never got?

Jesse, would you be a stay-at-home dad?

Yeah, if we had the means. Absolutely.

Mobility

"You're being…" he trails off. He wants to say "snotty."

We discuss theoretically.

What kind of home do you want to live in? What kind of home *could* you live in?

"I know how it sounds, but I won't. I don't want to—I couldn't—live in a trailer," I say apologetically. But I am not apologetic.

He sighs. "They're *mobile homes.* I don't think there's anything wrong with them. There's just a stigma, of what they represent—I've lived in really nice ones," he offers.

He's patient; he is always patient. Both sets of my grandparents live, have always lived, in trailers. Lovely ones, spotless and cozy and only slightly worn. Still. And I don't know why he needs to convince me, but he keeps trying. "I would almost rather, if I had the choice, live in a nice double-wide trailer—it's better than an apartment."

When I was two or three, my family lived in a trailer park called *Lamplighter.* My earliest memory is of the white-and-mildew-tiled community swimming pool there, just at the entrance of the "Mobile Home Community." My dad had friends who lived a few trailers down, and after a day of construction or truck driving or road-working, whatever the job du jour, he would take us, his little family, to have drinks and dinner with his buddies. My mother was loading me and my baby sister into our car at the end of one night when a skunk appeared on the Astro-turfed porch of the trailer. The skunk sulked there between the car, where my mother had us trapped, with the windows rolled up, and my dad, who stood watching with his friend from the screen door. The friend ran into the trailer, came back with a bow and arrow, and mercilessly shot the thing—actually pinned it to porch, the arrow buried into the black and white fur, then down through the green Astroturf.

"I can't, and it's not about status or whatever," I tell my husband, though my explanation is weak. Instead of telling him it would feel like backpedaling, it would be the final nail in the proverbial coffin in which my American Dreams lie, I tell him: "I just can't, Jesse. I won't."

Love and Money

My paternal grandmother, Martha, managed a trailer park in Denver in the late eighties and early nineties. I can't remember where or what the trailer park looked like, just that there was a large lit-up sign out front, a silhouette of a cowboy, his hat tilted forward, his boots spurred. His head hung low and cheerless, because the world had changed around him and he couldn't keep up. I feel like there must have been a cigarette dangling from his mouth.

Martha was Matriarch. She smoked at least a pack a day, and the cigarettes didn't dangle, forlorn, from her lips; she wasn't a nervous or disconsolate smoker, but a regal one. She kept her cigarettes in a tawdry Fingerhut case, and they sat waiting next to her glitzy glass ashtrays. She'd keep a tight grip on the cigarette as she moved it slowly to her lips, her hands adorned with Fingerhut rings, all fake gold and brilliant lab-made gems. She did not share a room or a bed with her husband, and God help you if she discovered you poking around in her kitchen. Martha barked orders in her thick German accent, and people listened. Her children, all five of them, and my grandpa too, a quiet man who said a handful of sentences in the time I knew him—they adored her. They were terrified of her.

Martha was a business woman. A young lady from Thailand moved into the trailer park. She was opening a restaurant and hungry for a green-card. She came to Martha, offered her cash for a marriage to one of Martha's sons. My uncle, at 32, was

either too smart or too drunk to accept; my dad, only 25, was just dumb, just drunk enough.

My father and the Thai woman wed. They got pregnant.

A year later, in another trailer, in another Colorado town, my mom was on her first date with my dad. They sat talking when his phone rang.

"Who was it?" she asked when he finished the call.

"Oh, just my wife, and my kid," he answered easily. I bet he smiled then, a "shit-eating grin" he would have called it. I don't know my mother's response.

They had me less than a year after that.

The times we visited Martha at her trailer were few, perhaps because she never took to my mother. She tried, once, when I was five, to claim me in her way. I had fallen asleep on the couch in her living room, and I woke in the night and found myself lying beside her, my long-suffering German grandmother. Her white permed hair glowed like snow on her pillow. I tried to be silent, and study the cases of Hummel dolls and knick-knacks in cabinets surrounding the bed, but my heart was booming. I was afraid of her room. I was afraid of this woman who knew how lives were arranged in trailer parks, or how to arrange them.

Lamplighter

"I brought all three kids back to that trailer," my mom tells us as we drive through the mobile home community, more than twenty-five years since we lived there. My step-dad is driving his big red Toyota Tundra; my mother bought it for him with the Survivor's money we earned from the Army. She sits up front with him, and my husband and I sit in the back. We do this a lot these days, whenever we come back to Fountain and visit my family. We take driving tours of the places we've lived, and my mother tells the same mythologies she always has, my stepdad adding details he now knows secondhand, as if he'd been there all along. The stories are the same, but I'm older now, and the trailers we once occupied, the place where we used to wait in line for Food Stamps, the bar where my dad drank while my mom was in labor, where he met a waitress named Samantha and then gifted me her name, they all mean something more than nostalgia now.

"All three of my babies," she tells us. Her voice is neutral. These are more facts than memories now. Our trailer sat, still sits, decaying, on the biggest lot of *Lamplighter*. The yard is lovely and sprawling, and is framed by Pikes Peak in the distance. "There was a pine tree in the yard," Mom says, "and we cut it down for a Christmas tree one year. Put it up on the floor in the living room." The floor where if there were pieces of carpet missing or coming up, duck-tape was the fix. Things fall apart; tape them back together. "Mom," I ask, "would you ever live in a trailer again?"

Her answer is immediate. "No. I don't want to live in a hallway."

Jesse draws a web comic called *Domestics.* It features two people who look and act exactly like us: a man with blue eyes and Elvis hair; a woman with red locks and black Buddy Holly frames, a young married couple brimming with poignant, funny love. Jesse does freelance art work, when he can get it. Jesse tries to make light of his limbo.

His Father

Humberto Gamez came to America from Mexico for work.

"You don't know anything about how your parents met?" I ask Jesse.

"Uh, no," he shouts from the living room. "The only thing I remember is that I think they met by chance."

"Doesn't everyone meet by chance?" I ask him, and he laughs. "Oh. Yeah. I guess that's true."

Humberto was probably a ranch hand. Or labored on a farm. Jesse's mother grew up in a series of small farm towns. She was eighteen, and felt much older, I bet—her father died when she was twelve, and her mother kicked her out not long after. That's where she met the man from Mexico, in a small farm town, where there isn't much else to do than to fall in love quickly with a stranger and start a family just in time for the quick love to fade.

He wrote her love letters in Spanglish, mixed the phonetics in a charming, earnest way: My *Juife*, he called her, when he meant to say *Wife.* And charming phonetics or not,

it was soon done, and Humberto Gamez became a stranger to Jesse, a man who drove through town every few years, a man who gave nothing to Jesse but genes and a name: Jesse Humberto Gamez. When Jesse grew old enough to understand the relevance of a last name, he started using his mother's maiden name. When we got married, he legally added *Iacovetto* as his last, kept Humberto Gamez as an insignificant middle.

My Father

I was sixteen when my dad died from a drug overdose, and it was kind of a relief.

It took a while to admit that, and even longer to accept it. When my father was functioning, he was irresistible; he had movie star charm and looks to match. Our elementary school gym teacher's best days were the ones our dad came to pick us up. He'd flirt with her outside of the car while my siblings and I glared at her through the windshield, and counted the cruel things we could say about her.

When he grew up, or as his children did, he wanted to be: a pilot; a private-investigator; a comedian; a chef. And he tried all of them for a time. Once, like his father before him, and his son after, he was Army. I have this tiny shirt that says "Dad's Little Co-Pilot" for the time he attended and then dropped out of pilot school. I have his *Tucker Investigations* business card in my wallet. He made us all laugh, strangers too, though we never paid him for it. Once, in another stint in college, he created a presentation on how to cook his legendary green chili. He practiced in front of us, his talking points hand-written on index cards, and a pink piggy bank on a table in front of him; he planned to

break the piggy bank with a hammer during the actual presentation to show that while other meals may cost a lot, green chili was cheap, easy, and delicious despite, something about "not breaking the bank," though the action countered his intention. He was very proud that day, and prouder of the 'A' he earned. He's been dead for twelve years now, absent for long before that, but those index cards and his recipe are somewhere in some drawer in my mother's kitchen.

My father had too many aspirations, and more drugs than drive, so most of the work he found was less prestigious than planned: truck driver; construction; road-worker; pawn-shop frequenter. "Jack of all trades," he'd chuckle. The saying finishes with "Master of None" but my charming, beloved father failed to finish much of anything.

Our Fathers

The absent father is such a trope, such a cliché—as are the effects on the children of absent fathers, as is the fallout after the fathers leave, the lasting shadows they cast over their children's lives. It is a complex thing, a man who fails to be a man—per some pervasive cultural standard, per some insidious definition of masculinity—but perhaps it should be considered more simply. What is more honest than someone who tries? What is more honest than someone who tries, but finds they can't, couldn't possibly, and so doesn't? Who decides when someone has tried hard enough?

And who says they should?

Work

Jesse is tense, unnerved, and can't stand still—he is never this; he is unwavering. He shifts his weight from foot to foot.

"I think I blew it," he says, his hands busy tearing at the cuticles of his thumbs. This is something we both do, an unconscious tic. Maybe it's something that happens to Children of Divorce, to kids who are all too aware that their mothers survive just a few steps ahead of the creditors. Come by our apartment on any given day and find us sitting together, pulling back our cuticles to nubs, worrying about the future, worrying out the past.

The manager of Old Chicago was no-nonsense. Jesse is pacing. He is unused to people not immediately taking to him. "He wanted to know what I was looking for. A job or a career? He asked what my goals are," Jesse sighs.

"And what did you tell him?" I ask, finding my own cuticles, my stomach twisting like a length of rope.

Jesse pauses. "I told him that I worked at Old Chicago in college, and that it was the best job I ever had. That I was promoted several times there. I told him that wherever I work, I hope to move into a leadership position. I told him that everywhere I have worked, I always ended up as a leader and trainer."

A silence hangs for a minute. We wait here as long as we can, because he wants this to remain a singular botched job interview, and I can't avoid the larger implications, the way it resonates in every corner of our lives. Because he can't answer those

questions; he doesn't know his goals. He doesn't have direction or careerist intentions. I have those things. I have the big plans, the aspirations. I will take us places, and he will dutifully make it work. My ambitions survive on his flexibility, a willingness I've incorrectly defined as indifference. Have I said that out loud? Have I confessed, to him, or myself, how fruitful my life has been by his malleability? He is not resentful, never resentful, though that is my greatest, most baseless fear. He never questions where he will be in two weeks or five years, except that he will work hard in any capacity, whatever that may be, however he can finally get it, and that he will be with me. And that has always been more than enough for him. Or, more than enough for me.

But you can't live on love, or so the saying goes. You can't live on love, I told him once, and he smiled and asked, "What, it doesn't have protein?"

Thrift Store Romance

The summer before Jesse and I were officially boyfriend and girlfriend, I rode around our college town on my bike, every day at sunset. He had another girl then, but I spent most of my time planning a future for me and him. As the sun poured orange and red, set fire to blue, I pictured his face close to mine. Because I was nineteen and didn't know better, I imagined we would be famous actors in New York City, have a loft there and a Colorado home too. We would win the lottery using our anniversary numbers and live somewhere tropical, where the humidity would wrap around us like a reassuring hug.

But then I got real and I wrote in my journal:

Even if we were poor, I would be happy. If we could just do dishes together at a sink. They could be dishes from The Salvation Army. And we could sleep on a futon. We could have a barely worn comforter from Goodwill. It could have a horrid Southwestern print, maybe with a howling wolf, or a moon and that dancing guy with the piccolo. We could live in a trailer, as long as we were together, doing the dishes at the sink.

Compromise

For our first year of marriage I refused to take his last name. And he didn't fuss or fight, he didn't shake his head or insist; he didn't even question it.

Just after our one year anniversary, I asked him if he minded I had kept my maiden name. I hadn't done that before, I just made it clear what the situation was and he accepted, unconditionally. He tilted his head to the side and considered what I was asking, answered in his deliberate and thoughtful way. "Well, you know—I guess it would be nice if our family had one name, the same name. It would be a nice gesture if you took my last name, I guess, if you feel like it." He shrugged, and didn't mention it again, so of course I had to fill out the paperwork and change my last name, though I kept my maiden as my middle in defiance of somebody, somewhere.

Wal-Mart, Actually

I cried the first time I told Jesse I loved him.

We were sitting in his '92 Ford Ranger in the parking lot of a Wal-Mart, though that is not why I was crying. I was crying because I was twenty and we had only been

dating a few months and I was afraid to love him too much. I was afraid to need a man. The neon parking lot lights spilled over the cracked paint on the hood of his truck and I cried, bawled, really, and said "I think I love you," and he laughed and said, "Oh! So that's why you're so sad."

We went into Wal-Mart, where I'd once spent days destroying the toy aisle with my brother and sister—Wal-Mart, a poor kids playground. Hand-in-hand, Jesse and I bought frozen chicken strips and boxed Velveeta and shells and went back to his place. He sat me on the kitchen counter and he made me dinner. We pretended to be adults that night, and tried to love each other in the most honest ways we knew how.

Your Wife

I float in from a difficult but happy day of graduate school and teaching, and there he is, woeful on the Internet. He has made a homemade Shepherd's Pie, the homiest meal there is, and it sits on the kitchen counter, cooling. Of this, he is proud—but the job search is wearing on him, on both of us. How long can we get by on "No one wears the pants in this family," before someone is hardened, bitter, no fun to be around?

We joke. Jesse will sit on the couch with our babies and puppies and when I come home from a long day of work he will whisper into the babies' ears, "Aw, she's home," and all of them will stand at attention, my husband, our babies, the puppies, and pronounce the fun of the day over. "Wait until your mother gets home," he will tell them when they misbehave.

I email him in the middle of the day because I know he's draped over the computer. I tell him I'm so proud, so lucky. That he is my greatest love, he is a good man, and I am so grateful. I sign it, "Your Wife." He writes back that he loves me too. He is so, so proud.

He signs it, "Your Wife."

Progress Report: On My Whiteness

When I left Fountain at eighteen I went to college on the Western Slope of Colorado, in a smaller, even drier, cowpoke/ranch hand/blue collar/white folk town called Grand Junction. And it is a Junction of sorts, where the Rocky Mountains run lower and red and just around the bend in the interstate the mountains turn strange and Martian and open up to a stunning valley of wineries and cracked bedrock. All this heady geology marks the end of Colorado and the beginning of Utah, a state whose predominant religion banned people of color not so long ago. After a week in Grand Junction I turned to my roommate, a white girl from Kentucky, and demanded, "Where are all the black people?"

I was naïve. I was complicit. I was young. In Fountain I believed we were livid as a group, enraged as a student body, when neighboring schools screamed the N-word at our football and basketball teams. I, a white girl who would always have the privilege as being perceived as such, didn't realize the world wasn't so diverse as the military town I grew up in. I somehow got the ludicrous idea that there were pockets of racism, few and far between, but that it was a fight we'd fight together. That is not to say that I thought Fountain was free of racism, or that I believed people of color in Fountain didn't suffer racism and bigotry and the unjust hatred of others. I know they did. I had to have known they did.

Let me try this again.

Everyone else in the United Skates of America is black. I'm aware that I wear a blank, benevolent, white face as I skate by, all of us swaying hips and floating arms, and I keep the face on not out of fear or actual benevolence, but out of shame and guilt and lingering confusion. I spent the majority of my life wishing I was black. I wished it until I learned it was not ok to wish such things. Here, under the strobe and disco ball, wheels spinning on lacquered hard wood and Christmas décor dangling well-past, we're all a swirl of glittering shadows. I'm sorry, I know that a disco ball is not some great equalizer. I know there's no such thing that is. As I skate I have to fight this urge I've never really lost, this need to legitimize myself with so many people, but with black people in particular, to assure that I'm not *that* kind of white person, while also making sure I don't *act* like that kind of white person through some dumb variation of "I grew up with lots of black people, I have black friends" as if that means I get it. Whatever that is. That which I don't, could never possibly, truly, get.

So instead, I skate. I swing my hips ~~like weighted scales of injustice~~ and I move my arms through the air over my head in a way I hope is rhythmically profound and I try to only smile because I feel happy, because I like this song, because roller skating is a great love of mine, and because everyone else is here for themselves. I'm a fool for making myself loom so large in my own (white) head. We're all just skating, and we're not even a "we." How arrogant of me to presume my white face should matter so much to anyone but myself as I glide, at times stumble, across this rink. How arrogant of me to

realize, so late, that of course it matters—my skin and its missing melanin—outside of this shimmering dream, the United Skates of America.

Am I infiltrating a black space?

There is no one thing excusing my early struggle with identity politics: me, a very pale white girl who wanted to be black. Rachel Dolezal, much? I watched her, appalled by the nerve of her theft—of oppression, of identity, of hair and style and agency. I was furious. I was a little afraid. Of the glimmer of recognition, that old desire to be, well—not me: I knew my family was poor; I knew food stamps were embarrassing; I knew strangers were better off not knowing the cops and my Dad were more than acquaintances. Mine was a simplistic conflation of class and race.

This isn't going well.

I did not, I DO NOT, equate poverty or police or shitty dads with blackness. Because I am white and those things were relevant to my white life and equating them with blackness—well, that is fucking racist. But I did feel disenfranchised in my life—I didn't speak the same language as other white kids as school. I learned to. A white kid has a lot of space to be a quick study. A white kid is so readily allowed to blend in, to perform outside of their own class, because skin color is more visible than class. I could shed our financial woes as fast as Mom could max out a credit card. I could be smart and

motivated and any number of things, with my whiteness being at the end of that list, because white is default. Demographically my hometown is listed as approximately 50% white and 50% minority. See? Non-white, all clumped together, non-white, other'd. White is default. *That's* white privilege.

What I am saying is as early as second grade I was chasing black boys. The new kid in class, Donnie, said I caught jungle fever from him. I took his word for it, though I only felt sick with love. He agreed to hold my hand on the playground, and took the blame when I farted in class. My kindergarten-through-third grade best friend was black (still is, actually). The most influential teacher of my life was a black woman, Precious Broadnax. She died before I could tell her that I am who I am today because of fifth grade with her, this beacon of pride, curiousity, ambition, generosity, friendliness. I am friendly with all people, especially black people. That's racist, right? The way I tokenize black people? The ways in which I often feel most comfortable around black people?

When I was younger, I felt like many parts of myself were made up of what I perceived to be as *black*, and I earned affirmation on this from my black friends (*I'm not racist, I have black friends*) who told me I "danced black." I received positive feedback from black men at the club who appreciated my big "black girl butt." I left the whitest part of Colorado for New York City and slung cocktails at a comedy club where I relished my role as a token but worthwhile white girl. We were a close and beautifully

diverse group of women, Puerto Rican and Domincan and Black French and Russian and Bostonians and complexly American, all. We discussed race and class and gender over Brooklyn brunch and mimosas. We delighted in our difference, our walking, talking, United Colors of Benneton advert. We eased into surprising common ground, our hustle for money and life and knowledge, as determined as the next. They are some of the loves of my life. We adore each other. Take my word for it, I'm a white girl with a platform.

Once more, with feeling.

What I mean to say is that *I* didn't thoroughly recognize what it meant to be a racial minority. *I* being the operative word here. No, I hear it too, that's sounds disgusting and oblivious and in direct correlation to my stupid whiteness, and I am completely, despairingly certain that my friends and peers of color knew mostly difference. An old high school English teacher recently posted on Facebook that she "couldn't wait to have a good-looking family in the White House again." I'd posted a photo of the Obamas, and this old white woman cared so little about her former students, her colleagues, and people of color in her life, she thought it best to add her nasty, foolish, racist opinion. I have been mourning the loss of the Obamas. I will always be mourning the vacancy of the Obamas. I told my teacher she'd better explain herself and "Good luck trying recover from looking so racist." A black girlfriend from high school commented below: "Sorry to see you are surprised, Sam. I'm not."

The Dreams of a Million Girls Who Are More

I don't know why my mother told me I was born on the day Vanessa Williams resigned her Miss America crown, except she used this truth to predict my own future beauty queendom. My mother is no fortune-teller, no temple-rubbing psychic, so she's gotten a few things wrong. I am not a pageant beauty, and I certainly couldn't be the second first black Miss America because 1) I am white, and 2) the largely forgotten Suzette Charles, 1984's runner-up, finished William's remaining two-and-a-half month reign as the first (second first) black Miss America before passing the crown to another blonde white girl who matched me in palette but was also not me.

My mother is no psychic, and she's also not very detail-oriented. Vanessa Williams resigned her crown on July twenty-third, which *was* my due-date. I was born on July twenty-first, early enough for my dad to be out drinking instead of waiting or helping. I was named after his bartender, Samantha.

Ignoring technicalities, mom saved a *"First African-American Miss America Resigns"* clipping from the newspaper and put it in a *Baby's Firsts* photo album. This was her insistence, despite us: on welfare, in a trailer with the linoleum coming up off the floor, exposing a rickety frame below. The only pageantry I ever did was around the age

of four, a pageant for one—wherein I was the sole contestant and winner—held in front of a TV showing the real thing in all its antennaed, low-quality-reception, too-many-runner-ups glory.

We did our own photo shoot in front of the portraiture rug, featuring a woodland scene with a curious bear cub bumbling up a fallen Pine—white trash art, a thing meant to be stepped upon, but instead, hanging from our faux-wood-paneled living room wall, fake woods on fake wood. I delighted in my BORN IN THE USA sweatshirt, pristine white and star-spangled, sported K-mart blue eye shadow and under-age red lips, stiffly posed one hand to my hip and the other in my yellow hair.

For casual wear, I kept the same star-spangled sweatshirt, added a page-boy cap, and someone scrubbed the glamour from my face. My grin, as wide as the Grand Canyon, all hope, all promise, is overshadowed by the rifle I leaned against. Squint and see someone has taken the time to paint each of my tiny nails a crimson red, and my small if certain left hand clutches the barrel in just the appropriate place—my right hand, my blood-tipped nails, rest confidently at the trigger.

These images are happy. The most honest, tangible, least-complex element I see is happiness, the potential for it. We are playing pretend, my parents and I, or pretending to play—because these pictures were made, are making, past, present, and future. We are staying in, but someday, getting out. Though I don't blame anyone if all they can see is

the gun running the length of my insignificant, blue-jeaned frame, the butt resting beside my filthy white moccasins: here she is, Miss America.

❖

I've tried hard to dissect the correlation my mom made between Vanessa Williams' resignation and my own future. I have strange and maybe inapplicable feminist concerns. (*"Mom, are you a feminist?" "No, Sam. Well, I mean—I guess so—but not as extreme as you."*) What mother doesn't want her daughter to be beautiful, whatever the conventional standard? Did it matter that the power and achievement my mother foresaw ("You're it, Sam. You're going to make something of yourself, somehow") may arrive through the Vaseline-ing of my teeth and double-side taping a bikini (red, it would have been red) to a cellulite-free (fiction, this is fiction now) ass?

I was a Chiclet-toothed pre-teen, sporting lay-awayed K-mart clothes and digging in old photo albums for proof I wasn't always as awkward or unfortunate looking. Instead of proof I found that old newspaper clipping. I wanted, needed clarification on the meaning—the pressure and promise—of the headline. "Why?" I asked, and she shrugged and replied, "Maybe you'll be Miss America some day?" The answer was a sorry one, and we both knew it. Maybe I'd be Miss America someday? I had talents, to be sure. I was a Jeopardy-theme saxophonist. I was the Skate City Fastest Speed Skater Female Ages Eight-to-Ten in the non-competitive speed skate song of the night. But at the end of

the day I hung up my skates, and I was just a kid who read an alarming amount of V.C. Andrews, terribly frightened of shaving my legs, counting on beauty coming quite naturally post-puberty.

I sought a light at the end of the tunnel that is an awkward and economically unstable adolescence. Was it at the Scholarship Opportunities Fair, held in some dank warehouse across town?

Their central booth glittered under grisly fluorescents. *MISS AMERICA! THE LARGEST PROVIDER OF SCHOLARSHIPS FOR WOMEN IN THE WORLD!* The banner had a font that just wouldn't quit. I made my fifth stealthy pass of the table littered with crowns and scepters, set out like an offering or a sacrifice, but I couldn't bring myself to grab a pamphlet from the impeccable young lady manning the booth. My bangs could have been disheveled and I wasn't dressed for the occasion. I was wearing an in-hindsight horrific shirt designed, by me, in some eighth grade, hybrid computer lab/art class, a silk-screened tee with colorful-if-intolerable bubble letters proclaiming "Hook'd on Fonix werked fur mi!" I found myself hilarious; and yet, per a very minimal amount of self-awareness, I concluded I wasn't quite "pageant material," and I forced my darling little sister to snatch some reading materials from the table for me. The pageant queen asked my sister her name while I looked on from between the *Army! Enlist today!* and *Pikes Peak Community College* booths (our mother lingered at PPCC). "Daisy Jane," my

sister giggled, and batted her lush lashes, which was all a little too perfect for my tastes, to be honest.

Isn't something better earned when you have to struggle for it?

❖

"Mom, did you know the dates are wrong?" My cell phone is wedged between my shoulder and cheek because I need two hands to Google every article I can find for Miss America 1984. I can hear water running and glasses clinking as mom does the dishes on her end, her hands tied as well.

She's a bit defensive in her response. I didn't expect investment in this situation. "No, they couldn't be. I cut it from the paper. I cut because of the day." I explain that perhaps the nude photos came to light on the day I was born, but that Vanessa Williams did not resign her post until the twenty-third.

She sighs because I'm always questioning things, and I've interrupted her domestic reverie. "I really don't think I got it wrong," she says. "Why would I cut the article out if she didn't resign on your birthday?" My mother still washes dishes by hand though she has a dishwasher now. Before she remarried and bought a house with neat appliances, back when she was still the single mother of three kids by the age of twenty-three, she meditated in the kitchen. She found it relaxing, gazed upon our dirt-lot backyard through the window over the sink, the last of the sun lingering over a garden of

plastic toys and destroyed Barbie Dolls. She swayed her too-thin frame, her hips sharp and puncturing the air as she scrubbed the inherited plates, hummed or howled Luther Vandross, and for a moment became her own person instead of a twenty-something mother of three.

"She posed for *Playboy*," my mom explains, but she gets the narrative incorrect again. Vanessa Williams posed for nude photos, yes, but as a freshman in in college. "Well, whatever, she took naked pictures," Mom adds. *Penthouse* got a hold of the pictures, published them without permission, and Williams was forced to resign her crown. Except that's incorrect as well. Williams was allowed to keep the crown and title, but not allowed endorsement deals, and could not participate in the 1985 Miss America crowning ceremony. Both Vanessa Williams and her runner-up/successor, Suzette Charles, are technically Miss America 1984. They are Miss America 1984 (A), and Miss America 1984 (B), the first black Miss America(s).

My urge is to email my mother several articles at once, to "get all academic on her," as she calls it. I want to give her a feminist makeover. Here are some, Mom, on the sexualizing and resulting demonization of black bodies; here are others on Williams being made a representative of her race as the first black winner of the crown, and how racism may have led to the uproar of over *stolen* naked pictures. I am late to the game on being attractive; I am late to the game on deconstructing beauty. Not only do I have to play catch up, I feel I must bring my mother up to speed as well.

Mom, I want to say, here is a quote from a PBS article! "Do women of color need to fit the idealized white version of femininity that is the legacy of the pageant?" I want to send my mother articles on intersections of race and gender, on victim-blaming and objectification of women, but all this deconstruction hangs on what, for her, may have simply been a coinciding news story, a tiny concrete if misappropriated hope for a very young new mother's wailing baby.

I send nothing. My suspicion is Mom will say she has dishes to massage, or bigger fish to fry, and *always has*. But who is she kidding? She never once bought fish with food stamps.

The truth is I do have a crown. And a sash. I was the Homecoming Queen of Fountain Fort-Carson High School, 2001. My first year in college (*on a full academic scholarship,* I'd want my mother to remind you) I would wear them both with a faux fur coat and red thrift store heels while I vacuumed my dorm room because it made my floor mates laugh. It gave me an audience. I'd bellow the song over the vroom vroom on the rug: *"There she is! Miss America! There she is, Your Ideal! The dreams of a million girls who are more than pretty may come true in Atlantic City…"* I was at once creating a commonality (isn't this all so ridiculous? I'm ridiculous!) and establishing power (I don't look like it, but I *was* the most popular girl in school).

Once, a little ballerina lab partner came to my dorm to study and found a picture of me, smiling and waving a pageant queen hand underneath the Friday night lights. "*You* were the Homecoming Queen?" she asked, incredulous. "*You* NEVER would have been the Homecoming Queen at *my* school."

"Oh, really?" I answered her like the fraud that I was—Oh really, I'm so shocked you would say that to me!—but in some ways, she'd said what I'd secretly always wanted to hear. That I wasn't pretty enough, and that I won anyway.

I like being right—I like being told I'm right better. The ballerina validated me in a way I dared everyone to. I wanted them to say, "Oh, you're different! You're different but also special, or special *because* you're different." I wanted to be an individual as good as the group, only better, the poor persevering smart kid *and* the golden most popular girl in school. I wanted (want?) to be the ugly duckling *and* the swan.

❖

To enter at the state level with the potential to compete nationally, you must be between the ages of 17-24, a United States citizen, meet character criteria and in "reasonably good health to meet the job requirements," both "as set forth by the Miss America Organization." I suspect "good health" is intimately linked to the ability to rock minimalistic bathing attire. Though not listed, it is widely known that contestants should also not be, or have ever been, married; must not be, or have ever been, pregnant; cannot

have children. These are not listed on the website, but on the paperwork a contestant would fill out in order to participate at the state level.

❖

I'm on my second graduate degree and I am surrounded by terrifyingly smart women. They went to Ivys or sub-Ivys. Some don't get my jokes about my mother putting a bowl filled with water and credit cards into the freezer. Some aren't sure why a person might literally freeze a credit card. As most women, they seem to wriggle under definitions of attractiveness, under that good ole male gaze, under their standing in regards to either. Few, often none of us, are black.

Several female peers in a writing class question my credibility in writing about concepts like lack of beauty. One asks: "Aren't you misrepresenting your looks? Don't you think readers will check your author photo and scoff?" I suppose I should thank them for considering me attractive and publishable, but instead I feel very confused and defensive about being ugly. I *was* an unfortunate-looking child, I want to say. I've only *recently* been made conventionally attractive. I was well into my twenties before the Ugly Duckling narrative took a swan dive. I've got pictures I can bring in as proof! You won't even recognize me! I have agency here, I promise! Instead, I nod and say, "Yes, I understand what you mean."

"Well, maybe when they grow out of their own ugly duckling phases, they'll understand," is my mother's pointed, loving response, to which I giggle.

Per the academy, per the brilliant women in my classes, per my own relentless tilt towards social justice, here is where I should focus this "running list of hang-ups": Do women of color need to fit the idealized white version of femininity that is the legacy of the pageant?

They need me to write:

I am a white woman who understands the depth of privilege. I am a white woman from a working-poor family in a continual struggle against my beginnings and the trappings of them and I am also deeply concerned about/ashamed of my privilege. I am a white woman and I was a white child and the teachers paid attention to my brain and my ambitions and now I am a white graduate student. I am a white woman and I was a white child and for many years I had a black best friend and we did each other's hair until the day I asked, "What's *wrong* with your hair? Why is *your* hair different than *mine?*"

Instead:

I'm a white kid in a trailer with a patriotic sweatshirt and a Vaseline'd smile and someone promised me I could be more than one of these things by embodying the other. What if I mixed the two up?

What could I possibly have to say to everyone about women and race and class and beauty?

❖

I remember Mom coming home from community college one day, her face drained of color. She worked so damn hard all the time. She had credit cards frozen in bowls of water in the freezer and three loud-mouth teenagers and shifts at Wal-Mart and a pretty spectacular head of hair and the grade point average of a much less burdened person and all that fucking tweed-sporting, assistant-professor-at-a-community college could say to her was, "Whoa, three kids? That close in age? You must have spent a lot of time on your back."

That was many years ago. These days my mom says the word *misogyny* like it's a pile of dog shit she's stepped in. "She kept saying that word, this feminist on the news. She said *misAWgynyyyy*." Mom draws out the syllables so that her disdain for the word cannot be separated from it.

I am tempted to ask my mother if she truly knows what the word means, but I suspect her appropriate response to condescension would be dial tone. Instead, I offer to email her several articles. I tell her about walking downtown where men shouted at me, insisted that my friends and I smile. Men like *girls* who smile! Smile, like this! Mom, I say. Mom! It's a thing that happens! Objectification! Infantilization! I don't know if that's a word, Mom, but gender! But power disparities! Patriarchy! Miss America! Your Ideal!

We aren't speaking the same language. My single-mother-who-raised-three-kids-on-her-own says, "I guess that misogyny, *misAWgynyyyy*, just isn't a part of my world."

❖

I wasn't a kid contemplating gender-stereotypes, let's be honest here. I was scrounging up change to buy a treat at the 7-11. I was hell-bent on escaping Fountain, Colorado, and turning one narrative into another, turning pennies into a fortune. It's exhausting to look back on who I was from where I now stand; all the critical theory and academic deconstruction and adult baggage can't change the fact that I was just another (white) kid moving to rewrite history, hustling for her own glittery version of the American Dream.

Still—Bazooka Job Bubblegum was only a nickel per individually-wrapped piece. Tiny, barely readable fortunes could be found on the bottom of each comic by those with perfect vision or a need for a brighter future. Because it was easy to gather five pennies, around the age of thirteen I started collecting the bubblegum comics hugging the gum just beneath the wrapper. I kept on chewing upon the realization that one out of every three pieces of gum predicted, "*Someday you will be Miss America. A good fortune if you are a girl; a bad fortune if you are a boy."* I began to wonder if my mother-as-seer had been on to something, Bazooka Joe-reinforcing-gender-stereotypes be damned.

At some point I realized I would never be Miss America, but I was the ultimate editor, the champion of my own misfortune: Who wanted to be a beauty queen anyways? I reigned over my growing clique of girlfriends. Some boys threatened to kick my ass for being the President of Student Council (and National Honor Society and Science Club and Drama Club, I got a bit carried away), and one even slapped *toward* my face and *missed*, ha ha, but all of the ladies, every color and creed, rallied around me. I may not have been cute, but I was in charge. I may have had a very weak chin, but no one questioned my character. I could quote Gloria Steinem and pretend like I knew what I was talking about and the ladies would cheer.

❖

In the end, I am my mother's mirror. I don't mean that in some heartwarming, Lifetime Movie way, *their eyes were the same as their love for each, deep and true.* We look nothing alike. My mother is tall and lithe—lovely—dark-eyed, dark-curled, all sharp angles, while I am pale and soft and light-eyed, lacking brows and lashes, lacking protection from too much bright. In another time my able-bodied mother would have been forced to leave me, a jaundiced-bodied baby, swaddled under a tree. Poor little yellow baby, too big a potential burden, too useless to be anywhere but under the shade of a reluctant tree.

No, I mean I am my mother's mirror: I am, have always been, the window pane, the reflective glass in which she checks her appearance, the place where her gaze finally lands.

"Do I have anything in my eye?"

"Something in my teeth?"

"How's my hair?"

"Is my foundation rubbed in?"

I learned the potentials for err in physical appearance were endless, and to compensate I developed several preteen ticks to right wrongs. I walked down the street: head slightly bent forward and down, torso at a forty-five degree downward angle hinging from my waist, acute awareness of whether or not my blonde bangs hung straight across my brow. I walked forward as if fighting hurricane-like gusts. I taught myself to know the feeling of bang correctness: each centimeter of forehead must not be exposed to air. If a slight breeze (real or imagined) shifted the bangs, I would give a manic, seizure-like nod to the left or the right to re-order my yellow bangs. I suppose I was a one-way mirror; if I asked my mother how I looked, she'd roll her eyes and say, "Sam! Sam. You look fine. Stop worrying about that shit!" I tell my mother it was hard to grow up with two extremely good-looking parents, and she scoffs and says, "No, no, no. *I* was good-looking, not your dad." We cackle together, loud enough for us both to hold the phones away from our ears.

"I'm writing this essay on beauty, Mom," I tell her. I read a few parts aloud, reassure her (myself) that I am secure in who I am now, but I know I didn't grow up as some beacon of the "conventional standards of beauty" (this time she snorts). I say I don't want her to feel blamed in any way, or defensive as she often does about the way she raised us—as best she could. I expect a bit of anger from her, a smart remark, but she apologizes. "I'm sorry you didn't feel beautiful," she says. "It was probably all that Ramen and spaghetti we ate."

I laugh, tell her no, it's more complicated than all of that—it's cultural, it's about gender and race and cl…too many things. I trail off because I want this conversation to continue. I don't want to hear her check out on the other end, her silences longer, the click of computer Solitaire louder.

"I got it from my friends too, you know, and they got it from their parents," I say, though I can't pinpoint what *it* is. "Like Carrie. I resented her for looking that way, a live-action Barbie dating every single boy I ever loved. So I made her feel bad for not being as smart as I'd decided I was."

"What did you do?"

"Which time? Once, she had to read aloud in class and she said 'clitch-uh" when the word was 'cliché'. I never let her forget it."

"Well, maybe you should call her and talk to her about that?"

"We have. I apologized for acting smarter, for making her feel stupid."

"And what did she say?"

"Well, she never apologized for being so pretty, for making me feel ugly," I say, and we cackle some more.

"I always thought you were beautiful. My babies were always good-looking and the best dressed."

"Did you think *you* were beautiful, Mom?"

"No—I don't know. Probably not. I had three kids. I look at pictures now and think about how much time I wasted worrying. I think, daaaaaamn—she looks good. All that youth, wasted."

"You never *really* thought *I* could be Miss America, did you Mom?"

She sighs then. "Why *not* you?"

I don't know why my mother told me I was born on the day Vanessa Williams resigned her Miss America crown. Except that I do: She foresaw my future beauty and/or power coming at the cost of another woman's, projected sashes, crowns, and glory, if only because Vanessa Williams lost them.

Or—not because Vanessa Williams lost them, but instead—because my mother coveted them. My mother gave me my inheritance early, offered the promise of something she didn't have to give—a glamorous life, a dream of more than faux woods

on faux wood, a glorified reality gleaming out from the lit-up box we stared into, our audience seating on a Goodwill couch in a trailer park in the middle of our good-ole, guaranteed, United States of America.

❖

On his show "Last Week Tonight," ("Mom! You should watch this!" "I don't have time, I'm busy, I'm tired") John Oliver reported that The Miss America Foundation's claim to offer "more than 45 million in cash and tuition assistance" yearly is fiction. The organization counts the scholarship earning *potentials* of all women who participate, though only winners receive funding; it also counts the tuition of every school the winner(s) could *potentially* attend—though the winner will only end up attending one of those schools, and thus the organization will only pay one of those tuitions.

I am not smug or satisfied at this, that the dreams of a million girls rest upon something made-up, re-vamped, empty but glossed over. John Oliver is not only concerned with Miss America's fictive numbers, but at how "even their lowest number is more than any other women-only scholarship that we could find. More than the Society of Women Engineers…more than the Patsy Mink Foundation…and more than the Jeannette Rankin Women's Scholarship fund." He urges his audience to donate to the latter foundations if they "want to change the fact that currently, the biggest scholarship program exclusively for women in America, requires you to be unmarried, with a mint-

condition uterus, and also rewards working knowledge of buttock-adhesive technology," which makes it all so simple, so funny, so undeniable and true. How easy for him, to wrap it up in a bow, just like that.

❖

I am a white woman with a self-described unconventional late-bloomed beauty and I was the Homecoming Queen and my mother found inspiration for my future through an American institution. I am an over-educated white woman from an under-served background examining magical thinking, cultural implications, privileged paths, the restraints or rewards of beauty, and I am wondering what I could have possibly gained from a black woman's loss of a title.

❖

In 2014 Mom turned fifty and I turned thirty. "I'm fifty!" she screeched into the phone. "I'm thirty!" I screeched back. I'm sure she was kicking her legs into the air just then as I was, both of us Molly Shannon with pants hiked up to our throats, both of us aging, defiant, drunken Rockettes. She turned fifty and I turned thirty and we both finished our Master's degrees this very same year, hers in Spanish, mine in English, different languages but both of us Masters, forever and ever, Amen.

❖

Of course I was the Homecoming Queen.

Just ask my mother, who stood beside me that night on the field. They announced the queen last, after the rest of the court, and the king. I waited for Carrie's name to be called, her long platinum hair swinging in a well-timed Autumnal breeze. I fussed with my self-identified "F-the-man" pixie cut and prepared the whole "Isn't it great just to be nominated?" speech the loser ought to give. The drums rolled and the bulbs flashed and the JROTC kids raised the glinting sword tunnel the queen would be escorted through by a football-uniformed king and I made myself think, "Isn't this all so ridiculous?" That's why I didn't hear my own name called. I remember Carrie's gracious smile, the slight nod of her gorgeous blonde head; maybe she knew I needed this more than she did. I remember the trumpets, the jazz band playing the fight song, the stadium lights blinding, the crisp air breezing through my bangs, the feeling of my mother patting my butt in front of a whole stadium of clapping, roaring people. I remember her pushing me forward like the road was long-since-paved and waiting. She whispered in my ear, "It's you, it's you! I knew it was going to be you."

Revised ~~Modern~~ American Histories

I'm ready.

I'm ready to explain America. I have a by-the-bootstraps back story and a Rosie the Riveter bobble-head doll and a penchant for Neil Young. My family is war-torn; we can spot a fascist miles away. I've reluctantly held a gun, and I'm near certain I could recognize the black and white flag of ISIS. I'm from Colorado, where Columbine is both the name of the state flower and a school where children died at the hands and weapons of other children. I can't recall if I was chosen, or if I volunteered, but here I am: Unofficial Ambassador of All-things American. Me, a write-in candidate, securing the popular vote of non-Americans, sad-Americans, and unaware-Americans who hope or assume I know things, that I've collected enough tragically nationalistic knowledge to stand in as a symbol for the rest of us.

Damnit.

I've just heard Neil Young is Canadian.

Look, I have all the dates if you want them. I remember where I was when they said "Osama bin Laden is dead." It was May 2, 2011—also my day to present America to my new group of international friends. We were English teachers making community in Korea, a veritable UN if the UN were made up of just white people from English speaking countries.

Monday, May 2nd, 2011, was also just two days past the third anniversary of my brother's death in Iraq. Officials write Ronnie's death date in this way: KIA 30APRIL2008. I don't know if that makes it more official, his death by roadside bomb spelled out like the barcode on a twelve-pack box of Coca-Cola. I do know Killed in Action sounds distinctly American, so nearly perfectly clichéd: a moving target, a body in motion, someone in the midst of something bigger, cut down, smoothed over.

While I can't quite pinpoint the many days President Obama said he'd get us out of Afghanistan, it was October 15, 2015 when he reversed the decision to end the longest war in American history, thus ensuring the men and women from my military hometown would return to the desert, again, and again. On a sweaty Friday in August 2012, President Obama stopped shaking hands with admirers at a rally long enough to take a button from me with my brother's face on it. He asked me, "Who is this?" My husband recorded a video of the exchange—a woman sporting a patriotic hat, pulling me to the front of the crowd and giving up her place in the rush for Obama; the terribly trying country music swelling in the background, Mr. Hootie and the Blowfish sounding so decent, so maudlin; a young man shouting over my head, "Your healthcare kept my brother alive when he was suffering cancer! Thank You!" President Obama reached for the button, asked me my brother's name, and I croaked "Ronnie—" before he grabbed me and let me crumple on his shoulder. I left tears all over his collar, his neck, and the secret service man grasped my arm, either concerned I would hug the president too tightly, or

perhaps in solidarity of my pain, or maybe just to examine and admire the bright red Swatch I wore on my wrist. Maybe he was surprised those watches were back in style. Maybe he should consider that history is known to repeat itself, or manifests in ways both random and fated.

Monday, May 2, 2011. On Mondays we held the lamely-named *Politics Geek Fest Night,* took turns giving presentations on our homelands. It was me and a Canadian, or two, an Englishman, a Northern Irish, a New Zealander, and the occasional Australian. We congregated in Parisian-styled coffee shops, where Korean baristas topped off lattes with foam portraits of kittens or flowers. We were twenty-somethings in the world and we thought we knew things and we believed it was a great kindness to share them with each other. I went in spite of myself, ole American me, the "well, you're not one of *those* Americans" of the group. I wore the Korean-made sweatshirt I'd purchased just for the occasion. It had a flag on it that looked Puerto Rican and said "America: Since 1976."

At *Politics Geek Fest Night*s the stakes were higher for me. I had something to prove, a presentation to win, and all the red, white, and blue baggage weighing me down. I brought a trusty notebook from a Korean stationary store. On the front there was a picture of Times Square—I worked there, once—with Samsung and Korean whiskey ads dominating the neon signs, and "Luck Be a Lady Tonight!" scrolling across another. The stationary maker had conflated Vegas with NYC, but I appreciated the sentiment. I'd

filled the notebook with hand-written, annotated historical timelines, more dates I knew I'd need in order to justify or, at the very least, explain, my nation:

12,000 B.C.—I can walk to Russia from my house!—First reliably dated evidence of early life in places like Alaska and New Mexico

1,000 B.C.-985 A.D., In the "No White Man, No Problem," Pacific Northwest—Affluent Americans live here due to abundance of fish, raw materials, and Seattle's great music scene.

I planned to take us all the way from what I'd titled the *Euro-trash 1400's,* through to the search for any Fountain of Youth. I'd decided to spend a neat amount of time making the British feel bad about Colonialism and Revolution and small pox and white supremacy just in time for a guilt-ridden, self-immolating outline of the Civil War.

I never got to any of it. We skipped Slavery and the Bill of Rights. We didn't have time for World War One or Two (where Dad's parents met), or the Koreas (where Mom's parents met), no time for Vietnam, or Iraq, or Iraq, or Bosnia, or Afghanistan, or Iraq. We don't get to my anecdotes featuring Clinton and Clinton, or the time I was hugged tightly by Michelle Obama, and later, remember?—her husband, Barack!—because we only had time for one man.

Osama bin Laden.

Osama bin Laden is dead.

I found out at lunch on May 2, 2011, and I should have prepared accordingly. I should have gotten my affairs in order. I should have adjusted the charts, printed edited inserts for handouts. Instead, I cried in front of strangers. "Oh, yeah, so he's dead," a random Canadian told me between mouthfuls of rice. Both of us English teachers in Korea, him at an elementary school, me, a guest teacher on rotation. I had never seen him before, would never see him again. As the Canadian infinitely repeated the words "bin Laden," I noticed his teeth were painted red with kimchi stains. I told him I didn't believe him.

Expatriate men of a certain age, living and working alone in a foreign land, beg suspicion. I imagined them fleeing their homes, rather than seeking adventure—their urge towards permanence abroad suggested something like danger. I'm all about Manifest Destiny—I was born and raised in the Wild West, where the plains hit the mountain that inspired "America the Beautiful"—but I was in Korea for adventure, not escape. That's what we twenty-somethings told ourselves in warning, a reminder that too long abroad turned adventure to avoidance. We'd say we were bothered that white people are expatriates, and people of color are immigrants. We'd be bothered *and* take advantage of the system because we convinced ourselves it was a temporary life, a learning experience. For our own sake we make those who stayed longer than temporary unrecognizable. We didn't say it aloud at *Politics Geek Fest*, but we all wanted to believe we weren't hiding from home, running from someone or somewhere for some reason, we

weren't searching for answers to questions we couldn't quite ask—such as: Why the fuck is my brother dead? And for all of the unanswered questions, the most basic truth was: We were thoroughly of our own homes despite however long we were out of them. However far or long away we got, the first question we were asked abroad was "Where are you from?" We are *always* presenting, and God Bless the USA.

And so, the Canadian Stranger—excited to tell me the news, because he learned I'm Made in America: Osama bin Laden is dead. "No. He is," he managed as he chewed. "Obama's talkin 'bout it on the news right now." Still shoveling in food, he didn't notice the transition in our conversation, the shift in the next few minutes from incredulity, to telling him he was flat out wrong, to the embarrassing point where I began to cry over my tray, sobbed above a pile of soggy kimchi. "Yup. Had him for a week I heard," the incessant Canadian informed, oblivious to my stupid tears. "DNA tests and everything. I can show you in my office if you want."

The Canadian's desk overflowed with papers and trash, and the keyboard was all crumbed up. He opened an internet tab to get to CNN and behind him I tilted my head from side to side so the tears would run past my mascara and not over it. I felt the need to explain myself to this kind man, this expatriate who'd left his county behind. I wanted to explain that my brother was a funny, sweet Momma's boy who once "accidentally" shot out a neighbor's sliding glass door with a BB gun, that I understood Osama bin Laden had nothing to do with Iraq—I'm not *one of those Americans*—but. I'm also from a

military town. We are a family with a military legacy. Also, 9/11. Generational poverty. War heroes. Parades and those little American flags on sticks and the financially-aided higher education that demands I know better than such propaganda. I have a convoluted list of reasons to cry, a heavy dose of survivor's guilt, and no appropriate time or place to purge. So I said nothing to the Canadian. He sat me down at his computer and stepped back and President Obama had something to say instead.

"So Americans understand the costs of war," Obama said, "Yet as a country, we will never tolerate our security being threatened, not stand idly by when our people have been killed. We will be relentless in defense of our citizens and our friends and allies. We will be true to the values that make us who we are. And on nights like this one, we can [but it's daytime here in Korea, it's already tomorrow, I thought as I gazed out the window] say to those families who have lost ones to al Qaeda's terror: Justice has been done." Then Obama quoted directly from the Pledge of Allegiance and the Canadian stood behind me, picking his teeth with his pinky, more unfettered than glib. *You should write this down,* I thought to myself. I got my Times Square notebook out of my purse and beside notes on W's second election win and the Patriot Act, I wrote *you should write this down.* I added a smiley face and *Osama bin Laden ruins everything.* The bell rang. The Canadian man squeezed my shoulder and left me, alone.

I'm ready.

I'm ready to explain America. We've got a fascist-in-chief now, but I still have a by-the-bootstraps back story and I can swallow a cheeseburger whole and it turns out Neil Young is half-American. His mother was even a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution. These days we'll manage a sliver of hope where we can get it.

I see now—I'd written down the wrong timeline in my Times Square Korean stationary store notebook. I prepared the wrong history for presentation. The alternate was longer, perhaps not adequate in all it aimed to convey, but this other American history is reliably sourced, and it is mine.

11SEPT2001: I am a senior in high school, driving my slight, freshman brother Ronnie to class. We decide it's a hoax on the radio. Some teachers let us watch it all burn on T.V. Some don't want to talk about it at all. Parents are deployed to some place in some desert, any place in any desert, at our government's whim; many of their kids follow suit, eager to fight some sort of enemy for their country. This, for the sake of honor and tradition, to stay out of jail or the food stamp line, from a lack of anything else to do. Ronnie does not enlist on 9/11—he is only fourteen. But he is eager to be what he decides is a man, and he brings a recruiter to our house just two years later. Mom kicks them out, screaming "Leave! Now! He's only sixteen!" She chases the men in uniform to their slick black SUV, her reputation as the most beautiful and terrifying mom on the street confirmed. Ronnie calmly waits, strolls back into their offices to enlist alone two

years later, and they remember, slap him on the back: “Hey! You’re the kid with the crazy mom.”

1DECEMBER2007: His first deployment is coming, so I purchase a plane ticket and fly him out from Fort Hood, Texas, to New York City. We don’t acknowledge our last visit is just in case. He drinks too much and stands at the center of Times Square, puts his arms straight up into the air. His smile hangs open, his expression literal shock and awe. He looks like he is the last man in the world.

19MARCH2008: He turns twenty-one in the desert. We will have drinks at a bar when he returns, drinks he can acquire legally. We will sit at a bar as adults, my siblings and me, and reflect on our past in an adult sort of way.

30APRIL2008: He is four weeks into his deployment. He drives his Company Commander back to their base, leads the convoy of armored vehicles through the dusty streets of Baghdad. The men are singing together, Captain Pearson beside Ronnie in the Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected truck, the MRAP. They often sang to kill time. Today, it’s Bob Marley’s “Three Little Birds.”

Don’t worry

About a thing

It is late afternoon so the sun starts to slouch down to the horizon, and the dust particles on the dash of his armored vehicle swirl in the air above the steering wheel, like so many tiny cosmos—I count thirty, though there must be so many more. Perhaps he is wearing

sunglasses, has a fat cigar hanging out of his mouth as he expertly handles the steering wheel. So many pictures of him will come back from Iraq with a cigar dangling from his cherubic pink lips, his hands on his hips like a football coach or the proud father he won't have a chance to become. Marcus sings from his spot at the gun turret, and he'll earn a Bronze Star with a Valor Device by saving Rafi and Herbel, scrambling to get them all out the back. Ronnie drives. He is young and apolitical and funny as hell, All-American. And then he isn't. There is a roadside bomb. And the roadside bomb kills Captain Pearson and my brother. The flames of their ends are indistinguishable from the glare of the setting sun. Everything is burning.

13MAY2008: Today's edition of *The Colorado Springs Gazette*—just below "NEARLY 10,000 KILLED BY QUAKE IN CHINA"—the other front page newspaper headline blares, "Destined to be a soldier: HUNDREDS REMEMBER FOUNTAIN NATIVE WHO DIED IN IRAQ." The reporter snuck into the service and quoted—or misquoted—our eulogies, long sobbed speeches where we fell prey to the pomp and circumstance, spoke of a "patriotic streak" we needed to believe in upon his death, a vague, possible patriotism that is harder to diagnose now, looking back. The high school's JROTC instructor, our beloved First Sergeant, is quoted saying Ronnie "was a highly motivated kid." My brother would have giggled at that sentence with an edit: "Ronnie was a high~~ly motivated~~ kid."

26MAY2008*:* George W. Bush gives a speech at Arlington Cemetery. It is aired nationally, interrupts talk shows and soap operas. *In a world where freedom is constantly under attack, in a world where our security is challenged, the joys of liberty are often purchased by the sacrifices of those who serve a cause greater than themselves…today we lift up our hearts, especially to those who have fallen in the last year. We remember Army Specialist Ronald Tucker of Fountain, Colorado. As a young man, Ronnie was known for having an infectious smile and a prankster's sense of humor. And then he joined the United States Army. This brought out a more mature side of him. Ronnie transformed from a light-hearted teenager into a devoted soldier, and a dutiful son who called his mother every day from his post in Iraq.* [Historical footnote: I am watching this speech happen live on a television. I am doubled-over and my husband is not sure if he should hug me or rub my back. We just left New York City and we won't move to Korea for two years. Some days I am in so much pain I want to beat the hell out of someone. I want to kick someone in the solar plexus, I want to hear the sound of cracking ribs, I want to wield a steel-toed boot.] *His final act of duty, less than a month ago, he worked with other members of his unit to build a soccer field for Iraqi children. He drove back to his base and an enemy bomb robbed him of his life. Today our Nation grieves for the loss of Ronnie Tucker.* [Somewhere in here he calls Ronnie a "Liberty Defender" and I see my brother with Captain America's shield, his eyes gleeful behind a superhero mask; the phrase stays with me for days, and I even practice saying it aloud: Liberty Defender.

Liberty Defender.] *I am humbled by those who have made the ultimate sacrifice that allow our free civilization to endure and flourish. It only remains for us, the heirs of their legacy, to have the courage and the character to follow their lead and to preserve America as the greatest nation on Earth and the last, best hope for Mankind.*

Mankind, I think to myself. Mankind is the name of Ronnie's favorite WWF wrestler. George W. also says Ronnie liked "driving like a NASCAR driver." No. It was like an illegal street car racer. The difference between the two is stark, like the difference between a Marlboro and a joint. A Cuban Cigar and a Hookah. Though I suppose Ronnie smoked them all. "My brother didn't like NASCAR!" I scream at George W. Bush.

12OCTOBER2015: I listen to a one minute and thirty-six second clip of the August sixth #GOPDebate. I listen, I watch, again, again, again. The title of the clip is direct, "Jeb Bush on Iraq War: 'It was a mistake.'" I watch so many times I start to believe Megyn Kelly is the most gorgeous woman in the world, or at least the most glamorous. Then I've watched for so long Megyn Kelly looks alien. She's is all sharp cheek bones and knowing smirks, her hair liquid gold. She is all-American, or she is humanoid. She begins to ask him a question, but never makes it to the punctuation—rather, she is forced to make a statement. "For days on end, in this campaign, you've struggled to answer a question about whether knowing what we know now—" Jeb Bush interrupts. He is wearing glasses and so I know he is not his brother. He tells her, "I remember, I remember, Megyn," and she smiles and says, "I remember too." Everyone

chuckles. The chuckles sound smug. Though it's possible I'm biased regarding this topic. She waits for the laughter to die out, and asks, "To the families of those who died in that war…how do you look at them now and say your brother's war was a mistake?" Jeb Bush's face is expansive. Humorless. Another way I know he's not his brother—he doesn't seem fun. Jeb doesn't seem like he'd egg me on during Karaoke at the local Fountain bar, The C'mon Inn, where Vietnam vets wobble around until they're cut off, where there's a glass case near the bathroom full of medals and airborne patches and a button with my brother's face on it. He tells Megyn Kelly, "Knowing what we know now, with faulty intelligence and not having security be the first, uh, priority, when we invaded, it was a mistake. I wouldn't [sic] of gone in. However for the people that did lose their lives, and the families that suffer because of it, I know this full well. Because as governor of the state of Florida I called every one of them. Every one of them that I could find, to tell them that I was praying for them, that I cared about them, and it was very hard to do." The audience titters here. I've never heard a real titter before, and I'm certain this is one—a titter for Jeb Bush saying it was hard for him to tell families of the Fallen he cared. He pushes on, however difficult. "And every one of them said that their child did not die in vain, or their wife or husband did not die in vain." There's more to the clip, but I only get this far each time before I start the video from the beginning again. Megyn smirks, Jeb slightly frowns, and I realize George W. would sing Creedence Clearwater with me at The C'mon Inn without letting the weight press down on him; Jeb would

pretend he understood "Fortunate Son," all the rage, the misery, the ironies, and he would also pretend to shoulder some of the burden. Is one worse than the other?

9NOVEMBER2016: How stupid we are, those of us who thought we were special, different, entitled to stability or reason, excused from this blatant a brutality. I should have know better. I did, once. I can't remember a time I wasn't waiting for the other shoe to drop. Mine is a body made by fight and flight, squeezed tight and spring-loaded, scanning for what's next, what's next, what's next. What's next is for all of us now; and if you are truly surprised, if you are wholly caught off-guard, if you only now understanding the damage unleashed by your ignorance—Welcome. I welcome myself, too, fool that I was. There is no finish line. Life is only overcome by death.

There are too many timelines, too many versions of histories, and none of them matter anyway. At *Politics Geek Fest Night* I was never going to get to any of it. America can't be explained. Perhaps it can only be lived.

My new group of international friends had one conversation in mind on Monday, May 2nd, 2011, and one only: Osama bin Laden is dead.

Northern Irishman demanded, "Did you see them, the Americans celebrating in the streets?" Would I have done that had I been home? No. No way. Our New Zealand transplant, by way of Iraq, promised, "Al Qaeda has already been breaking apart, this death means nothing." Another kind Canadian studied my face, looking for cracks. I had nothing left to offer. They made insightful points, "Why wasn't there a trial?" and "How

does this change anything? Why do they celebrate death?" even "What was the point of these wars?" or "How could people follow so blindly?"

And now? What do I have to offer now? The word *trump* is British slang for "fart." My brother would have loved that. *President Fart,* he'd say. Maybe in an alternate timeline he's alive, and *President Fart* doesn't come to fruition, and he is alive, my brother, he is alive and laughing.

The voices fade after a time, a foam latte or two, and I don't know when I am, in and out of so many timelines—in Korea or pre-America or post-America or a desert I never actually seen.

Here is Ronnie, running in the sand. He is sweating and grinning, listening to his slow jam "Baby Makin' Mix" on the clean white iPod he bought with one of his first paychecks from the Army. The sun is blinding—always so heartbreakingly blinding—and bouncing off the rolling sand, making his blue eyes squint. In my mind, he is always running. "How far did *you* run today, Sammy?" he asked, that last call full of static and time. "I did six miles in near a hundred degree heat." He was chubby before the Army. He had chubby cheeks and slept through alarm clocks and smoked weed. I guess W. was right; Ronnie had matured after all. He wasn't really calling to talk about running. He was calling to talk about his girlfriend, her waiting for him deep in the heart of Texas. He wanted to know how soon was too soon to tell someone you love them.

"Sam?" someone asked. Ireland, England, I wasn't sure who, which is just so American of me. "Sam—are you ok?" I could have told them what I've always said, something I mean but don't feel like unpacking, squawk at them like some yellow-ribboned parrot: "I don't support these wars, but I support the troops!" I could've made it simple for them, offered some definitive American experience, plied them with some star-spangled truthiness, reinstated my place in the group as not one of *those*—it ain't me, it ain't me. I could have pointed to my sweatshirt, *Since 1976,* and promised many, many ironies.

Instead, I wanted to tell them about my hometown of Fountain, Colorado. I want to talk about The Wall of Honor and the Food Stamp Office and the Friday Night Lights. I want to tell them about every single parade and my immigrant grandmothers and my war-soiled grandfathers. I want to say we know there's a difference between Iraq and Afghanistan, but sometimes war is just war, an enlistment just a way out. I want to explain we aren't numb to mass shootings, to the rage and sorrow of fellow Americans, but we have mouths to feed and so many talking heads to filter. I want to tell them about the motorcycle gang of veterans who led the miles-long funeral processional, then stood watch and held flags outside my brother's funeral in case of Westboro Baptist. I want to tell them that my mother wears blue jeans and my stepfather does too and they have different interpretations of Springsteen's "Born in the USA." I want to sing, "Keep on rockin in the free world," and claim Neil Young for myself. I want to offer I've barely

got my footing inside the US of A, never mind out of it. I want to remind them that fascism is local. I want to say fascism is not new to many Americans, our lives ruled by systematic oppression and the enduring tyranny of this failing idea called America; maybe baptizing this Fascist—christening this heinous, abhorrent, orange face and his people what they are—maybe this recognition will bring us closer. I want to say America's not a place you can really get away from, and I'm not sure I would want to. I want to promise I will always keep pace, with pilgrim feet, the railroad tracks of my hometown, conjuring things behind spacious skies, over purple mountain majesties, far past amber waves of grain, beyond sea to shining sea.

I'm ready.

Progress Report: For Ronnie

"Generosity is relative to hope. Hope is simply the promise of more time."

—Me, I said that once. It sounded pretty convincing.

The pressure. I have folded in on myself, collapsed under it. I may be standing, smiling, winning, but I am also laid out on a shag-carpeted floor somewhere, fingers clinging to pea-green fibers, terrified the world will finally dissolve beneath me. I began on that shag carpet, and begin again. I'm literal worlds away, by landmass, by lives and deaths, by occupation, by time and space, by material gain and monetary debt, by books read and lost, and still, the shag shadows me, lurks, imitates grass, promises comfort in the form of filthy floor yarn. Poor choices in design, fueled by a 70's drug-addled aesthetic, are hard to outrun. You can replace shag carpeting, but you cannot *replace* it. Your toes get trapped in that shit. So does your psyche.

For the first time in my life, I believe I am experiencing the jealousy of others. I'm a person who thrives on a specific kind of confrontation, one wherein I only participate if I forsee a win. This sort of self-promoted confidence, this motivation to speak early and loudest, makes me a target, but I've gotten away with running my mouth because of my constructed narrative. I've not only gotten away with it, I believe it. I am

become it. I am *She's Overcome, LLC*—a creator of product consumed by the people who, as of late, may be envious of me.

I find this confusing as the underdog. I've built my life upon how it would take at least three to seven therapy sessions for me to wholly unload my collective trauma. I'm a counselor's wet dream. Who doesn't want to record my therapy sessions? I hope someone is making money off those tapes. My family *is* the DSM. We'll autograph a fucking copy. If you can find a sober one of us to sign, that shit will sell on Ebay for a couple grand. Did I mention my brother was killed in Iraq?

The pressure. My sister and I have named it *Ronnie,* though it's the last thing he'd want for us. We double our efforts at life because our brother was robbed of his own. When I go for a jog, or dance, or roller skate, I think, "Do you know how lucky you are to be breathing? You are alive and your body is moving and you are doing this, extra, for Ronnie." Every moment is cruelly imbued with symbolism, meaning, back-breaking heft. Every *Star Wars* movie he misses. Every blonde little boy with food on his face. Every pup he would love, every car he would crash. Everything, everything, everything is Ronnie. No one has ever—at least, to my face—envied me. I'm that Greek dude scuttling up a hill, but I'm carrying the bodies of my loved ones, and the hill is an endless hallway, and ugh, again, with the shag carpeting. What's there to be jealous about?

I don't know who I am without the pressure. I don't know who I am if I've already proven, if I've already won. And I present as if I have. It's a part of my brand, what I hock, *She's Overcome, LLC*, I win fellowships, I earn Master's degrees for free, I write and sometimes that writing can be found online; once or twice I was paid for that writing. I have partnered with the most incredible person, a man who will help carry the bodies, a man who will carry me too when the haul overwhelms, a kind, funny, a too-handsome man who loves dogs as much as I do. He's an artist and he helps me artist, too. He and I live in foreign countries together. And big cities. We've run theatre companies, and outrun theatre companies. We don't have kids, and we don't want any, so that's going well. We don't have a car payment. We like the same movies. We have enough money for most of the movies. We're good on paper, even better in person. Fuck. We're so great, *I'm* starting to get jealous. Look at this life we have built around the gravity of my brother's death.

It is for Ronnie I rail against the American Dream. It is for Ronnie I am dogged in the creation of a life worth envy. It is in Ronnie's memory I assure you the pursuit is rigged. It is roadblocked, racist, gendered, classist, sexist, singularly-abled, *it is what it is*—rehashed, endured, recycled, ad nauseum.

But if you must, keep chasing. Find joy in the chase. The chase is all you are, all you have.

Unless.

Are you holding this book in your hands?