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(In)Tangible Things

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(IN)TANGIBLE THINGS

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2015

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for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
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ABSTRACT

(In)Tangible Things is a collection of memoir essays and poems that examines loss, pain, and identity. Many pieces explore familial ties through separation, secrecy, and divorce, while other stories and poems observe the author's connection to drag culture, sexuality, eating disorders, and time itself. Using techniques such as framing devices, backwards storytelling, and delineated narrative, the author invites the reader to experience memories and moments from his past that show consistency and change, betrayal and forgiveness.

To my grandmother, Georgene.
Thank you for always believing in me. And for the ice cream sundaes.

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“Because you remembered

//

and memory is a second chance.”

Ocean Vuong, *Trevor*

HURRICANE SEASON

I remember the camcorder. It sat on his shoulders when he filmed my brother's basketball games at the city gymnasium. I remember my brother wearing his number three jersey, running across the emerald green floor, dribbling the basketball like a yo-yo, as easy as inhaling and exhaling. My dad filmed every game, and he would crane his neck into the side of the camcorder, trying to avoid the bulging rectangular piece where the VCR tape went in. "C'mon, Mike!" he screamed. "What kind of play was that?" My mom and I would sit in the stands, leaving enough space for others to question whether or not we knew him. When we watched these videos back, we made sure the volume was low.

About a week before Hurricane Frances arrived, my dad gripped the camcorder's handle and peered through its lens, his crow's feet spread like small branches reaching, and he stayed silent. His motions were slow, and he rotated gracefully around corners like a dancer. He shushed me when I tried to ask him why he was filming the house.

I had no apprehensions before this point. My parents stayed calm, and the city officials and news stations constantly gave out information and tips for safety. Everyone described this hurricane as a bad storm, but seeing him film our house terrified me.

He started with my bedroom, my small space on the west side of the house that faced the front lawn. The camcorder peered over my desk with my middle-grade novels and Harry Potter collection, up to the boxy television that hung in the top corner overlooking the room, down to my X-men figures scattered across my floor, complete with Professor X's wheelchair tipped over and Magneto's helmet almost blending into the carpet. The walls were a light blue, chipped in places that showed the constant shifting of furniture that I rearranged often—once, putting my

dresser stacked with books closer to my bed so I could read before I fell asleep. In all of these changes, the walls took the hits and now small, white spots peeked through the blue.

My brother's bedroom was next to mine. His window looked over the backyard, the grassy parts that sat next to the newly installed screened enclosure around our porch. His walls were a dark, forest green and on them hung jerseys signed in frames from his favorite MLB and NBA players. Autographed sneakers and Wheaties cereal boxes with famous athletes on the fronts lined the shelves above his bed. Orange clay hardened in the carpet follicles under his soiled baseball uniforms.

The wooden boards blocking the natural light made everything feel small inside the house. My family now relied on the yellow hues of the ceiling fan bulbs and the glow from the television screens. The living room was painted a dark maroon color, contrasting with our beige dining room. My dad worked as a painting contractor, and we often picked new colors for our bedrooms and the other rooms around the house. "Trust me," he told us as he painted the living room wall. "This color is *in* right now."

My father paced the house like he was seeing it for the first time, exploring new rooms and new corners. Each step he took seemed to be calculated with enough precision for the new hardwood floors not to creak. He now scanned the camcorder from my brother's bedroom, down the hallway, and into the living room, moving over the Thomas Kinkade painting above the television set layered with dust. On a small, golden label attached to the frame read *Carmel Sunset on Ocean Ave., Thomas Kinkade.*

"He does stuff with the light," my dad told me when he and my mother purchased this painting on our vacation to Gatlinburg, Tennessee. I was about six. The art gallery was dark, but

glowed from the spotlights positioned perfectly over each painting. I remember oil paintings of gardens and romantic, flower-filled landscapes, street views, and the American flag at sunset. My brother and I waited for a while as my parents discussed the investment on dark leather couches. I could tell, even from a young age, that the salesman did his job well. Things like “You don’t want to pass this up” and “price value” circled through the conversation. My parents gave in. The picture they chose was a cobblestone street adorned with cars, pedestrians, a woman on a bicycle, and a man painting on a canvas, who Thomas Kinkade had painted into the scene as himself. The woman on the bike, we later found out, represented his mother. She watches him work from behind, studies each brush stroke. My parents bought an adjustable, cylindrical light that rested above the painting in our living room. My dad made it as bright as possible to show the company that came over, and this made the painting look like high noon. When it would be dim, the image resembled dusk, the sky faintly glowing orange and dark pink onto the scene below.

I wonder how Thomas Kinkaid felt, looking at himself looking onto this scene. Taking a step back and seeing the man in front of the canvas from a distance, perhaps as a younger version of himself. His mother behind him, watching his work come to life. I wonder if something like this actually happened, or if Kinkade simply created it all.

My dad passed by slowly, looking through the lens, silent, recording its detail—each thick brush stroke in the clouds above the cars and every natural line in its oak frame. It was the darkest I had ever seen it.

I found my mom smoking a cigarette on the back porch and she told me not to worry. “You know your dad can overthink things sometimes,” she said. “Just in case. If anything happens, we want to remember this house.”

It was 2004 when Hurricane Frances hit Florida at a category four. The highest winds peaked at 145 mph. It was August, and I started sixth grade at the school I had attended since kindergarten. This school, which was founded on Quaker beliefs and eventually turned into a Southern Baptist establishment, offered kindergarten through twelfth grade. By the time a student graduated, they knew most of the other students and faculty. This academy was small, so small that the largest graduating class on record was twenty-two people. While my parents were not religious, they believed that my best education would be from a private institution.

In fourth grade, my sixteen-person class huddled around Mrs. Adams who wore her hair in a thick braid wrapped around her head like a turban. She let it down once to show us, and it fell to the back of her knees. One day, she had our science book opened on the podium.

“Today,” she said, “We’re going to talk about how the earth was made.” We knew this story since kindergarten, when our picture books started with a black page of nothingness and slowly turned into pages of stars to plants to animals to humans, slowly addressing each day God formed the world in a colorful way that children could understand.

She looked into the science book and read aloud stories that originated from the Bible.

“Trust me,” she continued, “There will be people who talk about evolution, about the ways that this world is millions and millions of years old.” She laughed. “Really, how can someone believe that? As Christians, we *know* the Earth is six thousand years old. Maybe less.”

Her looks and pauses were menacing between sentences. Her beady eyes that sat too close together looked at each one of us slowly. “Our job is to stand firm as warriors of God.”

After dinner that night, when my parents were watching the news, I asked about the Earth and my dad told me that he believed in evolution. “Isn’t it obvious?” He explained the concepts to me, the idea of “survival of the fittest” and how the Earth could be so old and still be around. But that night, I cried, fearing my father could go to hell, afraid that I would be separated from him for eternity.

A week before Hurricane Frances was supposed to come, everyone gathered in the small chapel in the middle of campus with the other grades. I sat in my white button-up shirt and navy tie while the girls crossed their ankles in their plaid skirts that ended at their shins. After the service which consisted of songs and a lecture and other school announcements, Principal Turner walked to the microphone.

“As you all know by now, Hurricane Frances is coming.” He was a large man with a bald head and small glasses that always sat at the tip of his nose. Everyone knew not to sit in the front on the chapel on days he was scheduled to lecture. He had a tendency to spit. “Tell your parents to follow the county’s schedule for school. We will pick up our normal schedule then.” He paused. “You will all be in my prayers.”

When Hurricane Frances finally came, I could picture the story of Noah more vividly than I could before. “This is what it must have been like,” I thought to myself, peering out of the small crack between the wooden panels on my bedroom window. The trees outside were beginning to curve like parentheses as the sky darkened.

We stayed inside, listening to the debris hit the sides of our house in chaotic intervals. Some hits were louder than others; sometimes it sounded like an entire tree plummeting into the side of the house, a loud smack shaking the walls. Other times were calmer, and the rapid beats of rain were the only audible noises, creating a form of white noise, a static. Frances seemed to end quickly, perhaps from the built-up anticipation prior. Thankfully nothing was significant enough to do any damage during this storm. The chipped paint near the front door and the small leak in the garage ceiling were the worst things that happened to our house. This time, we got lucky.

But Hurricane Jeanne came just a few weeks later, just enough time and notice from the National Weather Service to take down the wooden panels that were shielding our windows and nail them back up only days later. Hurricane Jeanne landed on the east coast of South Florida at a weaker category three; the highest winds only reached 120 mph. Jeanne was weaker than Frances, technically.

Our neighbors were new; they had only been in the area for a year or so. Their avocado green house sat across the street on the corner lot. The house was new: white columns sat parallel to the front door's frame, the bushes near the front walkway were perfectly placed and had bright purple flowers spread throughout, the front lawn dropped into a slope near the street.

Ted and Leigh. They were somewhere in their sixties, and they were from Jersey. Hurricane Frances was their first hurricane, and like us, their house had no significant damage. Their daughter, Lois, made the trip down from New Jersey to stay with them for both of these storms. They told us that Lois had recently come out of a bad relationship, so the hurricanes were an excuse to escape for a while.

“She’s never had luck with men. Good men, at least,” Ted said to us before she came down.

My brother and I helped my dad put up their shutters since they were too old to do it by themselves. Instead of wooden panels, they built their house with attachments over each window so metal sheets screwed easily on. I was eleven, and my brother was four years older than me. My job was to hand my brother screws while my dad held the sheets of metal in place so they aligned perfectly.

My dad went inside while my brother and I went back to our house for a quick break. When my dad came back, and after he talked to my mom in another room away from me and my brother, he told us we would stay with them for Hurricane Jeanne.

“Their house is brand new,” he said. “It’s safer.” He told us that we would pack bags with anything we wanted to have safe, including clothes for the few days of the storm and anything else that would help us distract ourselves. Naturally, I brought my Gameboy.

Even before the hurricanes, we went over to Ted and Leigh’s for dinner often. They usually made something that only the adults liked— chili or weird seafood dishes with brown rice or things with onions. They played cards with my parents, and I watched with my brother. I usually brought my Gameboy, immersing myself into another place, missing out on their conversations about politics and celebrity gossip and how different Florida was from the north. We sat on their back porch during dinner so they could smoke. Lois and Leigh used this plastic tube that I didn’t understand, and they attached it to the end of their cigarettes, puffing smoke into the night. Sometimes I distracted myself by wandering their porch—an assortment of bright flowers and gnome statues and wind chimes that lined the perimeter.

We moved our things to their house in just a few trips. My brother and I each had a single bag of luggage and what we deemed our most important possessions. I stuffed my suitcase with my *Goosebumps* collection, my Gameboy, books for school, and some clothes. My brother, however, filled his suitcase with baseball cards and autographed basketball jerseys.

My dad took the Kinkade painting off of the wall before we finally settled in to Ted and Leigh's. He wrapped the painting carefully in a plastic sheet, followed by a paint-speckled white tarp that he used for jobs. He carried the painting over, carefully putting it under his right arm and supporting the bottom with his left hand.

Before my mom moved her things into Ted and Leigh's house, she spread out everything on her bed: birth certificates, family photos in plastic sandwich bags, documents on our house. She looked down at it while her suitcase of clothes was packed near the front door. Our life was spread before her. Everything my mother saw necessary to save was in paper.

We were watching the original *Night of the Living Dead* when Hurricane Jeanne started to invade South Florida.

"I can't believe you all haven't watched this together," Lois said, addressing no one specifically. We lit candles and scattered them throughout the living room—not to add more horror effects, but in case the power went out. My mom sorted through her plastic bags of food and opened a bag of tortilla chips speckled with green dots that tasted like sour lime. We formed a semicircle: myself, my brother, my parents, Ted and Leigh, Lois.

Lois was pretty. She was tall, blonde, and always wore her eyeliner thick with small wings jutting from the outer corners into her temples. Her voice was loud; sometimes too loud, and it boomed through the house. My mom said that this was the Jersey in her voice. Lois's laugh rang through the back patio and into the night, louder after every glass of wine.

"Now let's hope the power lasts," Lois said as the movie started.

The Night of the Living Dead was released in 1990, three years before I was born. The movie began in a graveyard. "Typical," I thought to myself before passing the tortilla chips to my brother next to me. Growing up, horror as a genre fascinated me, possibly because it was so different from my school where everything remained distant from anything other than the holy. Gore and violence and anything scary were considered things from the devil. However, television shows like *Are You Afraid of the Dark?* and *Goosebumps* consumed a large amount of my youth, somewhere in between my *Rugrats* phase and my obsession with *X-Men*. My collection of *Goosebumps* books lined my small bookshelf next to my bed, and I made sure my parents bought every movie as soon as they came out. I read through each book as fast as I could, ignoring all homework that got in my way. My favorites were always the choose-your-own-adventure stories, where I could be involved, deciding for myself what each character would do and living with those consequences. Or, more times than not, flipping back to the previous page and changing the outcome—something I couldn't do in real life.

The Night of the Living Dead escalated quickly, within the first five minutes, as a random man, covered in blood too dark to be real and prosthetic makeup that looked like plastic, approached the leading female character who had been staring down at a headstone. She attacked him, punching him while she screamed, and finally made her way back to the car which,

naturally, could not start. The red-headed actress put the car in neutral, leaving behind the zombie, and rolled down the cemetery hill.

The lights cut out. The room was suddenly dark besides the flickering lights of the candles.

“Well, that was just *perfect* timing,” Lois said. In the abrupt candle light, the black roots against her yellowing hair shone more than they did in normal lighting. The glass of white wine in her hand was still cold from when she poured it before the movie started; the condensation was beginning to form. “Should we just play cards?” she asked.

I went to bed early that first night in one of their guest rooms which had two twin beds against the far wall. My brother and I shared a bed while my parents shared the other. My dad usually got up in the middle of the night and moved to the couch in the living room, where I would find him asleep in the morning.

During this first night, my mom came in the bedroom alone while my dad continued to drink and play cards with the neighbors.

“Sorry,” my mom said as she opened the door. My brother and I slowly lifted our heads up and saw her dark figure climbing into the bed next to us. “Go back to sleep.” I could hear the drunken conversation of my dad and the neighbors from the dining room just outside of the room.

“It’s too hot, Mom,” I said. “I can’t sleep.” The sweat underneath me formed into a second layer of skin between me and the sheets. My body heat along with my brother’s turned our bed into a scorching cluster of limbs.

“I know,” she said. “Just try to sleep on top of the sheets tonight.” The thunder shook the windows inside the guest room, and the glass ticked against the frame of the window. The metal shutters were steady, but the creaks came from inside the walls. The once soft tone of the trees whispering turned into a clashing army throughout the neighborhood.

“You don’t have to worry,” my mom told us just as we were about to fall asleep again. “Everything will be okay.” Now, I wonder if she was talking about the weather.

The next morning, I rolled from my mattress, feeling my damp skin peel away from my sheets. I could still hear the storm filling the hollow house with thuds and wisps. My mom was asleep in the other bed, cradled in whatever shape the twin bed forced her into. I put on a shirt from my small suitcase of clothes, grabbed my Gameboy, and felt my way through the dark bedroom.

The morning light from the back porch filled the rest of the house. The living room, which shared the same part of the house with the kitchen and dining room, looked like a black and white photograph. The sunlight trickled in from the silver clouds, seeped through the screen covering the back porch, and through the sliding glass door. My dad was sleeping on the couch in the living room underneath a light knit blanket, and he used the arm rest as a pillow.

Leigh was the first person awake, maybe since she was older than the rest of my family, and we were used to sleeping in. In the kitchen, I saw her cutting up different kinds of fruit: apples, cantaloupe, honeydew. “Good morning, Ryan,” she whispered. The dim light shined onto her counter from the small window just above the kitchen sink that looked into the back porch.

“Hi, Leigh.” I powered on my Gameboy and sat on the loveseat next to my sleeping father. I quickly turned the Gameboy’s volume down.

On the thick cutting board, Leigh sorted out a colorful spread of circles and squares and wedges, and I saw her take a taste of each fruit she cut into. She reminded me they would go bad soon since the refrigerator could not keep cold and save some of their food. “Y’know, some people call these Chinese apples,” Leigh said quietly. She showed me a pomegranate, rotating it slowly like a door knob. I had never seen one before, and I remember questioning its color and taste, wondering what kind of sweetness could be inside such a hard shell. “These little buggers aren’t easy to get out, though.”

I approached the kitchen to hear her better. She told me about the water method. She used to cut the pomegranate into equal quarters and submerge each piece underwater. The seeds would pop out with gentle nudges and the skin would easily peel away and separate. “But that’s the old way,” she said, chopping the pomegranate perfectly in half. “I would lose all of the juice in the water. That’s where the flavor comes from.” She put each half of the pomegranate into a large wooden bowl. “Do you want to try the new way?” she asked.

“Sure,” I said. I powered down my Gameboy.

“It’s easy,” she said. “You just have to reach in the fruit and grab as much as you can. At the end, you hit the outside and all the little pieces left will just fall right out.” She handed me the both with the halves. “And don’t worry about all the juice. That’s the best part.”

I sat on the kitchen tile, away from Leigh’s workspace. The floor was cold, and the temperature soon climbed up my warm body, cooling me. In my left hand, I gripped the fruit’s ruby skin and faced the open side over the bowl. A deep marble ran throughout the fruit in

shades of dark reds and white. My dad was starting to move now, but stayed asleep as the outside weather continued to howl.

“In Bible class,” I said to Leigh, piercing my fingers through the fruit’s textured flesh, “our teacher told us that Adam and Eve might have had one of these things instead of an apple.” Her back was towards me and she continued to chop. “But I think it was an apple. That’s what the Bible says.”

That morning, the eye of the Hurricane approached and we waited patiently, anticipating a breath of air fresh from the muggy, staleness of the house. The wind seemed gentle when I went outside. The road was starting to flood, and we all stayed on the driveway. The damp air touched my hot cheek and cooled me. Down the road, we could see trees fallen over into the road along with countless pine needles and pinecones, blocking the paved street. From what I could see, my house was fine from the outside.

That day consisted of the final bursts of the storm bands, and we decided that it would be the last night with them, that once we had more daylight and the storm was completely over, we would move our things back into our house, assuming that we had no damage.

That night, I sat on the back patio away from the screen once the hurricane dwindled into a regular Florida storm. Lightning strikes still ruptured the air. Thunder still roared. But what I remember most from the final night of the storm was the light that sprinkled down from the stars. The moon, of course, let off a light incomparable to anything else. It rested in a sky, a little sliver like a silver eyelash that I could blow away in one breath. In between the black clouds circling above me, stars that were normally blocked out by city lights broke through, and I had never

realized just how many there were before this. It might have been the only good thing about not having power.

I was in my Gameboy world again the next morning; the light rain came through the screen on the back patio, turning into a cool mist. The rain had turned from a charge to a trickle, bullets to pebbles. My mom, Leigh, and I sat under the roofed part of the porch, but my seat was close enough to the rain to still feel it. My mom's cigarette smoke blended into the watercolor gray sky, marbling the clouds. Leigh attached her plastic tube to the white tip of her cigarette and inhaled. The menthol scent became a relief to the atmosphere, a balance against my mom's harsher cigarette taste.

"I'm sure it'll be fine," Leigh reassured my mom. "If it made it through Frances, it'll be fine after that one." She was referring to our roof.

The hurricane was almost over now. We were still being hit with smaller bands from the storm every hour or so, but the worst part of the storm had moved up to Tampa.

My dad opened the sliding door, eyes red and sweat glistening on his cheeks. "I'm starting to move our stuff back over now and check out the house. Lois is going to help bring stuff over with me."

"Can I come?" I asked, looking up from my Gameboy.

"No. Stay here. In case there's any damage." He promised to come back as soon as he knew anything about the house. My mom remained silent. She inhaled again, exhaling the gray smoke. I played my game.

But I still did not understand why I couldn't go with him to check the house and help bring back our luggage. I didn't understand then that he had been staying up later with Lois to drink more and smoke pot while my mom had been going to bed early, maybe realizing the truth but refusing to believe it. I didn't understand that he had just smoked a half of a joint in their garage with Lois and was going back to our house to finish it with her. I didn't understand that he was doing more with Lois than just smoking.

Within the next few months, school had picked up its normal schedule as the town tried to fix everything the hurricane left behind. Homes were destroyed, and the city scheduled events, fundraisers, walks, anything to raise money for the families that had lost everything. Just driving through the city, you would see signs and billboards promising to help citizens. Roofs were collapsed, walls fallen in, trees fallen into houses and onto cars. But my house—my wooden, one-story sanctuary—was spared again.

This period after the hurricane became dim to me over time, more distant and foreign than even earlier memories. I felt like I could remember moments from kindergarten easier than scenes from my parents' divorce. My brain became like one of my dad's VHS tapes, and it felt like my mind had taped over certain moments, making them fuzzy with black and white speckles, screaming into them with white noise, turning them into blank screens that I could not decipher. I only remember some parts: my dad's face when he told me and my brother he was leaving, the angst in his voice explaining that it was not our fault, the bags under my mom's eyes that came as quickly as her weight left, the hatred I felt for my father and the silence between us when I was forced to see him. My dad moved out, living on a friend's couch then renting a room

from a stranger and finally moving in with Lois after she purchased an empty lot and built a house on the same street we lived on, right next to her parents' house. All of his moving for months while my mom, brother, and I stayed in our house.

We were forced to watch from across the street: his truck parked in her driveway, the house color slowly changing to a darker color they picked out together, the plants along her front porch emerging one by one like Ted and Leigh's back porch. On the days I saw my dad, I barely spoke to him. The occasional one-word answers were all he got, were all he deserved.

My mom finally moved across town, and my brother and I went with her. My dad stayed with Lois for the next four years, and when I was forced to stay with them, I was reminded of my past every time I looked across the street.

In October of 2005, about a year after Hurricane Jeanne, another storm slowly formed in the Atlantic Ocean. Hurricane Wilma. Its projected path was to go under the Caribbean islands, sweep up into the Yucatan Peninsula, and head back over to Florida's west side. The prediction for Wilma was optimistic; the weather stations informed Florida that the storm would weaken after hitting some land and reach the west coast as a category two hurricane.

This time, my brother and I stayed with my mom. We didn't board up since we had fewer trees around us than at our previous house and my father was not there to help. Days before, just as the lines at grocery stores and gas stations seemed to go on forever with people preparing for the worst, we stocked up on supplies for the coming days: water bottles, batteries, canned food.

Hurricane Wilma was different than the storms from the previous year. Not only was it weaker, but it hit Florida from the west side while we lived on the east. The storm, however,

developed more power as it reached Florida, and weather stations later said this was something to do with the warmth of the Gulf of Mexico. When it got to our town, it became a category three, the same strength as Hurricane Jeanne the year before.

I watched the clouds turn from gray to black out of the back sliding glass door, and this time, I did not have to look through the small opening between wooden panels. The rain started to pick up and eventually it became worse. Worse than anyone in South Florida expected.

We had just lost power when Hurricane Wilma developed its strongest winds in our area, which were just over 125 mph. My brother, my mom, and I were in the living room listening to the radio when we first heard the clicking sound. The storm started to shake the sliding glass door, along with the other windows in our house. But it became more than just shaking.

My brother was the first to move. “Mom,” he said, “Mom, it’s coming up.” He held the sliding glass door in place while the storm fought against him.

My mom was quickly at the side of the glass door, holding the frame down on its track. “Shit.” The door still shook as they held they held it on the track. Space started to form between the house and the door and water flew in. The whistle that seeped through the opening vibrated the house.

“Get some towels,” my mom yelled, emphasizing each word.

I ran to the bathroom and got as many towels as I could carry. I draped them over the television and cords and near the sliding glass doors where the water had already started to invade.

“I’ll do that, Ryan,” my mom said to me, her voice shaking as she continued to hold the door shut. “Just go back to the bathroom and stay there.”

“Why?”

“Just do it.”

I sat there on the toilet seat lid listening to the thunder cackle outside, knowing we would make it through this. But still, as much as I hated him, as much as I wanted nothing more than to keep hating him for the rest of my life for everything he did to my mother, I wanted him to be there with us for that hurricane. I wanted him to be holding that door that the wind was quickly moving off its tracks. I wanted more than anything else to flip back a few pages, to see where I left off so I could, somehow, choose some new ending to our story.

RAIN

**Originally published in Ink in Thirds, November 2016.*

that it's like a cycle,
how it falls—misted & small—
through the screen & into the chemicaled basin.
The rings created, hidden in the trees
now cracked and chipped, bent into
shapes, hunched and bruised
after the hurricane we watched move through.
The black, now a quiet whisper
on my tomato cheeks, freckled and ripened.
I cannot see the birds, though
when my eyelids dance lightning,
I can hear wings moving in a pulse,
& see the V-pattern periscopes.
When it's clear she takes my hand, about
half the size of hers now. She says
that it's like a cycle.

BRINGING MY FATHER BACK

25. Dad's Dodge truck is stopped at the end of the street, and I can still see its silver outline facing away from our house. His headlights blare into the ruby of the stop sign and the color blends into his already red face. "M&R, '99" is carved into the pavement near the stop sign—sidewalk scars of his children's initials. An almost full moon is perched above him, silent with the stars.

24. The living room is illuminated. Light seeps and spreads through the window, the one hiding behind the Christmas tree. The yellowed light of my dad's truck shines through the tree's silhouette, and I stand near it, peering out of the blinds. I cannot see his face because his headlights are too bright, but I still search for his outline. I wonder if he can see my fingers bending the horizontal pieces of plastic or my eyes, shit brown near the pupils like his.

23. I'm not surprised because I've seen it coming. I have replayed this moment in my mind just before I fall asleep at night, and this feels like that. It feels routine.

22. He walks out of the front door, passing the countdown 'til Christmas chalkboard. Eleven days and counting. My brother and I stand in the living room and wait, perhaps wondering if he will actually leave. He promises us that he will see us soon. We stand in silence and my mom is in her bedroom with her door shut.

21. "Kell, I'll call you tomorrow, okay?" my dad says.

20. My dad gives the sliding glass door a few thrusts and lifts it out of the track before it opens into the dining room. My brother follows him inside, and I wait a moment longer.

19. My eyelids feel heavy, but I'm not tired yet.

18. “It has nothing to do with you,” he says again, eyes glazed with tears and words shaky through the air. “This is between your mother and me.”

17. My brother, Michael, is four years older than me and seems to be doing the crying for both of us. Is this really that much of a surprise to him?

16. *Yeah, maybe because you're a cheater*, I think. I would never say this to him. I am resentful, yes, but I still recognize my father's fragility.

15. “We've been having problems for a while now,” he says. The porch light is still buzzing in a symphony with the crickets scattered in the woods around our house. He talks quickly, yet time seems slow. “Mom wants me to leave tonight, and I think that's a good idea.”

14. He's building it up now, maneuvering through sentences carefully like sharp street corners in the rain. He repeats how much he loves us and Mom, even though they aren't happy anymore. “You just have to know it has nothing to do with you two,” he says. I'm standing there, not acting the way I had been expecting to. I nod and listen.

13. Just above my father's head, I see the rip in the screen. I remember my brother was playing catch with a neighbor, David, who lived down the street. I remember running out of my room when I heard something land with a thud. A patio chair was on its side. My brother still says that David threw the football into the screen, and my dad says he's been meaning to fix it.

12. He tells us how good our mother is, how there's nothing else they can do but separate at this point.

11. “I think it's obvious that your mother and I have been having problems for a while now,” he says.

10. I can tell my dad has been crying because his skin is stained pink around his eyes. No one speaks, but I look up at my father who looks down at the patio carpet, now browned by mud and time. Outside of the screen, Florida forests lean in with us, waiting for my father to speak.

9. The sliding glass door that leads to the back porch has always been hard to maneuver. My dad pulls and lifts the door until it finally wiggles open. The cool December air is perfect now. It never gets too cold here.

8. My dad tells us that he wants to talk outside. The kitchen still smells of the dinner that was made hours earlier: chicken paprikash—my grandma’s recipe. I see my parents’ bedroom door is shut.

7. “Boys!” my dad says from down the hall. “Can you come here? I need to talk to you guys about something.”

6. I am playing “Tomb Raider” with my brother on his PlayStation. The pixelated tigers are running out from behind the waterfall trying to attack our avatar. “You have to keep shooting,” my brother says, his eyes wide and in sync with the little character inside the game. “Just keep going.”

5. I wake up, and still in my white underwear and groggy from my dreams I walk down the hallway. With my forearm, I erase the “12” on the Christmas count down we have near the front door and write “11” with the nub of chalk.

4. It is almost my bed time, but before my mom sends me off to bed, she wants all of us to go outside. The four of us—my mom, my dad, my brother, and I—walk down the driveway and stand in the street facing our house. The Christmas lights hang from the roof in colorful strands and the bushes are sprinkled with white, twinkling lights mimicking the stars.

3. “Stand near your brother,” my dad tells me. “C’mon, we always do this. At least act happy about it.” It’s the first day of eighth grade for me, my brother is a junior now. We are in our school uniforms—red polos tucked into khaki pants with pleats—and we are standing in front of our house. “Smile like you mean it,” my dad says just before snapping the picture. On the way to school that day, he tells my brother how, even though he got held back when he was younger, he’ll look cool to the other kids now that he can drive on his own soon.

2. I am six, and my dad takes my wrist in his right hand, his much larger and more calloused than mine. My small pointer finger digs into the gray grit of wet cement as he traces an “R” near where my brother wrote an “M”. The sun warms our backs. Our bikes rest in the grass near us, and sweat runs down the bridge of my father’s nose.

1. My head rests against my father’s palm, against his life line that scribbles out onto the side of his hand like mine does. I am a baby, gripping his pointer finger with my fist, holding, I think, everything that I can fit into my small hand until he pulls it away.

GROUNDING

Prove that I have bones
without cutting this skin
& tell me that my lungs
are no more than fairy tales.

The pebbles sink
under my tongue like
skipping stones
down my throat.

Let me look
through this house
one last time:
the reddish walls,
the stained floors,
the darkened attic
with Christmas lights.

Don't I deserve
a proper burial?

THE DEVIL'S TREE

i. 1972

The girls arrived at the police station in the middle of July, midday, at the peak of Port St. Lucie's high. Ninety-one degrees on Florida's east coast. With leaves in their hair, dirt on their faces, and bracelets of purpled bruises, the two girls—aged seventeen and eighteen—tried to catch their breath. They panted, huffed each exhale and sucked every inhale as sweat gleamed across their hairlines like rain-kissed pavement.

The police station, with rows of wooden desks that sat almost camouflaged against the wooden floors, was on the corner of Savona Boulevard and Venus Street. Cedar and cigarette smoke suffocated the room. Officer Morris was perched at his desk, the one that sat closest to the entrance. Yellowed papers scratched with notes were stacked next to his desk calendar. It read July 23, 1972. Other officers were busy filing papers and answering a constant stream of telephone rings. A cigarette remained lit, just barely, in Morris's ashtray as he tried to sort through the stacks of recent police reports: aggravated assaults, attempted robberies, mostly domestic disputes. The two girls opened the doors, and the low-lit station filled with sunlight.

There was first a silence, a beat of shock, broken by Morris's chair scraping as he stood.

"Jesus Christ," he whispered.

He ran to the girls. One walked with a limp while the other held her upright.

"Jesus Christ," Morris repeated, this time louder. He ran to the other side of the limping girl and led her to chairs against the wall. "What happened to you girls?"

“We—we just,” the younger girl said on an exhale. She sat in a chair and hunched into her knees and held her ankle. Other officers gathered then. One handed each girl a rag while another jotted notes. Others watched wide-eyed.

“Did you walk here?”

They nodded.

“Try to relax, okay?” Morris said. “You’re okay now.” He knelt down, trying to make eye contact with them. His training prepared him for moments, and from his experience, he knew he had to stay as calm as possible.

“We were tied,” the other girl started, “to this tree.”

The officers behind Morris exchanged glances. “Do you remember where?” Morris asked.

“Not really, no. Just woods.” Her words shook.

“How far from here?”

She said that they’ve been running for about a half hour. “A few miles maybe.”

“Landmarks? Anything that stood out?” Morris asked.

“We were by water. A little river, but,” she paused then and shook her head. “I don’t know.”

Morris looked back. “Could be C-24,” he said to the other officers. “That one’s the closest.” Built in 1961, Canal C-24 snaked through Port St. Lucie and discharged into the south side of the St. Lucie River.

He turned back to the girls, still shivering and shifting in their seats, but now looking up at the officers filling the room.

“We were hitchhikers,” the girl continued. “We wanted to leave town,” she said, her jaw quivered.

“It’s okay,” Morris said. “Try to calm down. Okay?”

She took a deep breath that fluttered. “We’ve been there for days and we couldn’t—we couldn’t leave.”

“It’s okay,” Morris said, touching her arm lightly.

Towards the back of the station, a door opened. Officer Schaefer, a round man with permanent dimples written on his cheeks, emerged into the haze of daylight and chaos. He saw the group of other officers gathered towards the front and he emerged slowly. His badge pinned to his chest, catching the soft touch of sunlight that came through the windows. Through the voices he recognized, he heard the hushed voices of the girls. He stopped. Through the sea of bodies hunched over and listening to their story, he saw them sitting there, shaking in their torn shirts.

“He picked us up in Jupiter,” she continued telling Morris. “He told us he would take us back to the halfway house, and he took us to these woods—”

“Where in Jupiter?”

“Just on US1,” she said. “Not far from the beach. Like a block away.”

“Is there anything you remember besides the canal?” Morris asked.

“No,” she said. “We don’t really know this area.”

“What’s your names?”

“I’m Nancy Trotter. She’s Pam Wells.”

While the older of the girls talked and the other officers took notes, the younger still held her ankle with both hands. She looked up at each officer gathering and at the looks they gave each other. Sympathy and confusion. She was reading their faces, going back and forth, until her eyes found Officer Schaefer, who stood just behind the crowd. He stared back. Her breathing quickened. Her chest heaved in and out like a dog's pant until the panic poured out of her throat.

"Him!" It shook the stale air of the station. "That's him!"

ii. 2001

My father, wearing an image of a swordfish on the back of his long sleeve t-shirt, considers the weather. "March is my favorite," he says. "Not too hot. Not too cold. Just enough breeze."

I sit with him, eight years old, watching the water below us. With his bobber at the epicenter, ripples feed outward until they disintegrate into the rest of the subtle current. I look through the wooden boards beneath me, squinting at the small fish circling near the rocks. I can barely see them, their scales catching drops of sunlight that squeeze through the spaces of the planks.

I hear my dad sigh in his low lawn chair next to me. He reclines as the sun hammers into his already tanned skin. He holds a fishing pole, carefully gripping his pointer finger onto the fishing line. I stand and pace the dock. "Isn't this relaxing?" he asks.

"I'm bored."

"Just chill," he says with another sigh. "Relax."

I'd rather stay home and color or watch movies. *The Wizard of Oz* maybe. He loves outside stuff—cars, sports, all that. I assume this is his way of trying to bond with me. He tries hard.

I stand and go to the edge of the dock. My fingers grip the wooden edge and I bend over just enough to see into the water. “How do you know when you get one?”

“I'll feel it,” he says. “The line will tug pretty hard.” His sunglasses are small, racecar driver-like. At least, from what I see when he has NASCAR on, they look similar. “Wait,” he says. I hear a small cranking noise behind me and roll my eyes, knowing exactly what is about to happen. He always has one of those disposable cameras on him. “This looks great.” He stands and says, “Here, hold the pole.”

I take it from him and smile, or at least try to.

Behind us, three miles of trails weave through Oak Hammock Park. The Pine Trail and the Oak Trail circle the woods shadowed by large trees. I've always liked these woods. The trails are a nice, and they are quiet compared to the neighborhoods and traffic placed right outside. I'd much rather be hiking through the trails than sitting out here, sweating and waiting.

“Can we go walking soon?” I ask, still near the edge, hypnotized by the shattered reflections of light gleaming on the water like broken glass.

“How about we catch a fish first?” he asks. “Then we can walk.”

iii. 1985

“You're goin' in first, right?” he asked with a smirk, turning the truck into the parking lot, the seal of Port St. Lucie stamped on the driver's side door.

“Hell no,” the other man said. “Same time?”

“Fine.”

They turned into the lot and parked the truck. Together, they carried the crosscut saw towards the park entrance, with each man holding onto one of the handles. A two-handled saw like this, with a wooden handle at each end, was made for the bigger jobs. “This should do it,” one of the men said as they approached the line of trees. “We still don’t know what happened with the chainsaw, though. Weird shit.”

They had been here before, weeks earlier, with a standard, gas-powered chainsaw.

“Nothing this baby won’t take down,” he continued, nodding his head towards the tool.

The oak tree, which was small compared to the others surrounding it, looked the same as they remembered. Roots jutted out of the ground and extended outward like a ripple in the canal behind them. Branches arched and dangled overhead with emerald leaves that blocked the sun in thin layers.

“Looks like the bark is already starting to chip here,” one of the men said. “This might be a good place to start.” They mapped the felling zone, towards the outer edge of the tree line. There, a stake was fixed into the ground and a rope was attached from it to the base of the tree trunk. Then they began. Wearing plastic glasses with clear lenses and yellow helmets, the men began sawing the tree in a steady back-and-forth motion. Sweat dripped from bridge of their noses and fell into the dried leaves.

They cut into the tree, and sawed about an inch into the rings hidden inside of the trunk. Right. Left. Right. Again.

The men stopped, placed the saw on the ground, and rested for only a moment. A break was needed. But after, when they started the patterned motion again, a sudden metal clank was

heard within the scrape of the harsh metal-on-wood. They slowed then, trying to catch what the sound was coming from. And it came again, like coins in a pocket or silverware slamming in a drawer. They stopped. With the blade still barely an inch into the tree, the men saw small, metal triangles spread out on the forest floor below them. The teeth from the saw's blade had chipped.

iv. 2003

We sit in a circle, the four of us, on the floor of Tim's bedroom. It's me, the oldest one here, and my three cousins: Tim, Kristina, and Rebecca. The walls are lined with shelves holding football helmets and Godzilla memorabilia and trophies from baseball. Rebecca leans against the bed and sits upright with a pillow just below her eyes. She is the youngest.

It's almost midnight, and we already feel like small rebels, staying up way later than our usual bedtimes. My aunt and uncle are sleeping across the house while the ceiling fan above us whirls in a soft white noise and the light attached to it fills the room.

"And then what happened?" I ask Tim, wide-eyed and leaning forward.

"I don't like this story," Rebecca says into the pillow, holding it up with her fists of its outer seams.

"It's not real," Kristina, the middle sibling, says as she rolls her eyes. "He's just making it up."

"Oh yeah? Ask dad then."

He has been talking about her for years. The Witch of Wellington. A local celebrity in Wellington, Florida, known for her outfits of all black and outlandish hats and rumors of magic. The bad kind. Rebecca and even Kristina, whether she admits it or not, are shaken, clearly

disturbed by their brother's story. I lean in even more, buzzing with curiosity. I love scary stories.

Tim stands. "I swear. She was walking with her back towards us," he says, facing away, but he quickly turns his head around and faces us. "She looked over her shoulder, like this. And her eyes were all *black*."

This is natural for me, along with my cousins. Though we are scared without adults near us in the quiet of night, telling stories that leave us petrified and gripping the blankets as we fall asleep gives us a sense of excitement.

"Man," I say. "I wish I could see her. One time and I'd be happy."

"She's crazy looking!" he says. "If you ever do, you'd know. She has this weird hat-thing that's covered with black la—"

The light above us flickers for seconds, almost paired with my eyes blinking. The room goes dark. At first we freeze, and I look towards the light switch, trying to find someone who turned out the light. A joke maybe? No one. Darkness. The four of us run, the girls in front. We yell through the doorframe and across the house. I am laughing with excitement and wailing in terror all at once. We wave our screams into the night.

v. 2006

My parents moved to Port St. Lucie in the late eighties, just before my older brother was born. As I grew up, they championed the city's fast growth. "You'd never believe what it looked like when we moved here," my mom would say. "There wasn't even a *mall* five years ago." I grew up here, about an hour north of West Palm Beach and twenty minutes west of the Atlantic.

Port St. Lucie is a beachy town, not known for much, not too small but little enough for rumors to spread in a matter of days.

I am driving home with my dad and brother on Halloween night from a family party an hour and a half away. I am exhausted. We all are. I am in middle school now and, like any other eighth-grade bookworm, I am dressed as Harry Potter—complete with round glasses and a scar drawn just above my left eyebrow, the one that points at the arch, in red marker. My dad, like every year, is dressed as a vampire. He sits on his cape the entire ride home, with string tied around his neck to hold up the black, nylon cape and white makeup used by clowns lathered on his face. Fake blood trickles down his chin. My brother is in the passenger seat and sits with a motorcycle helmet in his lap, the one he wears when he drives his ATV four wheeler. He tells me that he is a motocross rider. I tell him it's a lame costume.

We are almost home, and as we turn onto our street, Leafy Road, our faces are painted by red and blue lights flashing and circling. My dad drives slow, skating his truck quietly on the pavement. As the police vehicles become clearer, I see four, maybe five, cars parked no more than 500 yards from our driveway.

“Holy shit,” my dad says. His words barely audible, and his stare remains.

After a small pause, I ask him what happened, expecting my dad to have the answers.

“No idea.”

Now we are in our driveway but no one gets out of the truck. “It looks like it's at the park,” my dad says. I can usually see the white fence along the perimeter of the back trails and the entrance to the park and sometimes the swing set towards the rear of the parking lot. Tonight, I squint and only see lights.

The next day, in Bible class, we are copying chapters from Isaiah. Wednesdays after lunch are always dedicated to memorizing new verses.

Isaiah 55: 8-9:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,

neither are your ways my ways,”

declares the Lord.

“As the heavens are higher than the earth,

so are my ways higher than your ways

and my thoughts than your thoughts...”

“It takes a person seven times to see something before they have it engrained in them,” my Bible teacher, Mr. Adams, tells us. “Copy it down seven times and you’ll carry the Lord’s words with you. Wherever you go.” He is a large man who wears a different tie every day, and is proud of this wardrobe choice. I have only received one detention so far, and he was the one who gave it: *Ryan came to class with his shirt untucked. And gave me attitude.* He continued talking while we all wrote the verse—something about the holiness of the number seven.

When we finish writing, Mr. Adams, sitting at his desk asks, “Does anyone know why I might be assigning these verses today?”

We are silent, and I can feel a collective internal eye rolling from everyone else. These verses are popular in my school, and I know them well. I think everyone does by now. They are assigned whenever Mr. Adams wants to remind us that we should not “conform to the evils of this world.”

“Yesterday was Halloween,” he continues. “And I don’t even *want* to know who went out last night.” He stands and goes to the podium. “What do these verses mean?”

“That we need to be like him,” someone says. “Like Jesus.”

“Yes. And anything else?” He scans the room, making a point to look at each of us individually. Nothing. “You cannot submit to the evil here. Understood?” He turns to the chalkboard and writes *Galatians 6:8* as white dust falls around him. “Now. Someone find me this verse and read it aloud.”

Another popular verse; this one I haven’t memorized. The numbers look familiar. We flip through, each of us feeling the competition. Everyone wants to find the verse first.

Later that day, conversation about Halloween circles the lunchroom. Some of us were not out trick-or-treating, some people here have never been. We are talking about the best neighborhood for candy. I say, “Obviously Lake Charles. Some people gave out whole candy bars there.”

Mark, who sits across from me, leans forward. “Did anyone hear about Oak Hammock last night?”

A few of us pause while others keep eating and remain unattached from the Halloween talk. I give Mark a skeptical look, my eyebrows furrowed and head cocked to the side. “The park?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he says. “The one with the Devil’s Tree.”

I don’t tell him that I live down the street, but I ask about the tree. A part of me is worried, knowing that “devil” is never a word I want associated with something, while another

part is intrigued. I lean forward as he tells me what he knows in a low voice, trying to remain inconspicuous to the teachers wandering the cafeteria.

“There’s this tree there that’s haunted,” he begins. He explains that, though he does not know the whole story, he does know that someone murdered people there, on the tree.

“Apparently,” he says, “he scattered their body parts around the park. A long time ago. Now people say the park is haunted.” He takes a bit of his sandwich, and with his mouth full, he continues. “I think last night there were people there doing a ritual.” He swallows his food. “My parents say it was satanic.”

I look back plainly, my head reeling with questions about the park, the tree, how I had never heard of this before. “Do you know what tree it is?” I ask, trying to map out the park in my head, thinking of every tree that stands out. And those that don’t.

Mark tells me he’s not sure, but that he has seen pictures. “It’s all marked up and stuff. There’s always weirdos painting stuff on it that they have to cover. And there are cuts in it.” He tells me that people have tried to take it down before, but something goes wrong every time.

I know the tree now. I see it clearly. The markings are noticeable, but passable. I never thought anything of them. It sits right by the entrance to the Oak Trail, the one closest to the dock my dad and I go to sometimes. The Oak Trail is the longest trail there. It stretches almost three miles into the woods along the canal. I’ve been there more times than I can count, and I wonder how many times I have wandered by this tree, unaware of its past.

When school releases for the day, I drive home with my dad and tell him everything, losing my breath, explaining every detail that I remember as quickly as possible. “And that’s why there were cops last night,” I explain. “It’s haunted, Dad. I swear.” I tell him about the

murder and the tree and the weirdos out there who do rituals with it. “Can we go, Dad? We should go and try to see a ghost or something?” I am begging him, waiting for him to give in.

I assumed it was a ghost story, a legend around town—a story to scare the locals. Every town has one, right? Perhaps I would have acted differently then, if I knew what happened.

Gerard Schaefer, a St. Lucie County police officer, picked up two young hitchhikers, Pamela Sue Wells and Nancy Ellen Trotter, on July 21, 1972. He told them, falsely, that hitchhiking was illegal in the county. Schaefer told them that he would take them back to the halfway house where they were staying, but instead, he took them to a tree in a remote part of Port St. Lucie, right along Canal C-24. He tied them there and threatened to kill them or sell them into prostitution. After promising that he would return, he left them there, bound, to return to his work.

The girls managed to escape and went to the nearest police station, where Schaefer happened to work. Once Schaefer was accused by the girls of the kidnapping and was confronted by his superior, he said that he took them to the tree to scare them and to teach them a lesson about the dangers of hitchhikers. He said that he never had plans to actually hurt the girls. Schaefer was immediately arrested and fired. Later that year, after the trial took place in December, he was sentenced to only one year in jail for assault. He began serving his sentence on January 15, 1973.

However, before Schaefer began his time in jail, sixteen-year-old Georgia Jessup and seventeen-year-old Susan Place went missing on September 27. Their remains were found on Hutchinson Island, a thirty-minute drive from the secluded woods on Canal C-24. In March of

1973, when Schaefer was already in jail for the assault, the case began to unravel when police searched Schaefer's house. There, they found teeth, jewelry, driver's licenses, and jewelry that belonged not only to Jessup and Place, but to seven other women who had been missing since 1969. Police also found sketches and notes in a journal, detailing the murders of his victims, discussing the pleasure of torture and often returning to the dead bodies to have sex with them. He often wrote about taking two victims at a time, describing how interesting it got, how much fun he had, when each girl had to convince him their life meant more than the other's.

About a week after my discovery of the tree, my dad gives in to my request. I am buzzing with anticipation, knowing that there must be something to uncover or see at the park that I have never seen before. We stand at the dock, the one my dad fishes at often, and the sun is setting over the tree line as the amber glow settles into the water. With flashlights in our hands, we pace back and forth and examine the docks we have come to for years. I look for clues, anything that I can find to spark some sort of discovery. My dad tries to make it exciting with the occasional, "Shhh! Did you hear that?" And then, "I coulda sworn I heard footsteps." I play along, a part of me wishing it was real.

When we move from the dock and onto the grassy area near the parking lot—the trail's entrance just yards from us. It's dark now, and our flashlights lead us.

"I think it's the one at the start of the trail," I say to my dad who is steps behind me. We are walking along the canal, immersed in the ringing of the crickets and crunch of dead leaves with pine needles under our steps.

Over the past week, my dad gave me stipulations, before we committed to coming out here. “We have to walk there. Since the park closes at sunset, I don’t anyone to see my car. And we’re not going far into the trail. Okay?” I nodded, knowing that the tree was close to the entrance, but I could probably still get away with going further into the trail. He wouldn’t let me go alone.

The trees ahead are breaking into wider separations. I am squinting now, aiming my flashlight to where I believe the Devil’s Tree stands. “Let’s make it quick,” my dad says.

The tree is large, but not as big as the others lining the inside of the Oak Trail. There is a large, black mark in a rectangular shape on the side of the trunk facing the entrance, and I wonder what symbols or words it covers. Lines stretch across the bottom of the trunk, indents like scars within its chipping bark. From what I know, some sort of death happened in this area, at this tree, a long time ago. Stories circulated days after Halloween about body parts that were scattered around the park, screams that could be heard from the girls’ bathroom, and transparent figures roaming around the trail. Lost souls looking for answers.

Four years into Schaefer’s prison sentence, a hog hunter stumbled onto teeth and bones that were later identified as two teenagers from Iowa, Barbara Ann Wilcox and Colette Goodenough. Police identified the area as the same location given by the hitchhikers years prior, and eventually, they blamed Schaefer for these deaths as well. Ropes that hung from the low-hanging branches indicated that the victims were hung, and their bodies were buried shallowly beneath the tree.

Schaefer would spend the rest of his life in prison, until he was stabbed by another inmate in 1995.

“This must have been really out here,” my dad says in a low voice, looking up into its branches, shining his light into the leaves. “If the park wasn’t built yet, these woods would have been impossible to get to.”

As much as I anticipated being here, the darkness and quiet are becoming more prevalent than before. I could never admit it, but seeing this tree standing alone with a backdrop of others, is making me realize how secluded we are. The humidity adds thickness to the air, circling the mosquitoes. I think about the loneliness, its stance along the canal, the sunsets it has stood by since the murders I have only just heard about. I wonder about the details I have yet to find out, and consider just what could have happened to the victims that died here.

“And there weren’t houses around then,” my dad continues. “Not as close as ours at least.” I’m not sure if he intentionally is trying to scare me, or if he is just talking out loud—something he does often.

I have never been exposed to death, besides the Bible verses that claim death as the final judgement from your actions here on Earth. I had not thought about it as an event, as something that you cannot escape from, as something you cannot choose, as something unknown, as something that is guaranteed. Those girls, whoever they were, had experienced death here, where I am standing. Where my father and I have come for my entire life, fishing and hiking and choosing the biggest pine cones to take back and show mom.

And now I am shaking. It's not cold outside but it feels like it should be. This realization in me, like something that snuck up out of nowhere, tapping me on the shoulder and disappearing suddenly.

We eventually leave, and I do not beg to go farther into the park like I had anticipated doing. With our flashlights turned off, we walk quickly out of the parking lot and into the neighborhood, where yellowed lights shine dimly into the streets. The crickets still ring and I still swat away the mosquitoes circling.

I think about the times I could have passed the Devil's Tree when I was younger, admiring its beauty. I wonder where else I have been with a past like this, something as dark and brutal and mysterious as this. The years passed, and the tree still stood with wanderers at its roots. I think that time itself might be just as scary.

vi. 2001

My dad has given up. No fish are biting today. My dad's once white shirt, the one stamped with the fish on its back, is now covered in circles of dirt and spots of sweat. We load his truck with the fishing poles and lawn chair, and walk into the grassy area just before the Oak Trail. Ahead of me, I see an oval, brown spot in the grass, moving slowly towards the towering trees.

"Slow down," my dad says, almost in a whisper. "Quiet." But my footsteps are too heavy, and the turtle quickly retracts into its shell.

I walk towards it at a normal pace, approaching from behind. I grab onto its sides and lift it parallel to the ground into the air. My dad takes his camera from his pocket and winds the

black crank. “Stand over there,” he says pointing into the more open area on the side of the canal.

I cooperate with the picture this time, since I don’t have to act like I’m fishing in this one. I smile, holding the turtle as steady as possible, hoping that my gentleness will make it peak its head out for the picture. I wish it wasn’t afraid of me.

The picture is taken, and even though I am facing my dad, my eyes stare down at the turtle, and I smile. Behind me, the sky is cloudy and overcasted in silver while the canal extends into the woods. My hands are dirty and the turtle is still hiding, but I smile anyway. The opening of the Oak Trail sits behind me in the distance and the trees shadow its entrance.

(IN)TANGIBLE THINGS

i. Love

Maybe, if the dream hadn't been as graphic or gory or had been just a little brighter, more vivid, you would have sat up slower—perhaps, in turn, making the pain weaken. By using the moon's light that seeped through the vertical blinds as a guide, you looked between your legs at the saturated, scarlet blanket, at your once pure white down comforter, plush and patterned in squares by a simple thread that stitched through like a game of chess. You touched your inner thigh, your fingers stained with the same color crimson that clung to your fingernails. The pain grew in a howling crescendo.

“Mike,” you said to the sleeping figure next to you. Not a whisper. A statement.

Still in a daze you lifted yourself carefully from the bed, the wooden headboard an anchor. Your thighs, now covered in stained pansies and orchids, shook.

“Mike,” you said again, this time louder. “Mike, wake up.”

As he rolled from his indented side of the mattress, you started to drop. Or maybe, the numbness subsided and you were finally able to accept this pain. It forced you to the ground, pulling at you from the inside, like gravity had strengthened, like the roof had crumbled and you had nowhere else to go but down. With your knees clutched into your breasts and now Mike's hands cool on your shoulders, the blood continued to drain from your body and onto the carpet.

“We have to go,” Mike said.

“No,” you said into your forearms, knees still pressed to your chest. “Not like this.” Your lower body continued to writhe.

“We have to go,” Mike said again, this time stronger.

From behind, Mike cupped his hands under your armpits and brought you to your feet. You stabilized yourself, one hand on your lower abdomen, the other on Mike's shoulder.

On the outside, your small shakes turned into convulsions. Your thighs were soaked and your forehead drenched.

On the inside, slowly, progesterone levels dropped, making your uterine lining weak. Your thyroid produced cortisol, weakening the fetus. A constant shift in chemical imbalance made your body a poisonous vessel—weak and saturated.

After two more pregnancies, I came, labeled as a “high-risk” birth.

ii. Thought

There's this picture:

The boy is four. Next to him stands an oak tree, shadowing him from behind, turning him into something like one of the squirrels. The picture is slightly blurred because you were standing a bit too far away when you took it.

Looking up, this little boy presses his eyebrows together, wondering—maybe—how the Easter bunny happened to find *him* of all people. The bunny stands with a basket full of eggs and green paper shreds. Though the picture is now faded, the bunny's ears are as pink as rose quartz, mimicking the boy's bubble gum cheeks.

You tell me later, when I am older and dreams about the Easter bunny and Santa and elves have long been hidden and shelved and forgotten, that dad was inside the costume. He spent his morning at work, and before he came to the Easter party, he searched around town trying to find a place that would rent him a costume, which made him arrive even later. People began leaving before he even got there.

“Hide behind that tree,” I imagine you told him. “I’ll tell Ryan to go look for more eggs over there.”

I believed he was the Easter bunny then.

Whose mouth does he breathe from? Whose air does he speak?

iii. Perspective

From my bedroom window, I can see Lois’s front door barely blocked by my father’s truck and trailer. Her door is purple now, and as much as I want to hate the color, I think it complements the green hues and white shutters. I wonder if he painted it. I imagine him using that blue tape, creating intersections on the corners of the door frame, balancing on his small ladder.

Is it his front door now?

I wonder if this is intentional. Maybe he uses his truck as a barricade for us. Or for him, not having to look at the small, three-bedroom house he calls his past, sitting across the street. Refusing will make it worse somehow, creating second-hand moments of what he thinks he remembers. The grass can only grow so tall. The bobcats still hunt nearby. He cut the trees down, the ones that shadowed the driveway. Does he regret that now? The bougainvillea is still there, where he planted it, blooming into proud summers.

We should be home at 3:30 now. School doesn’t end for a few more weeks.

What does he forget? Does he forget we have eyes? My irises are his shit-brown on the outside and jeweled green on the inside. Emerald, like yours. Sometimes the colored ring shows more—I remember someone saying it depends on my mood.

Light is energy. It moves.

It searches in waves.

Or, I wonder, not what he forgets, but what does he remember? Does he remember my brother and me, toddlers, reaching with our fists into the sky, searching for the sun, the center of our small galaxies we knew to be called “Father”?

iv. Reflection

I don't know what the rest of the family knows at this point. The hurricane summer has ended now and today, my aunts and uncles and cousins gather, like we usually do, to celebrate recent birthdays.

My dad is a Scorpio, born October 28th. Resourceful and brave. Secretive. Passionate yet violent.

My family never sings like other families do for birthdays. We start at random times, different keys and tempos, some screaming, some simply stating the lyrics. We all laugh. No one expects a proper birthday song from us.

Most years, you make him apple pie for his birthday. It's his favorite. “Firmer apples bake better,” you tell me as you measure a tablespoon of cinnamon and a teaspoon of vanilla extract, all while the dough is chilling in the fridge. The pies are never covered in woven dough strips like in cookbook pictures, but instead covered in one uneven layer of golden brown, sprinkled with sugar that glistens like glitter. The apples line the counter and make the kitchen smell sweet, invading the air like burning candles, their stems the wicks.

There is an orange glow from the birthday candle flame that traces each feature on my dad's already tanned face: his dimples deep and the dashes on his temples marking years of

working in the sun (Was he looking into the sky often?). My dad blows out his birthday candles—he's forty-one this year. Somewhere a camera flashes and smoke melts into air.

v. Love, Revisited

With your forearms, you hold yourself on the kitchen counter. Arched, with your hands folded into each other it looks like you're praying, but I know you aren't. You've given that up. Instead, I hear sharp inhales and see you shaking from the side. It's quiet other than that, and the walls lean in with me, listening to each breath you take. The shirt drapes from you now because your body weight has evaporated into exactly what you are: bones, blood, breasts. Mother. You don't see me watching, and I back away on my tiptoes before speaking. I wish I knew what to say.

I wish I could tell you to let that go—the idea of what it means to be called a mother. It's simpler than that.

Take my hand again and tell me how long my life line is—how my head line and heart line crisscross on the side of my hand, extending slowly into my soft palm. I remember you told me once that this means I will constantly struggle with decisions, debating with both my head and heart equally. Is that what you do? Tell me about your eyebrow, the one that goes into a point like mine, like grandpa's. Show me pictures of how it runs in the family. How can I find north without a compass? Why do you put butter into the loaf pan on Sunday mornings before making banana bread?

I wish I could speak now, changing this air into something sweet. I wish now that my childhood was not over, but I know it is.

You began packing weeks ago, but your vinyl collections of The Partridge Family and David Cassidy don't matter. They are not you. This house is not you.

When, at seventeen, you meet something called love, you see him in a high school Spanish class. And then, sixteen years into marriage, when you become his punchline, when he reaches for the doorknob rather than your waist, a Bud Light rather than your hand at the dinner table, you cannot find the answer to this riddle. There might not be an answer. Instead, you cry, holding firm onto the surface where you cut fruit into geometry lessons. You shake. You shudder. But you stand.

You are not the kitchen counter: do not melt into it.

You are not the punchline: do not laugh along.

vi. Pain

My sixteen-year-old legs are bare on a stranger's couch, my underwear on but hiked up enough for my upper thigh to be exposed. This is his living room: white walls without art, blue couch, a wooden coffee table with stained circles dotting the top. I turn my face to the side, taking a deep breath of air that hasn't been trapped in the fibers of the couch. The tattoo gun rattles, and the needle pricks my skin, stinging it where a patch of hair has been shaved off.

It is a weekday. I skipped school to come here, after a friend suggested him. "He's the real deal," Kaitlin told me, after pointing out he had been fired from a tattoo shop for stupid reasons. "The lines on mine are really clean, too."

His name is Stitch. I tell him that one day I want an angel flying up my side, maybe with a sword in his hand. I learned, growing up, that Archangel Michael has a sword. He protects. He

cuts away the past. I tell Stich that for now I want to start with something small, and the tattoo gun vibrates into my epidermis, scarring my skin with black text.

I stand when he tells me to, and he reminds me to wash it with unscented soap for the next few days, adding all-natural lotion if it ever feels too dry. In the mirror, I see the scribbled words, slightly slanted, the writing shaky.

“Good?” he asks.

I nod.

Years later, I stand in front of my mirror naked, touching my thigh that is now sprouted with hair. I feel the words that have sunk into my skin now, like it is some natural part of my body—like a birth mark or another limb. I am reminded of what is left, what has been left permanent. Some of the words have been faded, but they still remain.

Fly away.

vii. Progress

“Come on, Ryan!” Nanny says. It’s been a few months since my dad left, and Nanny drove from West Palm this afternoon to visit us. “We can have a sleepover,” she told me, “like when you and Michael were little.” Now she dances with a glass of ruby wine, the legs on the glass run paralleled and curve with the shape while her legs move beneath her to David Cassidy’s “I Think I Love You.” Your favorite. You are there, too, and pouring a glass now, this time for yourself. Your nail color, just a shade lighter than the wine.

Nanny takes my hands and pulls me from the couch. She wears a flowered blouse and white pants, while I wear fleece bottoms. We are now bouncing to each beat, and she moves my arms back and forth. “So what ‘m I so afraid of? I’m afraid that I’m not sure of...” Nanny sings,

slightly faster than the actual tempo. I watch her, swaying and waving her smile around my living room, happy, knowing that she found it somewhere.

Behind us, you sing the words to yourself. “I think I love you... I think I love you...” You dance with us as the song begins the final chorus.

viii. Time

The white and black flecks of static shift around the television screen, ants on pavement, hypnotizing, glowing gray onto our faces.

I am in college now, and it is Christmas break. We dug through bins tonight and found baby books and a stuffed bear I used to sleep with. You scribbled in these books, journaled about everything you wanted to hold onto. *Ryan likes to walk around the neighborhood*, you wrote, *He likes birds and waves to them when they fly away*.

At the bottom of the plastic bin, we found old VHS tapes. You tell me that you kept some in the divorce, but dad has a lot more. Usually, the tapes showed my brother, young, playing basketball and you could hear my dad yelling in the background. Sometimes without profanity. This tape we found was different.

With wine to our lips, we watch a younger me—no more than two years old. I was on dad’s shoulders, bouncing as he ran around our living room table. His hands gripped my chubby thighs, situating me. I looked into the camera, unable to catch my breath, laughing in staccatoed pitches, cackling into the sky.

ix. Forgiveness

“Who knows what they were doing,” you told me when I am much older and finally ask about my dad and Lois. “Smoking probably, and who knows what else.” You told me you had a

feeling, even before the hurricane summer, that something was happening between them. But during the hurricanes, when they would sneak off often, it was too obvious to ignore. “It didn’t help that she lived across the street, either,” you add.

We are drinking now, and since turning twenty-one, I like white zinfandel as much as you. We are at the kitchen counter, now a town over from the house you raised me in, from where she lives. “But honestly,” you say, “I got to a point where I realized that anger would just hurt me. I let myself be angry, sure, but I couldn’t stay that way.”

This is the first time we have talked about it, really. Besides what I knew when I was younger, when the hurricanes hit, I never knew anything specific. “We had problems for a while. You remember the fighting,” you continue. “I look at it as fifty-fifty.”

I never held onto the grudge for too long, but there was a time when I hated him. I hated Lois. I hated their house with the perfect kitchen, like the ones from the magazines I flipped through while I waited for you at the hair salon. I hated the white fence around the backyard, the plants that hung on small hooks on the porch, the garden gnomes hidden at the base of the shrubs. I grew to live with it, to not mind it, to nod and smile when I could until it became real again. I never stopped wondering, though. Wondering what would have happened if you were still with Dad. How differently my life might have played out.

x. Fear

Since he quit his job at UPS when I was four, my dad has been a painter. He told me not to touch the walls in our house because the paint would become dirty, like the area underneath the barstools, he pointed out often, where my young legs dangled and my toes kissed the wall. Gray streaks showed slowly on the eggshell color. Now, boxes line my living room wall where

the television used to be, stacked into cardboard pillars where I sat watching cartoons Saturday mornings, piled on each other, taking up space throughout each room yet still making the house feel empty—like lungs on an inhale: full and bare all at once.

On my back, staring into the white, pimpled ceiling, imagining the small, hammocking cobwebs wrapped around each popcorned piece, the wooden floor whispers behind my ear and tells me stories about family dinners with grandma's chicken paprikash recipe that no one could make as good as she could. Stories about where the Christmas tree stood, curved just barely in the living room window. About that one time we tried to get a dog. About those X-Men figures I collected, and how I lost my Wolverine for a year only to find him hiding under my bookshelf in a blanket of dust. Wolverine, known for his claws made out of Adamantium that emerged through his knuckles, also has regenerative healing properties. Almost immediately, if attacked, Wolverine will bring himself back to a perfect, healthy state, and I wonder what that feels like.

Now, I can hear you talking on the phone just outside the front door. My spine is planted into the floor, aching into its hardness, but I savor this house one last time. From here, I can almost see the pieces of egg noodles that have been lost, swept and forgotten under the dishwasher. Hear my brother dribbling a basketball in the driveway. Smell your hair before you go to work, straightening it, your burning ends filling the morning air, melting its scent into Dad's coffee.

And finally, I wonder who will have this house after us. What will it be to them? I wonder what marks will remain on these walls when the boxes are gone.

SON

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When you reach, aim for waists or
hands. Perhaps doorknobs or cups of Kool-Aid.

My shadow is long on Altman Avenue,
yours between my legs.

Your life will not offer you a page
unless you make one.
Take the trees & the potato peeler I used
on Thanksgiving—that year you finally tried
my mashed potatoes & grandma's gravy.
Count the rings in each tree,
count them & count them again until
you know that addition means more
than putting things together like stacked spoons.

Remember the day we went shopping for Barbies
& you sat on my shoulders?
Together we roared 7 feet tall & you reached
for the red-headed doll, your fingers like clouds above me.

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

My dad was a painter; not like the kind I wanted to be growing up. He didn't paint on white, stretched canvases or squeeze the last bit of ochre-colored acrylic paint from a tube. Instead, he went to houses or business and painted the walls, either inside or outside. His calloused hands were often covered in white speckles after a long day.

We were riding in his car while I flipped through the tattered book he kept in his glove compartment. I was twelve years old. My dad had recently moved out.

"Whatever you want," my dad said. "Your pick." I knew he was trying to make me feel better. I nodded.

I looked through the book, about an inch thick, organized by the colors in a rainbow order, an expansion from red to purple then to browns and blacks. I searched the pages, looking for a color that stood out. I wanted something different, either a red or orange. I grew up in a baby blue room and painted it green with my parents when I was a little older. The oranges all seemed too bright, though, so I flipped to the more neutral reds.

"What do you want for lunch?" my dad asked. I shrugged my shoulders.

We turned into the parking lot for the hardware store. The sun hung in a cloudless sky, and the humidity steeped into the truck.

"Any ideas yet?"

I pointed to a block of red, a darker, borderline maroon color, telling him that it was called "Ryan Red."

He smiled. "Meant to be, huh?"

I downloaded the dating app, at first, as a joke. Some friends begged me to see what it was like. I was twenty-two and recently single. “C’mon,” I heard over and over. “If nothing else, it’s just entertaining.”

I swiped on Jay’s picture because I recognized him from somewhere. The app I was on let me look through his profile—his hobbies, height, eye color, and pictures. I scrolled through the images that he posted to his page, and after each one, his face felt more familiar. The final picture was a stage with ten or so men and women in maroon and black clothes. Some held microphones to their mouths while some were mid-motion clapping. I saw a close friend from high school, Robbie, in the background, and realized that this was the connect. I called Robbie.

“So I definitely just matched with someone you know,” I said. Robbie questioned me, and I explained that it was Jay, a baritone from the collegiate a cappella group they were in together.

“Yeah, he lives in Orlando now. No surprise,” Robbie said.

“I’ll let you know what happens.”

We continued talking, catching up about post-college life. He was a banker now, starting his career, and I was in my first year of grad school. I think we were both envious of the other person’s life. Or maybe, we wondered what would happen if we were doing what the other person was. Robbie and I were close in high school, and we talked every month or so after. We hooked up a few times in sophomore year, when we were both confused and new to the sex-thing. Nothing too serious, just a couple of drunken make-out sessions and flirtatious grabs at parties.

I told Robbie about everything that happened between Jay and me. I played dumb at first, writing “You look familiar” so I wouldn’t come off completely creepy. Slowly we were talking about the singing group, about how we both knew Robbie, and we eventually decided to go on a date.

Jay and I dated for eight months. Around the fourth month, my anxiety shifted in a way I had never felt.

I had panic attacks regularly for years before, about every three months or so, and I was used to them. There’s this feeling that’s hard to explain. Some people suggest going outside and taking deep breaths and, sure, that works sometimes, but it’s not a cure.

Panic attacks make you feel like you are physically and mentally dying. In a physical way, you shake, sweat, stutter. You feel your body giving up. You see colors and lights and your peripheral vision sometimes goes black but you try to focus—focus on whatever you can. You cannot sit, you have to keep moving. But when you stand, you swear your feet are about to give out. Your legs feel cold. Mentally, you convince yourself you are dying. Or rather, there is no convincing. You know you’re dying. It’s a fact. You don’t contemplate it. Instead, this conclusion makes you even more worried, and your body and mind continue in a dance until you breathe back to reality.

Jay lived with his mother and father in Orlando when he got out of college. His parents are Catholic. His father is a news anchor at a local station and his mother works for a church—some sort of coordinator for the services. I never knew her exact title, but Jay would often say, “Without her, the church would be in shambles.” Jay also worked at a private Catholic high

school, so I believed him when he said he wanted to keep our relationship a secret, that he did not have choice. I didn't know it at the time, but this would ultimately lead to our end.

I wouldn't have started dating him if I didn't like him. I was confident that this guy was special. We bonded quickly over our love of drag culture and literature, both of us intrigued by the shift of dystopia novels to steampunk. We gave each other books regularly to read.

Because he lived with his parents, we did not see each other much. Instead, on the weekends, we would spend the days together. His parents' house was a forty-minute drive from my apartment, so we made it a goal to see each other as much as possible. This distance was nice at first, as it gave us both time to breathe and be apart. We had a chance to miss each other.

Slowly, however, I saw a shift in Jay. Looking back, I think he got scared. He didn't want to be that twenty-three year old in a committed relationship. I see now that he needed to have his independence, to experience other people. I, on the other hand, wanted him. Only him. I pictured us together, years from now, talking about how stupid it was that we had to keep our relationship a secret.

My clothes were spotted in red by the time we finished painting my new bedroom, my arms and legs speckled like an unfinished connect-the-dots puzzle from my childhood. The room was bare, but the walls were heavy and deep in red, making the room feel smaller and darker than what I was used to.

When the paint was dry, my father and I put up a curtain rod. I stood back and told him when I thought it looked even. At the hardware store earlier that day, my dad asked if I wanted

anything else to make my room feel complete. I picked out a pair of gray curtains, thick and heavy, to block out the morning sunlight.

After the holsters were drilled into the wall, perfectly parallel with each other, we hoped, we led the rod into the top hem of the curtains and lifted it onto the top of the window. I pushed the curtains aside. Across the street, my childhood home. The bougainvillea, white and blooming like a spewing fountain, still sat in the corner. I could almost see the porch towards the back of the house, its screen barely rising above the roof. My old bedroom window was still patterned with small crack in the upper right corner from where my bookshelf fell once when I was trying to rearrange my room on my own. My young arms pushed the shelf, heavy with choose-your-own-adventure novels and stacked slivers of comics, and it fell, thudding into the window. My parents ran in, happy that I was okay.

Once, after the first time I watched *Jurassic Park* with my dad, I took a hammer from my garage as my dad mowed the lawn. While he cutting the grass in the backyard, I beat the cement in the middle of my driveway as hard as I could. I was sure that there were dinosaur fossils embedded in the hardened rock. I knew that if I kept digging, I would be able to show my dad a fossil. I would reach it up to him and he would smile, the light behind him haloing his face. I hammered about an inch or two into the driveway, creating a crater the size of my hand, when my dad stopped me. That dink in the driveway was still there, too.

I heard the front door open and rolled my eyes away from my father.

“Lo,” my dad shouted. “Come see the color.”

Lois opened the bedroom door. “Wow,” she said, smiling. I could tell she was trying hard. The grin was large, her lips pressed. “This looks awesome.”

“Right? Ryan picked it out.” My dad was folding the tarps that we lined on the carpet, in case any drips got on the floor.

Lois lingered, examining the walls and the carpet. She slept with my father while he was still married; my brother called her a “homewrecker.” She came to visit her parents and help them in preparation for hurricanes that hit our town. Her parents were our neighbors, and now she built a house to be near them, and in turn, near my old house.

She walked towards a box in the far corner overflowing with books. On the top, a cookbook for kids— “Cooking Rocks! Rachel Ray’s 30-minute Meals For Kids.”

“I love Rachel Ray,” Lois said as she picked up the book. I tensed, and she flipped through the pages, thumbing through those that I tabbed, the recipes that intrigued me.

“Me, too,” I said. “She’s my favorite.” I always loved cooking, but it didn’t feel right to talk about it to Lois. I cooked with my mom my whole life—rolling cookie dough, licking cake batter off wooden spoons, snipping the ends of green beans with kitchen shears. I felt like I was betraying my mom, just by talking to Lois about food.

“I didn’t know that,” Lois said. “You’ll have to make something with me sometime. Deal?”

My dad smiled, and I couldn’t read what he was thinking. Did he know how hard this was for me? Did he expect me to nod and follow along? I did anyway.

“Yeah,” I said. “Deal.”

We were having another talk; this time I was being open about my anxiety.

“It’s not just nerves,” I explained. “I’m nervous every day now.” He was silent, driving and staring into the flat highway ahead of us. Rihanna buzzed in the background, humming into the air conditioner. “You don’t get it.”

“No,” he said. “I honestly don’t.”

I never experienced a feeling like this before. I had panic attacks in the past, yes, but I was never scared, every day, about ruining a relationship. I woke up every day, wondering if I was good enough and then, after repetitive contemplation that became constant for me, I knew that I wasn’t. Aside from our relationship being private, I felt that I was never good enough. I never felt validated.

A part of me felt bad for Jay because he was right. He didn’t do anything wrong. But the lack of affection was evident. Or maybe it was his enthusiasm for the relationship that was lacking.

He continued, in his usual way that was sometimes too honest. “I don’t mean anything bad by this, but I don’t know what I’ll want in the future. Like, I’m happy with you now, but in a couple months from now, I don’t know what I’ll want.”

Way too honest.

“Do you realize how that sounds?” I was accusing him now, trying to make him realize how hard it was for me to deal with.

I talked to him about anxiety before, but I don’t think he completely understood.

I think it stemmed from my parents getting divorced. I was twelve. My mom and dad fought often, but it wasn’t until my dad slept with the neighbor that my mom ended it for good. I was young at the time, but I was still able to understand the concept of infidelity clearly. I hated

my dad for a while, but I forgave him. I was taught to forgive. I was taught that this was what needed to happen. That I needed to close my eyes and clench and say that everything is fine. I needed to breathe deeply and smile and nod like everything was better because it was. I forgave him. We all did. People make mistakes.

Right?

“Every day,” I continued. “I don’t know why. I just feel like you’re not into me as you were in the beginning.”

“But I am though.”

I told him there could be more effort. That even though he might not understand where my anxiety came from, at least he could try to calm it. I told him I was worried that he would try to find someone else.

“I would never *intentionally* cheat on you,” Jay said, eyes still ahead.

I was burning inside, screaming. He knew my dad cheated and ruined my family. He used infidelity as his way to escape what he wanted to end. He slept with Lois, the other woman, and left his life behind him. Or maybe, left his life across the street. *Intentionally*. Was he fucking kidding me? I sat there, silent for most of the drive, but I calculated my emotions then. I knew I needed to end it; I didn’t know how.

I’m not sure why my father thought it was a good idea to move across the street.

After the divorce, we stayed in our home until mom moved to the next town over. We watched Lois build her house next to her parents’ home, across the street from ours. As the bricks stacked higher and the concrete hardened, we came home from school, tired and hungry.

We ate dinner—my mom, my brother, and I—with the news in the background, and we put puzzles together on the weekends. I played my Gameboy and my brother practiced his free throw in the driveway, the ball thudding against it with each fall, and my mother scraped grease off of the frying pan. For a moment, I wondered if my mother’s eyes were permanently stained red. The house was built across from us and still I rode my bike down the street, around the block, making pictures in the clouds like they were my own. I passed her house, sometimes with my dad’s truck parked out front, and I wondered what they were doing.

Before my father was a painter, he worked for UPS. He wore a brown-on-brown uniform in a brown truck and delivered packages. He knew the town and he knew its people.

I was four when he quit. He started his own business, one he was proud of. “I wanted to make my own hours,” he told me once. “I wanted to be able to spend more time with you and Michael. I didn’t want to miss out.” I remember my dad taking my brother and me to Oak Hammock Park, fishing after school and on the weekends. He took my brother to play basketball and me to the movies.

I wonder if this is why he did it. He knew that he wanted to see us, he could walk across the street and knock on the door. I wonder if he knew that we would smile, nod, and go with him to eat, to a movie, to a park just to throw a ball around for an hour until my brother and I got bored. I wonder if this fear was still with him. He didn’t want to miss out.

We went to dinner, the three of us: myself, Robbie, and Jay. Robbie was in town visiting other friends, and he asked to stay with me for the night. Since Robbie and Jay knew each other from college, it would be like a reunion of sorts. We talked for hours, until our checks were paid

and our glasses were long empty, the cold condensation dripping from the sides. Jay worked in the morning, and he went home after dinner to sleep. I drove with Robbie, the more sober one, back to my apartment.

We drank cheap liquor mixed with cheaper fruit juice that sat in the back of my refrigerator.

He put on Beyoncé and blasted it throughout my apartment. My roommate was out of town, so it was only us two. We danced and sipped and I smiled into the ceiling, my head back and my body moving. He yelled something about his love for Beyoncé and I agreed and we screamed her lyrics over a chorus we both knew. “I have neighbors,” I said mid-laugh. We didn’t care. It felt like we were back in high school.

We talked about the people we went to high school with—the ones with babies, the ones in the military, the ones who haven’t been heard from. “People change so quickly.”

We ate a pizza delivered even though we weren’t hungry. I forget who paid for it. The crust was stuffed and was overflowing with cheese.

I told him that I wanted to break up with Jay, but I felt bad. I felt like I couldn’t break up with someone if I didn’t have a reason. “But it’s how you feel,” Robbie said. “That’s enough.”

We ran out of vodka, but we quickly reached for the merlot that was already corked.

“I’ve always had something for you.”

I changed into basketball shorts because I couldn’t dance in the jeans.

“Me, too. Obviously.”

The merlot stained my lips a purple. My lips were chapped but I licked them, the small flakes of skin pressed on the tip of my tongue.

We were naked in my bed. We touched each other but not much else. We didn't kiss, but I wanted to. I held back. I already felt bad. I did. He and Robbie were friends. Hell, Robbie and I were closer. But then again, Jay was fucking with my head, and I couldn't take it anymore. I felt like I needed power back. This felt good. Being naked with Robbie felt good.

"Are you sure?" Robbie asked.

"Fuck yeah."

We didn't kiss that night. We didn't fuck. We touched each other and it felt like high school again. I always felt something for Robbie.

I assume we finished, though I don't remember it. I remember cleaning up and wiping ourselves clean with dirty towels. Robbie said, "I think we both needed that." He smiled.

I woke up next to Robbie feeling nothing that I expected to. Last night, even with my mind liquored and dazed, I thought I would wake up pounding with guilt. I thought I would wear it on my back, heavy and obvious. My head pounded and my mouth smacked dry, lips cracked and eyes flaked with crusted specks. I looked at Robbie, remembering the main parts of last night and forgetting the small moments erased by vodka.

At first, I thought about how hurt Jay would be if he knew, how angry he would be if he knew it was with Robbie. The morning light was seeping through the windows, the yellow rays pushing through the blinds near my bed. Robbie was next to me, still asleep in only his underwear. I wondered if this was how my dad felt after the first time he slept with Lois.

I rolled out of the bed wearing only my boxer briefs and went to the kitchen to grab water. I needed saving from this hangover. I drank it, wiped my mouth, and let out a sigh. I held the kitchen counter with one hand and the cold, dewed glass in the other. I thought about the

moments from last night that I remembered—how hot it was that Robbie and I touched each other like years earlier, how drinking and groping made my body shake, my toes tighten and curl. I felt the water cool my mouth; I felt it in my chest, in my back, and down into my stomach. I stood, my back straight. This feeling was not guilt, like I was worried about the night before and briefly this morning. It wasn't panic, either, the kind I was used to waking up with. I pinpointed this feeling. Relief. I was relieved. I remember what Jay told me. *I would never intentionally cheat on you.*

With Robbie, I found my way out. I knew the relationship was over, and looking back, Jay must have too. I was not sure how to end things with him, and now I was forced to. I forced myself to make my own decision. Somewhere, I calculated this the night before, and maybe without being fully honest with myself about it. But now, I realized that I had no choice.

I wondered if this is what my dad felt like, or if he felt anything like I did. Guilt? Denial? Relief? Everything all at once? I wondered if, then, there was no other choice but to leave. I wondered if he tried to stay.

I went back to my bedroom and Robbie stretched his body, holding his arms over his head, yawning. “Good morning, *baby.*” He smiled.

“Shut up.” I rolled my eyes and smiled back.

Jay and I broke up a month later. I never told him about that night with Robbie.

It was my dad's turn to have my brother and me for the weekend. My parents left it up to us to decide the schedule, and we agreed on weekly stays starting every Friday after school.

My dad picked me up from school that day, since my brother had basketball practice and stayed late. We pulled into the driveway, and I saw a car parked at my old house across the street. People were moving in.

We walked into Lois's house and I smelled garlic. I heard sizzling and smoke wafted towards the ceiling, disappearing before it reached it. Lois was facing the stove, her back to us, and her arm moved in a circular motion. She was stirring something.

"Hey, guys," she said, turning towards us. I started to my room across the house. She continued, "Hey, Ry, come out here when you get a sec. I'm making something you should try."

I nodded, and went to my room to take off my backpack. I took a deep breath. *Ry*. I didn't want her calling me something like that. It was "Ryan" to her. I walked back out into the kitchen.

"I found my old Rachel Ray book," she said, pointing to the counter. "I think it was one of her first ones." The book on the counter was tattered and pieces of paper stuck out from the pages, from all sides.

I sat at the counter and flipped through the pages, trying to find a recipe that interested me. My dad was outside now, putting away his paint and ladders from work that day.

There was a silence, only the hiss of the pan and the pages turning. Finally, Lois said, "Pick something out that we can make." She turned and smiled but I kept my head down. "That'd be fun, yeah?"

"For sure," I said. It came out naturally that time, without force. I understood what was happening, though I didn't want to accept it. I knew what she was doing, trying desperately to win me over, breaking the label of "other woman." But I couldn't see her other than that, and if I tried it wouldn't be fair to my mom, the woman whose life crumbled.

Years later, in college, while I brushed my teeth, shirtless with only underwear on, I would look at Robbie, still pushing in and out of sleep. His shirt and pants would be on the floor, and I felt powerful for once. With Jay, I lost control of who I was. The anxiety took over because Jay could not give me what I needed. Guiltless, I would put on a pot of coffee, pouring in enough grounds and water for both Robbie and me and I would wonder what my dad felt like, what Lois felt like in these situations. I could only see her as one thing for a while, which was the person that tore my family apart. In time, I realized that my parents would have split. They would have separated still. My dad would have found someone else or my mom would finally have been fed up with the fights and left.

I found that forgiveness is not about force. It's not about deep breaths or clenched eyes or family telling you to love him anyway since he is your father after all. It's not about smiling or forced fishing trips. I wish I could go back and tell my younger self that anger is fine, that being mad is normal, that one day, you will have to relearn that your father is your father. Forgiveness moves in waves, slowly. Not all at once.

Lois and I would eventually make most of the recipes in her book, skipping the ones with seafood—I never liked fish. My dad would tell me later on that Lois bought that Rachel Ray book that day from a used bookstore and before I got home from school, she highlighted and bookmarked pages to make it seem as if she had been using it for years. And even though my dad would leave Lois years later for another woman, my perception of Lois changed. We would make food together often, and she usually let me pick out the recipe. I learned a lot over that time, and our cookbooks became more worn as we continued to cook, napkins and receipts were stuck throughout the page and grease spots stained and waved the edges.

NOTES TO MY FATHER

Carry me if you must
& I promise to rest my neck against your heart line—
the valley that stretches across your latex palm.
I'll be quiet beneath the yellowed street light (if I have to be).

The front porch is empty now,
so fill it with cigar smoke and Sunday's sports page.

The living room looks the same
(in case you were wondering), same plastic box of television
and couch dancing between gray and burlap.
Your toe nail clippings burrow in the carpet
like snails hiding from sunlight, shells bleached white.

You, gasping for hunger not found on taste buds,
gripping me with your forearms, stay.

Apples going sour, like air,
& mom says the front yard needs a cut soon.

I think of your face because all of the blue
in the world cannot glue it back together.
The veins running like sentences scribbled on your neck
& shit brown eyes, thin lips, crow's feet
clenching your temple harder in the sun.

A GRAVEYARD OF DIMPLES

I wonder if you can feel time anymore, the way we do—the waiting for the phone call, the pacing around the coffee table, the stale silences in between the questions, commercial breaks, finding last the few numbers in a Sudoku puzzle kind of time. I wonder if time watches you the way it lusts for me.

I remember when you won the Dane Cook comedy album at the family Christmas party. I was ten, and in my mind you were already ancient. After a few more rounds of rotating and swapping presents, my dad won some sort of alcohol. He traded his bottle for your CD. “Aunt Marge is old,” he told me on the way home. “She doesn’t need to hear that kind of stuff.” You wore a sweater to the party almost every year because it was chilly, or at least, chilly for Floridians. You had these dimples, the ones that camouflaged into wrinkles. When the party was over, you said goodbye to everyone individually. I remember that slight arch in your back that proved age had taken over your already frail body. I remember hugging you and pressing lightly into you and feeling the homemade stitches of those sweaters.

A hummingbird can flap its wings in $1/60^{\text{th}}$ of a second, roughly the same amount of time it takes a camera to capture an image.

A couple of years ago, my grandmother, told me that you cannot recognize her anymore. “My mother had Alzheimer’s,” she told me, “and now my sister has it, too.” She said this on an exhale, like she was forcing herself into it, factualizing it, making it real.

She told me that she sat with you. She held your hand and went through old photographs of family and vacations that you couldn't remember. You just stared. Since that day, my grandmother has slept with a Sudoku book on her nightstand. Her barely-there Facebook wall is filled with puzzles that read: *I beat this in [insert number here] seconds. How fast can you beat it?*

My grandmother showed me that photo album she showed you. Old yellowed and chipped pictures preceded the photos from your Ireland vacation, a prologue. These photographs, headstones—they lined the pages with names of people I would never meet. My great grandparents stood in front of houses and sheds and gardens. They smiled like they meant it.

Memories can sometimes be trapped in things other than pictures; sometimes the smallest things like the wine stains on my kitchen counter from underage drinking and cooking Italian dinners or yearbook signatures that read “KATS” (Kick Ass This Summer) or rings—like the ring from my ex-boyfriend. The ring that was given to me on the first Valentine's Day I had ever celebrated with someone, the day when I dragged him out of bed to see the sunrise and then drove him another three hours that same day to watch the sun set. The ring had an inscription: “You can't see it, but you can feel it.” This quote was from a shared favorite movie, and this quote comes alive when we break up and the ring is long lost in my underwear drawer. The tan line lived on my ring finger and when I went to play with the aluminum band and twirl it out of habit, it was gone. I still felt it sometimes on my finger long after the breakup—an amputated limb, taunting me when I tried to sleep. But there are also pictures—or better yet, were pictures of my ex-boyfriend that were deleted during a drunken night filled with *Fuck him* and *I don't*

fucking need a man anyway. These pictures were gone by the morning, and when I woke up, I thought of all the things that I wanted to forget. But couldn't.

But now, you didn't choose to forget, and you struggle behind those glassy eyes. Somewhere swirling inside your eighty-something-year-old brain is a roux of neurons and tendrils sizzling away and cooking off. The smoke rises out of your skull and clings to the ceiling, staining it black. And when I get the invitation from my grandmother to go to the family Christmas party each year, I have to return to my limitless excuses and pull out another one. "I can't I have to work." *Lie*. "I can't. I'm not feeling too well and I want to get better for New Year's." *Lie*. I choose not to go, perhaps selfishly, to protect my own memory. I don't want to see you as nothing anymore, as an extra body on the couch. Expressionless. I don't want to remember you this way. One day, my kids will ask me about you, and I want to tell them how I remember you. I will show them pictures, and I will tell them that you were the one who always asked if I still played piano and told me never to quit, and I will tell them that you were the only person to wear a sweater with Santa on it even though it was eighty degrees.

When I think of this photo album that my grandmother showed you and the pictures taken and even the film, I think of how fast it was to simply take the pictures and how easy it would have been to forget about those specific details and moments without the proof. Time is like a crank on a film camera—you take a picture. Crank. Moving forward onto the next. Crank. One after the other. A photograph needs good lighting, but light can destroy the film. If you take a picture and open the camera before the film is wrapped up in its light-ridden chrysalis, the pictures are destroyed. The memories are gone, too.

MERLOT

I will stay here—bury myself here—
under this gravel scraping my scalp.

Leave me a shovel that I can reach.
The roots remind me of lighting

cracking the dirt and sopping
my messes. (If only, if only.)

Debt in ten dollar bills will sprout
so the surface looks so much better.

Black as a beetle's wing here
and above only pinches of light

because winter seemed way too long
and red was never my color.

THE SHORT LIFE OF NOVA JEAN

**Originally published in Outrageous Fortune, Volume 6.2.*

Nova Jean was born in the late spring of 2011. She died the same day. Nova Jean was conceived inside of a Walmart and she was born in the back seat of my 1997 Toyota 4runner. Her life quickly ended under a pile of cheap clothing and a wig that was heavier than it looked.

It started with a phone call from my friend, Robbie, while I was shopping at Walmart with my dad. “You’re going to Relay for Life tonight, right?” he asked. Relay for Life was an annual event at my high school and at many other schools across the country that raised money for cancer research. This year, my final year in high school, was particularly important because one of the Spanish teachers had recently been diagnosed with breast cancer. I told him that I was going, but I should have known better. I should have known some sort of request was coming. I was a senior in high school and had been friends with Robbie for a couple of years. We covered for each other whenever we needed – “If anyone asks, tell them I was at your house last night.” “Don’t mention anything about that kiss on New Year’s Eve to anyone, okay?” – so I figured that another one was on its way.

He continued. “Great. I’m a representative for SGA tonight.” *Uh huh.* “Every group needs a volunteer.” *Okay, I can help.* “This year they’re putting on a drag show to raise money.” *I take that back.* “We need you to be our drag queen for the night.” *Shit.* The silence was long enough to envision my face plastered in foundation and my calves burning from walking in heels. I hesitated.

I suppose he asked me to help them out because I was in the school’s theater department at the time and I could do stage makeup, or maybe it was because I was one of the only openly

gay guys at my high school. I suppose you don't have to be gay to be a drag queen, but trust me, it helps. I also had an ounce of knowledge about drag queens from watching reality shows about men dressing as women and calling each other "hunty" and "sissyng" this way and "sashaying" the other. These men would pluck and tweeze and shave every hair they could find peeking out of their skin, and thanks to my Norwegian-Czech-Hungarian concoction, this was not the easiest thing for me.

"Why can't you do it?" I asked.

Robbie told me that he was the only guy that volunteered with his group for the event, and since he was definitely not gay, he couldn't be seen by the school in a dress and makeup. He eventually came out a year later. "C'mon you're, like, the only guy I know who would do this. It's for a good cause."

Right. Good cause. "Okay," I said on an exhale, "I'll do it." I asked what I needed to bring and wear and all the other technical stuff.

"Well, it's a pageant."

I was six or seven the first time I put on makeup.

My dad is outside while my mother is cooking something in the kitchen and I find myself in her closet, both surrounded and distracted by her collection of boots and pumps, all of which are either black or brown or grey and none of which have a red bottom. Her walk-in closet is my runway. I am able to find my balance on the balls of my feet and shuffle aimlessly around like I am learning to walk all over again. The dresses and blouses that hang on each side of me become my fashion critics, my Anna Wintours and Rachel Zoes. The vanity at the end of the closet

becomes the group of photographers from the latest magazines, snapping away as I turn back to the front. Beats made with each step I take thump in my head.

My mom finds me sometime in between walks, but I cannot be bothered by her. I am being yelled at and called for by the stylists who need me to walk. “Where’s the next model!?” “Is the next model in the right shoes yet?!” “Hurry up, people! We have a show to do!” “Ryan, what are you doing?”

I look around for another pair of shoes when I heard it again. “Ryan, what are you doing?” My mother, towering over me, wears a smile of amusement and an apron splattered with sauce. Shoe boxes that were once stacked neatly against the sides are now opened and spread everywhere, along with the shoes that were once in them. She laughs, tells me to make sure I clean up whenever I’m done. She goes back to the kitchen. I try my hardest to put everything back the way it was before my daydreaming hurricane hit.

I am almost done cleaning when I notice the vanity at the end of the closet, the mirrors open, the plastic drawers see-through and packed with makeup. I open the top drawer and see the eyeshadow palettes of pinks and plums, blues and metallics. The colors bounce off like constellations against their black case. There is mainly eye shadow in this drawer, but to me, there is blush and bronzer and even lipstick. I load it on my face, having no interest in blending the hues.

My mother finds me again sometime later, and even though she laughs, she tells me that this is the only time I can go in her makeup drawers. I guess the colored powder was getting on my clothes and into the carpet.

I hear the door to the porch shut and my dad walk in. He comes into the bedroom, getting ready to rinse off in the shower. He sees me and my mother, both in his closet. “You are never going to put on makeup again,” he tells me, gritting his teeth. “Did you let him do this?”

My mother tells him that it’s not a big deal, but he keeps insisting that boys don’t wear makeup. Besides, he never put on makeup as a kid and neither did my brother.

“Wash that off.”

Ten years later, when I was seventeen years old, my dad and I were shopping in the makeup aisle at Walmart for the cheapest makeup we could find.

“Some red lipstick would be good, right?”

“Yeah, Dad.”

“Why do you need the blue eye shadow?”

“Dad, I’m dressing in drag.”

I guess he still had a lot to learn. While we were at Walmart, we also stopped by the lingerie section where I picked up some tights, four pairs to be exact. With legs as hairy as mine and a skin tone as tan as fluorescent lighting, these tights would make me look as ladylike as I could.

Luckily, there was also a Goodwill nearby, where I was able to stock up on all of my outfits for tonight for each category: formal, swimwear, and talent. My formal look was a seven-dollar dress with a fitted black top and a silver bottom that cascaded down on one side like a glass of water overflowing. Someone probably wore it to a beauty pageant in the ’80s, or to a cheap fabric convention. My bathing suit was a blue and pink floral one-piece with a ruffle on

the bottom that doubled as a mini skirt, and I made sure to get an even tackier floral sarong that I could rip off for a dramatic effect.

I went back and forth on what my talent should be. I considered dancing and lip syncing, but then I realized that everyone else would probably do that. I wanted to be different.

While still shopping at the thrift store, I remembered an old magic set I had that was tucked somewhere under my bed. I remembered its rigged card decks and its plastic thumb. To stand out, this is what I needed to do. For my co-star, I bought a skin-tight black velvet dress with a turtleneck and long sleeves. As soon as I got home with my new purchases, I got out that magic set along with an old Amy Winehouse wig I stole from the school drama department. The wig sat on the shelf in my closet pushed back against the corner.

The magic set and the wig had been tucked away and long forgotten. When I pulled them out of their dark resting places, I think I might have also been pulling out something else.

“So have you thought of a name yet?” Robbie asked as I changed in my back seat from my regular clothes into the black and silver gown.

“A name?”

Robbie told me that I needed a drag name for them to announce when I walk on stage. He took out his phone and searched for drag names from a quick search. “What about Paige Turner? You like to read, right? Or what about Anya Knees? Is that too much?” He read down a list of names that were simply puns and girl names thrown together. I thought of my own, sometime while Robbie was reading them off.

“I got it. What about Nova Jean?” I asked. We laughed and agreed this would work.

Kevin does my mom's nails all the time. After school, she picks me up and all I want to do is get out of this new uniform they make us wear for middle school now. White button-ups are the most uncomfortable things to force on a sixth grader.

"How long will this take?" I ask every time we arrive at the salon.

While my mom has her nails painted I wait on the couch, shifting and scooting almost automatically. I watch some news station going over the latest crime and when that's over, a made-for-TV movie plays. I am not intrigued. I recognize the women behind the counter and in the back painting nails and rubbing feet.

"Mom, can I get a manicure, too?" I walk towards her.

"No, honey."

"Please. I can do a boy color."

A boy color is blue, right? Maybe dark green or something, too?

My mom keeps telling me no and Kevin grabs for the nearest black nail polish. He paints his pinky nail black and shows me.

"See," he says, "nail polish doesn't look good on boys."

When it was time for the pageant, the rules were announced. Three rounds. A question. A vote. Voting was simple, each contestant had a jar at the base of the stage. At the end of the pageant, whomever had the most money donated in their jar won.

She was backstage five minutes before the show started, putting on foundation in a little compact mirror one of her friends loaned her. Nova Jean was assessing the competition from the

corners of her eyes as she applied a black line to them. The quarterback was in the pageant, and she knew he was her biggest competition. His name was Trevor and he was a black, toned, dreamy guy who decided to go by “Miss Thickness” for the night. Nova Jean and Miss Thickness were friendly with each other. But something about her was intimidating to Nova, and thus made her more nervous. In front of her class, her teachers, and whoever else volunteered that night, she would be in a dress, a swimsuit, high heels, and layered with makeup and nausea. But she had to fake the confidence until it was natural.

The formalwear was an easy round. They announced “Nova Jean” and some kids laughed at the name, but not nearly as many as the ones who laughed a few seconds after, when they realized what it meant. She waved and walked, balancing the the beehive that rested on her scalp. The silver bottom of the dress made her torso stumpy and her legs extra short, but she owned it. People cheered more than she ever thought. They smiled, too.

The next round was the swimsuit portion. She felt like she had stomped on Miss Thickness and the other contestants. She ripped her sarong off in the center of the stage. The crowd cheered again. The big question happened immediately after the swimsuit round. Nova Jean stopped and answered, “What is your definition of world peace?”

She thought for a moment, searched the sky, and answered confidently. “Peace throughout the world. Thank you.”

She walked out for her magic show in the velvet dress. Her fake thumb was put in her right fist and a handkerchief waited in her clutch until she needed it. Nova Jean told the crowd she would make it disappear. She took out the yellow handkerchief and shoved it in her opposite fist. Some of them must’ve thought she was trying to be funny because the audible “oohs”

confirmed that something she did was right. She put the fake thumb with the stuffed handkerchief on her left thumb and opened her hands. It was gone.

“Okay,” she told the audience in a pitch higher than her natural voice. “For this next trick, I need everyone involved.” She said that everyone needed to stand up and think of a number between one and ten. “If your number is somewhere between one and five, stand like this”— she put her hands together near her chest. “If your number is between six and ten, put your hands like this.” Her hands were up to her chest again, but this time they were apart about six inches. “Don’t forget to smile!”

While the audience waited, she turned around so her back was to the audience and opened the clutch. Nova took out a disposable camera and took a picture of the confused crowd. “Now I have proof that I got a standing ovation. Thank you, South Florida!” She didn’t come up with the idea herself. Some magician on a cruise did it when she was twelve, but she figured no one would know.

She left the stage to watch the other talents.

Miss Thickness dressed up as a cheerleader and did a routine with the help from his real life girlfriend, who was on the cheerleading squad. “Cover Girl” played as Miss Thickness threw his girlfriend into the air and caught her as easy as a feather. More music pumped from stage as he did a backflip that is usually only seen during the Olympics. This was Nova Jean’s biggest threat for the crown.

The other contestants, about five other guys who had no idea how to wear a dress or the difference between eyeshadow and blush, all danced to popular music. The audience laughed as

they tried to move like the girls from the background of music videos, painfully dipping and arching their backs and moving back to a standing position. This went on for too long.

“Now we will take a little break for the audience to cast their vote. Remember to put money into the name of the jar that matches your favorite contestant.”

Nova Jean lined up with the other queens; Miss Thickness was directly to her left. They all held hands. Sweat against calluses. Nerves bounced inside of her like a drill.

“We have the results,” a girl that was a part of the Relay for Life committee announced. She held an envelope, for what Nova Jean assumed was just dramatic effect.

They announced third place quickly and it was neither Nova Jean nor Miss Thickness. In Nova’s mind, this narrowed the final two quite easily. It was down to the classy magician who balanced a bowling ball-sized wig on her head for the night and the other one.

“Ladies and gentlemen, it is time to crown your new Miss Relay.” She braced herself, sucking in so much air that her lungs screamed. Nova Jean clenched Miss Thickness’ hand.

“With forty-five dollars raised, the first runner up is...” Silence. A beat. A short and small wave of exhaustion and anticipation came over the contestants. “Nova Jean!” Everyone applauded and the hostess smiled. Nova Jean was unsure about what to do. Bow? Walk off and wave? Instead she curtsied and walked off with her head held high. As she trickled down the stairs to the back of the stage, she heard Miss Thickness’ total money raised, fifty dollars.

I had always wondered why they announce who is the runner-up in pageants first instead of saying the winner right away; I know why now. It doesn’t make you feel as bad, sure, but it

also puts a title on something rather than diminishing it. You're the "first runner-up" and not an unnamed loser standing by the winner. You mean something.

I drove back to Robbie's house that night, so we could finally get some sleep. I tried to wipe off as much makeup as I could, leaving behind black slashes under my eyes from the eyeliner and mascara that was supposedly waterproof. Nova Jean was in my backseat, disheveled and sloppy. Her once vibrant colors looked dim under the night, but as the street lights passed, the fragments of silver and glitter shined.

SOMETHING OTHER THAN HUNGER

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I cradled the small box in my right hand, keeping the label faced downward. The man in front of me wore a windbreaker with a pixelated, camouflage print, and the woman behind the counter smiled at him—a crescent moon, ear-to-ear kind of smile that revealed paralleled dimples on her cheeks. The cigarette boxes behind the register framed her in multicolored rectangles hidden with golden words of health warnings. The line grew like a game of Centipede; every time I looked behind me there seemed to be another person and now the line started to wrap around the closest aisle. I could feel sweat under my hoodie.

“Hello. Are you in our rewards program?” the woman asked me once I stepped forward.

“No.”

“Is this all today?”

“Yes.”

She scanned my item. “Would you like a bag?”

“Yes, please.”

I slid my debit card and began answering more questions: *Is this amount correct? Cash back? Would you like to donate to St. Jude's today?*

Yes. No. Not today.

I took the bag from her and tried to smile. “No receipt, thanks,” I said, already walking toward the glass doors.

“So how many do you take in a day?” she asked me.

“Depends.”

“On average, then.”

My arms remained crossed. This was our third session together. “Maybe three or four.”

“Three or four per day?”

I nodded. She wrote something down on her yellow notepad.

Everything in her office was beige, the color of coffee with just enough cream—the walls, the rug, her hair. Reruns of “The Office” circulated in the waiting room, but inside, it stayed just as bland as I remembered from my visits weeks prior.

“And you sleep more than normal now,” she said. “So you don’t exercise a lot?”

“Sometimes.” The light sliced through the curtains, creating a white line against the bookshelf behind her.

“What kind of exercise do you do?”

“Sometimes I run.”

It felt like the lights were getting brighter. I returned to my dorm shaking with sweat, damp against my hoodie. Today was a good day—three miles in twenty-seven minutes. I made sure to drink enough water to flush out any sodium leftover in my body that might have been bloating me. I had been trying to drink a gallon per day.

Shakiness was normal after a run, but today, I felt different. I couldn’t focus. My tiny dorm seemed to be smaller, closing in slowly, trapping me in this place I call my body like a cage without bars. Words became deceptive puzzle pieces that I could not quite fit together, and my thoughts were external rather than coming from within, floating around me like cigarette

smoke before it gets lost in the air. My heart rate increased, pumping like music with a steady bass, blurring my vision. I paced. I had to keep moving.

“I think there’s something wrong,” I told my mom over the phone. Five minutes in, my throat felt like it was closing, my trachea moving in on itself like a fist.

“Just breathe,” she said. “You’re having a panic attack.”

“No, something’s wrong, Mom,” I said. I convinced myself I was dying. She didn’t know I hadn’t eaten that day, or anything since lunch the day before—a carefully calculated garden salad (220 calories) with three tablespoons of balsamic vinaigrette (120 calories). I told myself that after the run, I deserved something bigger to eat.

“Ryan, you’re stressing yourself out,” she said. She told me that this time in my life was hard because of the transition and something about prioritizing what I wanted.

She stayed on the phone with me until my breathing became steady again. Before we hung up, she added, “Maybe you should talk to someone.”

I didn’t want to talk to anyone, but I promised her I would. I didn’t want help. I wanted to be skinny. I wanted to be thin like I used to be. But in my foggy, after the panic episode, all I wanted was food.

There were days that I wouldn’t eat. In my mind, these days were tests.

In the morning, I would tell myself to do what the therapists said, to eat one banana and see how I felt. This, she told me, would lead to smarter, healthier options with food and might make me eat smaller meals throughout the day. “Your metabolism is being hurt.” *What did she know?*

Every morning, I passed the cafeteria on my way to class. I smelled the baking croissants, buttery and flaky. I imagined myself taking a bite and chewing each layer of thin dough, tasting the sweetness. My brain indulging in the moment, but knowing that after I would feel worse. And knowing that, that I would loath myself after eating, stopped me from getting breakfast in the first place.

It would be easy until the afternoon. I would have only consumed water and coffee—no sugar, just skim milk and sugar substitute. I would often have a friend invite me to lunch with them somewhere on campus, and I would always turn it down. I would come up with an excuse of too much homework or say that I was too tired and wanted to nap. The naps grew frequent. My routine turned somewhat nocturnal as my eating habits changed, and with them, my depression grew with me.

Nights were the determining factor of success. If I made it through, falling asleep with my body empty, I would wake up and reward myself with a small meal. But more often, I would cave, hating myself with each step I took my car, each second until I pulled into the gas station down the road.

I walked into the gas station with the same goal as usual. I had to make sure I got enough food to fill me up without making it obvious it was just for me. The more food and the more diverse the snacks were, the more it looked like I was buying food for other people. I preferred salty, but often would buy a couple candy bars filled with dripping caramel and cloudy chocolate to round out the cravings.

The best parking spots were on the sides of the building, away from the glass fronts. I put my car in park and took a chug of my Coke Zero. With the nutritional facts facing away, I opened the bag of Flaming Hot Cheetos, an appetizer that left red, fingertip scars as a savory, lingering reminder of the taste—I slowly scraped each fingertip with my teeth, biting and digging under each fingernail for every last taste. The Fig Newtons were easy to get down quickly, followed by the peanut M&Ms. When I opened the bag and poured a handful of the colorful beads in my hand, he was already at my window. He nodded, as if to say hello. His beard was the same color gray as the hair that stuck out under his wide-brimmed hat that shadowed most of his face.

“Excuse me,” he said with the window between us. I rolled it down just enough to hear him.

“Hello,” I said as I cupped the M&Ms in my hand. The heat had already made the pieces dot rainbow colors on my palm—green glazed against my life line.

“Spare change?” he asked. “Anything? Just trying to eat.”

“I’m sorry, I really don’t have anything.”

“Then what’s that?” At first I thought he meant the M&Ms, but I saw him pointing at cup holder filled with coins. Silently, I reached with my free hand and grabbed a fistful.

“It’s not much, man,” I said. I rolled the window down more with my elbow, just to fit my hand through.

“It’s something,” he said. “ ‘Preciate it.”

Before he could ask for more, I rolled up my window and told him to have a nice day. I drove away, looking into my rearview mirror, watching him walk around the corner into the gas

station, wondering what his lunch would be. I drove back to my dorm, eating the candies one by one.

“Let me ask you something,” she said during one of our sessions. “Are you controlling the food? Or is the food controlling you?”

I smoked cigarettes on the fifth floor of the parking garage near my dorm. It was usually empty there. I sat on the edge of the concrete wall and flicked my cigarette, watching the ashes burn out into the night. I created constellations from embers the size of dust. The star systems I studied told me I was smaller than I thought, while the drifting ashes reminded me I was bigger.

I felt better when I left because I allowed my body to feel something other than hunger. My neck was sore from staring into the sky, my lungs tired, and I walked back to my dorm passing signs that warned of alligators.

“Stand here.” Her hands felt light on my shoulders like the straps of an empty backpack. She flipped her yellow-paged notepad to an empty page and handed it to me with a pencil. I gazed into at the full length mirror on the other side of the room. She stood behind me and spoke softly. “Draw yourself,” she said. “I’m going to step out of the way so you just see yourself. I want you to draw what you see.”

I looked at myself. My eyes were greener than usual that day, and my striped sweater hid any imperfections I found on my body; it hung limp around my torso. My beard was getting longer than usual. I hoped I could hide my cheeks that way.

“Whenever you’re ready,” she said.

The more I looked at myself, the more I didn’t want to recreate my body on paper, the more I didn’t want to eat.

But I did. I always did. That’s why the pills were necessary.

I sat in Modern European History during the spring of my freshman year, and I couldn’t feel them through my jeans. Usually, before I left I would make sure to hide at least one in my pocket, two if I knew I’d be gone a while.

I searched my pockets while the professor discussed World War II. “Now, from our reading, who can list some of the Axis powers?”

I took out my wallet and opened it in my lap, pushing old receipts and the backup condom hoping to find any hint of blue underneath. I thought it could have fallen in.

“Germany, Italy, and Japan,” I heard someone say.

I know I have one. I placed my keys, wallet, and phone on my desk while my peers around started to watch me. I sat up enough to search my back pockets.

“How ‘bout the Allies?” the professor asked.

It was obvious that I was searching for something now as I moved in my confined space, the desk that was too small and the plastic chair too hard below. I turned my front pockets inside out. The pill, about the size of a pinky nail, fell to the ground. I picked it up, already knowing the people around me saw. They probably wondered what I was on or what the pill was, if that was the reason I acted so frantic.

“And what year did the US enter the war?”

I looked downward for the rest of the class, pretending to take notes though not knowing what I was writing.

The word lingered between us. It sounded heavy. The bulbous, round *B* fell like balloons without helium, the long *e*'s screeched like rubbing Styrofoam. I protested.

“That’s not it,” I said. I told her I was trying to look better, that I was health conscious. I worded it that way, too. Health conscious.

“Bulimia isn’t about throwing up all the time,” she told me. “Your system is becoming dependent on the laxatives.” She said something about taking probiotics and drinking kombucha to help my system get back into a normal rhythm. I tried kombucha once before. It tasted like feet.

I still didn’t understand. I was a guy. I was trying to lose a little weight I gained. That’s all.

“It’s not always about throwing up,” she said. “Using laxatives is a bulimic tendency, Ryan. It’s the same thing, just from two different ends.”

Eventually, I promised her that I would throw out my laxatives. And I did. “You should try something small in the morning, too,” she told me. “Like a banana or yogurt.”

I’ll admit it helped sometimes. Starting the day with something healthy made me promise myself to continue this way. The 500-calorie days became fewer, but on those days, when I was left with my brain screaming at me in hunger, my organs churned and begged for something other than water and emptiness.

One night, I return to the same spot in the McDonalds parking lot, and I park my Toyota 4Runner under the yellowing hue that glows onto my dashboard from the light above. I can almost see where the ketchup drips from my hamburger onto my center console. One burger down. One large fry. Another burger. A kid's meal. Three chocolate chip cookies for a dollar.

I return to my dorm and need a laxative. I search my medicine cabinet for a forgotten box only to find sample packets of face wash and travel-sized hand creams taken from hotels. I can feel this food inside of me, growing, turning into an entity of something other than myself—the grease and fat mixing into my system, claws forming from whatever chemicals smear across my stomach lining. It spreads like a virus. I look into my reflection, at the sink, at my toothbrush resting in its gray holder. I flick the bathroom fan on. The white noise hum fills the room.

It's the same thing, just from two different ends.

The grout in between the floor tiles digs into my knees, creating lines like X and Y intersections in my skin. I hold the toilet with my left hand and look into the water shaped by a broken ring of mold. I grip my toothbrush in my right hand, the bristles digging into my palm.

I start slow, seeing how far I can go before I gag. Gagging. The end of my toothbrush tastes like leftover peppermint candies as I guide it slowly into my mouth, onto my tongue, grazing over my taste buds, jamming it into the back of my throat.

My eyes become glossy and I release a broken howl from within. A roaring croak. My back arches, spine curves, my nose fills with the same hot liquid that I taste in my mouth—bitter, pungent, hot yet creamy. It looks like an exorcism. Looking down, I see it hit the water, landing and sinking under the surface like a feather in midair until it touches the porcelain bottom. The taste lingers for a while until I use the same toothbrush to clean my mouth.

I look down into the toilet with my eyes still pink and wet. The pile of gristled fluids rests against the white like a child's smeared finger painting. Below me sits everything I am scared of, but yet, I feel relieved. I feel accomplished. I stand there for a while mesmerized, my throat gritty and dank until finally I flush. The water invades in a rushing spiral, breaking apart the settled pieces from their resting places and taking the hot liquid and broken parts down into the toilet, to a place I cannot quite see.

WHERE I LEARNED TO DANCE

She began with her back towards us, her hands pressed together near her chest like a prayer and her elbows pointed from her sides like small wings. The black dress grazed the floor behind her calves, smooth and bulging in her stilettos. The black wig piled into a beehive; bobby pins scratched her scalp to secure her hair in place.

The music started. A low hum swelled from the speakers and blended into the thumps of the bass. High notes melted into the air, the heavy and sticky air that was dampened from the central Florida humidity.

Her arms floated to her sides like scales out of balance. Her right arm high with a flick in her wrist, while her left was low. And slowly, her arms shifted with the beat, back and forth. Right low. Left high. She spun when the words started, and her chiffon dress twisted with her as if in slow motion.

So long ago. Waka Shame moved her mouth with the lyrics. *Certain place, certain time.*

I knew this song, though I couldn't place it. It might have been the drinks.

The crowd around me cheered as she walked towards us, eyeing everyone like her prey. And we watched her too, hypnotized with every gesture, fixated on her movements, the way one might watch a lover walk away. A pentagram was painted on her bodice in cherry red, dripping like blood. Waka's makeup was smoky, which is standard for drag queens because it is easy yet practical—cover everything in dark shades, highlight the brow bone and under eyes. It made her features pop in the stage lights. Her cheekbones pointed from her face towards the glow above her, and her lips plumped in scarlet. Waka Shame was a pale, witchy drag queen who always wore an occult accessory—a pentagram, Ouija board printed dresses, tarot cards hot glued to her

skirt. Waka was known for doing things that would not be considered standard by any means in the drag world, like burning a bundle of dried sage while performing or popping blood tablets in the middle of the lip sync so her chin and chest would be covered in a red, radiant liquid by the time the climax of the song hit.

Underneath the layers of concealer and foundation, Dominic. A guy who quit his job as a gas station clerk to pursue his dreams of performing.

My roommate, Holly, leaned in as close as possible and shouted over the song. “Who is this?” I smelled the ripe pineapple juice on her breath. I told her about Dominic, as best I could, over the booming music and roar from the crowd.

Just hours before, Holly was at my bedroom doorway begging me to go out, explaining how much I needed it and how good it would be for me to let loose. “You haven’t been out in a while,” she told me, “You know you want to.” She continued to plea, and I eventually caved, after she offered to drive.

The chorus hit and I knew the song. Of course. “Seven Wonders” by Stevie Nicks, but remixed into a club anthem.

She walked into the crowd, and even though I stood should-to-shoulder with others because it was a full house, Waka was able to part the onlookers below her and make a path easily. She ran her hand into some guy’s hair near the stage, and he laughed along. He jammed a dollar into her drawn-on cleavage near the pentagram. I watched her float through the crowd, hovering with determination.

I measured Waka by sips of alcohol as she danced and held her head high. As she glided forward, I deciphered a black scarf that hung around her neck camouflaged against her dark wig

and dress. She took it off and held it above her, arms stretched, and she spun faster than I felt the room circling. The audience formed a circle around her and she was spinning, spinning and mouthing the lyrics to the lights that flashed above her. I was two drinks in. Her wig's synthetic strands caught the light and fluttered back. *If I live to see, if I live to see the seven wonders.* Her torso alive and swaying. I felt dizzy for her and I turned to Holly and smiled and it wasn't forced. I moved with the music. My drink floated above my head and I gripped it and Waka moved closer to me. I saw her briefly break the lyrics—something a drag queen should never do—and smile when she met my eyes. I searched my pockets and found a five-dollar bill folded between chapstick and a condom. Grabbed it. Held it out and winked as she strolled past us. She took it and blew a kiss when the lyrics stopped for a moment. She was illuminated.

The second verse started and I still moved with Holly. I looked over the dancing bodies around me, over the heads that bobbed up and down like wave crests and I was reaching the surface. I saw other queens standing on the perimeter of the dance floor: Homely Pop. Tarot Read. Opulence Black. Karen from Finance. And just near the bar in the back, in front of the door stamped with "Exit Only," there was a tall figure I found only in glimpses, where the dancers around me parted and a space to the end of the dance floor was cleared and I thought he saw me. I felt a current, like the ones that rush under waves, push me at my core and the ground felt not so solid. Nausea, I thought, not from the alcohol.

"Jay's here," I mouthed to Holly, cocking my head towards the bar. Holly still danced and I watched her turn. Her eyes suddenly widened.

“What. The. Fuck,” she mouthed back. She knew that just days before I had broken things off with him after almost a year of dating. Holly said that I finally stood up for myself and I wondered if it was the right thing to do.

Jay never went out, at least not from what I knew of him. Maybe his friends forced him out, too. I tried to watch Waka carry on and twirl through another chorus but I kept replaying everything my cocktail was trying to make me forget, though some things were not just moments I remembered but instead were stains I could not quite erase. Times like when the fights went on for too long and we had no choice but to give in, to compromise, to smile, faking some sort of resolution. Times like when Jay told me, after a road trip to Tallahassee together, that he would never *intentionally* cheat on me. Like when I told him I needed more and he left, silent, the front door slamming behind him. Like when I ignored it for too long.

I felt Holly’s hand on my lower back, forcing me out deeper into the dance floor. She took my cup, only ice, and said, “I’ll be right back. Keep dancing. I’ll find you.” I assumed she was getting me another drink.

I watched her figure dance to the bar and blur into the other dancing silhouettes. I knew Jay was here. I knew I had to say something, and another drink would help. I was still shaking from what I believed was adrenaline, but for that moment, I had no other choice. I danced.

Waka was finishing. The music was fading, but still she moved. Her arms waved like she was casting spells into the air. Her fingernails sparkled under the spotlight as the song softened. And even when the song was over, when there was nothing but applause, she continued to move her fingers, in small pulses, gently, in every witch way.

I had no choice but to move with those people around me, with the strangers that were more than that. I felt this connection that we had. Electronic music that screamed back and cocktails that were too sweet and glitter in our veins. I breathed in the noise, saw the dancers wearing everything from sequins to t-shirts to football jerseys. I looked around this place, this bunker, where the walls were chipped and the dancefloor was worn and cracked. Where “vogue” did not mean a magazine, but rather a dance that only the most agile could accomplish. Where fishnets were not cast into rivers, but instead were usually ripped and worn tightly around smooth legs. And where some of the best people in Orlando would greet you on the back patio for no reason other than “I felt a vibe,” they would sit with you under the patio umbrellas that spread open under a cloudy night, they smoked a cigarette with you which felt that much better after a drink as the ash and embers blended into the stars, and they told you how much happier they were now that they found a place like this. This was how I met Dominic. Waka Shame. Here, we were safe and we were loved. Here, we thrived.

Today, you don't feel safe anymore. You wake up in your boyfriend's house. The light blares through the blinds as you squint, searching for your phone to check the time. You find it on the bookshelf next to you, still plugged into the charger. 7:30. You see a text appear from an old coworker you have not spoken to in months. *Hey. Were you at Pulse last night? I heard there was a shooting. Are you okay?* You tell her that you're fine, that you miss her, that you want to see her soon. You assume the shooting was a typical robbery or some drug deal gone wrong. Maybe one person injured. Two people max. You put your phone back on the shelf and turn to your boyfriend—his eyes shut, his breath deep and full. You kiss his cheek, his facial hair

against your own, soft yet prickly, a velvet sandpaper. He rolls over and stretches, tells you good morning. You hold up your sideways body with your forearm and tell him you are going to take a shower. He yawns, reaches his arms above him, and pulls his body as long as it can go. You are used to this rhythm by now. You naturally wake up first, and he naturally begs for another hour of sleep. Sometimes you say okay, but you often cannot fall back to sleep. Instead, you put your arm over his tattooed chest, your eyes closed, and you match his breathing until the alarm rings. But today, you turn on the shower. You turn the handle to the little red dot stamped into the silver. The water trickles out and steams when it hits the floor. Your boyfriend joins you. His decorated body huddled against your own. Your figures become a mosaic against the shower's frosted skeleton. You ask if he is awake yet and he shrugs. You tickle him. Your fingers dance under his arms and down his sides until he shouts in between laughter. You kiss. You wash his hair, his back. He washes you. After, you dry off and check your phone. Text messages line the home screen. Three from your mother: *Ryan are you awake? Please call me. Hello?* You stare at the screen. It glows back. You call her and tell your boyfriend to check the news. She is crying. She says there was a shooting. There was a shooting at Pulse. Twenty people dead.

I was blasting the new Lady Gaga album when Tina, my cousin, called.

"I'm outside," she said. "I've been knocking for five minutes."

I opened the door. "Sorry," I said, hugging her and my other cousin, Becky. They were both younger than me, undergraduates at the time, and I was taking them out. They recently moved to Orlando to attend the same university that I was in for my master's program.

“I was just getting pumped,” I said. Music played from my bedroom, and my makeup spread out on my floor.

“Are you wearing concealer?” Becky asked.

I nodded, batting my eyelashes, and they both smiled. I told them about the tricks guys do before they go out, to look better in the club lighting. I told them that bronzer is key, and a little white on the inner corners of the eyes helped. “Believe me, it works.”

They sat on my bed while I finished getting ready. I told them how excited I was that I was taking them to their first gay club. “Orlando has the best ones.”

From what I knew, Tina and Becky only went to the bars near campus, filled with undergraduates with fake licenses and cheap beer. As soon as they were free, I begged to take them to one of my places. “Trust me,” I told them. “These are the best spots. Everyone just dances and they’ll all love you.”

When we arrived at the club, Homely Pop was on the dancefloor. It was still early, so she had free time to mingle before her performance.

I met Homely Pop years earlier through mutual friends. She was a colorful queen, known for outlandish looks and an avant-garde aesthetic. Tonight, the look was mod: an avocado green skirt with a black corset, a cropped haircut, polka-dotted sleeves, and white eye shadow extending into her under-eyes, which made them look doll-like. A pair of lashes were glued to the bottom curve of the white, just above her cheekbones, adding to the illusion.

“Bitch!” Homely said, smiling when I walked onto the dancefloor. We hugged. “It’s been too damn long.”

“I know. I know. These are my cousins.” I gestured towards them.

Homely shook her head and kept her distance. “No,” she said. Tina and Becky looked at me, clearly confused. “Not allowed.”

“What?” Tina asked.

“No one prettier than me is allowed inside.” Homely smiled and hugged Tina, then Becky. “I’m kidding. But really, you two are goddesses, and it makes me look bad.”

I caught up with Homely over the music while Tina and Becky started to dance. The dancefloor had picked up, and soon everyone was moving.

It felt good to show my cousins a glimpse into my world. We danced together, talked about the boys we liked, the boys we didn’t, the music they had never heard of before. We took pictures in the bathroom mirror, smiling with our drinks in the air. We stuck dollars into the dancers’ briefs and forgot about everything outside of this place.

Becky drove us home, and they raved about the night. They begged me to take them back. Homely texted me and thanked me for coming to watch the performance.

Of course, I wrote back. *I’ll be back again soon!* I added a smiley face.

“And Homely needs to do my makeup soon. He’s so good at it!” Tina and Becky talked for the rest of the drive while I smiled from the backseat. Downtown Orlando lit up the sky behind us, a little star dotting the dark horizon.

You sit on your bed and listen to the live news reports. Your boyfriend is working and your roommate is out of town. The police chief is talking to a group of reporters. Much is still unknown. Someone else steps up to the microphone. You think you hear fifteen. But when asked to clarify, you hear it. He says the number. From twenty to fifty. Fifty people killed. And

suddenly, your bed is nothing. You cannot feel the springs under you, the blankets on your lap, the pillows behind you. That thing in your stomach moves up and into your face. You feel it behind your eyes, in your ears. It rings. Fifty. There it is again. Pulse. Your Pulse. Twenty minutes away Pulse. Dance until your legs give out Pulse. Red and blue lights blink on the screen. Yellow tape cuts across. You wonder what the inside looks like. The dancefloor. The DJ booth. The emptiness inside. You remember the Pulse you know. The whoever you wanted to be Pulse. The never going to leave Pulse. The where you learned to dance Pulse. The last time you went. Your cousins. Homely. The what ifs. You think about your cousins who never wanted to leave. About the people who just wanted to show others the love that was hiding inside. The queens that danced. The dancers that loved. The lovers who held hands. A man with a man. A woman with a woman. Life lines and heart lines that pressed together on the patio. The drinks that were too weak, the music that was too loud. The nights that seemed to blend into mornings. The walls, away from the dancing, where men kissed men because they could, a place outside of their own rooms. Weeks later, you will return to these walls, to the fence that blocks this building itself. The fence will be dotted with flowers, flags, with ribbons rippling in the wind, photos of the forty-nine lost. There will be mothers and sons holding hands, because maybe that's the only way to keep walking. You will fall onto your knees. You will claw your fingers into the cage side of the fence. You will only look down because gravity gives you no choice. The sun will be out. You will wonder why. You will wonder what would have happened if you we went that night. You will realize that life moves forward without answers. You will remember waiting for the names, for the list of those that died. You will remember the phone calls, the statuses, the text messages. You will mourn the loss of the lives lost. You will realize that it is possible to mourn

the loss of a place, of the lights. The name itself. Before you leave, you will look up. You will see the walls. You will see the entrance. You will see the wooden patio. You will picture the line outside of the front door, imagine the sound of roaring music and laughter again, feel the vibrating bass in your chest, your spine, your throat. You will nod a silent thank you. You will walk away. You will keep walking, and Pulse will be behind you, its flags and colors waving.

SCRAPS FROM '16

after Ocean Vuong's "Notebook Fragments"

I sketched a heart into my hazy bathroom reflection—
the shape like two bass clefs kissing.
If you stay the night, you will see it in the morning
carved into your own image like a scar.

I bite my cuticles because I can't find our constellation,
the stars scattered like table salt.

The white bougainvillea is dead now. Its leaves thin like Bible pages; fragments will settle like
dust, like sand, the way gravity wants it to.

My grandmother almost left my grandfather, but then found out she was pregnant with my
mother, almost gave her away. My father almost never left West Palm, almost never took that
job, almost convinced my mother to give up on hormone treatment because life is supposed to be
that way. What am I missing?

"I heard there was a shooting. Are you okay?" Today, I remembered that morning again, the first
question that day.

Finding Orion's belt has become a bad habit.

I told you that you were the first boy I ever took home. I lied.
But you were the first boy to talk to my mom about her birdfeeder,
to ask her if that was cardamom in the soup,
to wonder if that was the same driveway my father traced my shape with sidewalk chalk.

She says that I should write about it soon,
but I don't know what words to use.

There was a fire back in my hometown, one that snuck into my back porch, but stopped just
before taking everything. It stained the patio bricks with an ombré ash the rain couldn't erase.

I don't sing in the shower anymore.
Instead, I only lip sync to the water hushing against my spine,

my head down, my eyes clenched, crow's feet fanned like neurons reaching,
like dead branches begging to fall.

When Lady Gaga dies, I'm going to lose it.

“You need to eat.”

My mom slices fruit but I only remember
that apples can be eaten when they still have stems,
sturdy like candle wicks ready for flame.

I was a coward for asking your friend if you were okay. I still couldn't talk to you, but that day I
thought about you for the first time in a long time. Some tell me that getting over you will take
time, that I will make progress eventually. I'm not sure if *this* is progress.

We drove to Daytona (Remember?) to watch the sun rise.
My sunroof opened, and you reclined in my battered passenger seat,
feet on dash, the typical 6 am ride.
We buried our feet into the grit of broken shells
and watched the ocean, topped with salty foam,
return to the shore just the way the waves wanted.

Sometimes, I think I know too much.

I'm sure it'll be fine.

I'm sure it'll work out.

I'm sure we will be okay.

I'm sure I will be fine.

Note: Optimism might be too fucking hard sometimes.

I told my mother what had happened, what had ended, that I was glad it was over but not like
this; that I wish I could have been that fire, tasted what it tasted, turning everything into
sweeping, cackling dust, laughing into the wisped sky, stopping just before I burned everything
else alive. Anger only knows “go.”

Once, I towered over candles near fences and flags,
striped and colored, near pavement.
My knees felt like only bone near the road while citybirds and mothers
paced behind me.

Maybe anger also knows “stop.”

I am home for the weekend to make sure the fire actually happened. The grass is gone, erased, evaporated. The magnolia tree charred; my mom’s birdfeeder waiting to be hung again. The burnt bark is peeling away like skin after sunburn but I know, after the wine glasses long empty, after the ashtray is cleaned, that the tree will heal again. I’m sure of it.

THIS I KNOW

The Empress: Femininity, Intuition, Knowledge.

Buffy held the amber-colored piece to the light. The old veins in her hand were white, prominent yet soft like bodies under bedsheets. The shadowed dents on her forearm muscles proved the years of yoga and Pilates and tantric sex she told me about in too much detail.

“Interesting,” she said, holding the plastic bag that contained the golden, gristled specimen. I think she smiled, but just barely. “Pretty big for a kidney stone, yeah?”

“Biggest one yet,” I said. It was my third, and I was twenty years old. I was in Orlando for my second year of college.

When Buffy found out that I had finally passed this one, she begged me to bring it in to her weekly yoga class I had been attending for over a year. I looked forward to her classes—to the cards she would bring in and pull for us, delivering a personal message to each attendee, to the long-winded speeches about the planet’s energy levels, and to the crazy moves she invented and named herself, ones that a yoga master might look down on.

“It hurt?” she asked.

“Like hell.”

The doctor told me that a five-millimeter stone was the cutoff for surgery. Mine was just under that measurement by a half of a millimeter. And after a week of hot baths, cold beers, hours on the Stairmaster, and the infrequent but prominent waves of nausea, the spiked sphere squeezed itself through my left ureter, fell into my bladder, and there it waited until I simply could not hold in my piss any longer. I was walking on the treadmill for two hours before it came.

My doctor told me to think of it like a pregnancy. She was a young physician who just started at the ER I went to, and told me that she had two kids of her own. “Anything we tell women who are pregnant, we tell people who are passing kidney stones. Well, besides the beer. That’ll help you pee,” she said. “Stay active. Keep drinking lots of fluids.”

My response was simple. “You got it. And you know, you should consider America’s Next Top Model.” It might have been the pain medicine dripping into my arm, but I meant it. She was beautiful.

About a week later, the rock shot out of my penis without pain, almost relief. It sank into the yellow bath at the base of a urinal like hail in a thunderstorm, finding its puddle on the earth. I reached in, soaking my bitten cuticles in the pungent roux. I wanted to keep it like a trophy, showing off my victory of too much caffeine and shitty, salt-infused frozen dinners. The doctor needed it also, to figure out what I was ingesting that made me get stones so often.

“You know kidneys relate to fear,” Buffy told me just as more students started to fill the humid gymnasium. She looked at me with more words behind her eyes but she held back, waiting for me to piece together the thoughts I needed to, so I could come up with the conclusion on my own. This was her way of doing things. Finding meaning in almost everything: the batch of flowers that grew chaotically around her front door, a circle of mushrooms around her backyard bird feeder, the pebble she almost stepped on walking to her class. But she would do this often, too—drop these simple statements but within the words, holding more than just a quiet phrase.

I returned to my mat and tucked my kidney stone into one of my sneakers for the rest of the practice. “Barefoot,” Buffy told us on the first day of the class, “connects us to Gaia.” She

spoke slowly, with fervor. “Even with floors beneath us, there is a greater connection if we have our shoes off.” Buffy was known around campus for being a little “out there” and that’s what I loved most about her. Even at her older age, she would often dye her hair pink or purple and always kept it in a pixie cut. She would walk around campus without shoes, carrying a yoga mat under one arm and a clear quartz cluster gripped in her hand. She said that crystals were the only way she stayed sane in today’s world.

She told us about ancient India often, talking about it so thoroughly I could have sworn she walked into class that day directly from that time period. She explained that the gods revealed the language of Sanskrit to the sages, the seers, the enlightened ones. “Prana” refers to life force that a person holds within them, and it is often interchangeable with the breath—the actual act of breathing in a yoga practice. It was first mentioned in the Chandogya Upanishad, a book of holy texts.

“Remember the breath,” Buffy would tell us often, usually in more challenging poses like Garudasana (Eagle), Bakasana (Crow), or Utthita Trikonasana (Extended Triangle). Aside from the meditation she would start each class with, she told us to focus our breath to enhance each pose. “Find your drishti,” she would also say. “Drishti” refers to the focus gazed that one holds onto in a yoga pose. Looking at something in the distance helps someone stabilize in a stance, especially one that challenges balance. I often chose a light switch or a fire alarm on the ceiling of the auditorium that we would practice in.

Our classes started with the physical practice and end with a lecture of some kind. Today, however, Buffy wheeled out a large, dry erase board. “We’re gonna mix it up a little today,”

Buffy said, parking the board in front of our semicircle of yoga mats. She told us she was going to lecture and then we would put that knowledge into a physical practice.

She reached in her bag and pulled out a new package of markers, each a different color. She ripped open the package and looked out at each of us with a smile. “Today’s class is important,” she said. “Now, has anyone ever heard of the word ‘chakra’ before?”

“Chakra” comes from the Sanskrit word that means “wheel.” In ancient texts, it is said that the human body contains energy centers in the body, hundreds in fact, though the writing focused of seven main spots. When one of these centers is out of balance, dimmed, or blocked in any way, the human body reacts in the form of sickness. Each chakra is a different color, and depending on how balanced a person is, the colors with sometimes be brighter or dimmer. The balance is found in many ways, and each chakra is balanced differently depending on what that wheel correlates to. Each chakra has a part of the body and color associated with it.

We began our physical practice after, with my kidney stone still tucked away in my sneaker. We started in mountain pose. Tadasana.

Five of Wands: Tension. Disagreement. Willpower.

I spent my first year of college in Ft. Myers. I was eighteen, on my own for the first time, in a city larger than what I was used to. A group of friends from high school and I went together and made the transition as a group.

This university was known for its connection to nature, and that was a large part in my decision for going. It was near the everglades, and the college was filled with giant trees shadowing the cemented walkways and wooden bridges over brown swamp water with signs that warned of alligators.

After a Modern History class that I had with my friend Sammie, we were walking back to the freshmen dorm rooms. She lived only a few floors above me. Near the library, a grass field stretched out, and we saw a group of students huddled together. We heard shouting but could not decipher what was being said. The sun hung above us and made my skin sweat beneath my shirt, my back wet against my backpack.

As we got closer, we saw bright-colored posters being waved past the onlookers.

“And look at you! You’re really gon’ tell me that you’re not asking for it?” A man was screaming into a megaphone.

We had joined the semicircle now. Behind the shouting man, other people held signs that read things like “Fags Will Burn” and “Soldiers Deserve To Die.” They were shouting, too.

“Is this really happening?” Sammie asked, her tone flat. We were now within our peers. Students with us were shouting back at the man and at the others behind him. Some of the protestors talked with those along the semicircle.

The man had been accusing a girl of dressing inappropriately. “With those shorts, you’re just askin’ for it!” The megaphone whistled.

People fought back. “Fuck off!” “Leave her alone!” “No one wants you here!”

Usually, I can stay calm in these situations, but when I saw Sammie’s eyes start to glisten, I felt an anger swell inside of me. I started shaking, and I put an arm over her shoulder. I told her that these people just wanted a reaction, that they wanted to be hated.

Sammie’s brother was in the military. “What the hell is wrong with them?” she asked, her voice breaking. She kept her head down, wiping her face with her sleeves. I was about to ask her if she wanted to leave, but before I could, an old woman approached us.

“You can’t take the truth, sweetie?” she said to Sammie. The woman held a sign with a glass of wine and a marijuana leaf glued to it. A big red “x” crossed out both images. She wore an ankle-length denim shirt and a straw hat, her gray hair spilling out of the back in a loose, wild braid.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” It came out of me like I had no choice, the words spilling out of my mouth.

She looked at me and smiled, exposing her dimples camouflaged into her wrinkles and yellowing teeth. “Oh, I see. So you can’t handle it, either?”

I knew she was just trying to provoke me, but I couldn’t stop. I shook and sweat. The smile had pissed me off more than anything.

“C’mon,” I said to Sammie, my arm still around her.

We started to turn when I heard the woman call me a faggot under her breath. The word was said with force, the “f” came out with a harshness and weight while the rest of the word trailed behind it. I heard it clearly. I stopped and turned. The woman had been looking away, smirking. After a moment, she looked at me and said, “If man lies with a man as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination.”

I cut her off before she kept going. “Leviticus 20,” I said. I thought she would look upset, but instead she smiled. I wanted to get away, but she wanted a reaction.

“You know the Word?” she asked. “And you’re still an ignorant faggot, aren’t you?” She was moving closer, her eyes searching my face for a response.

My parents enrolled my brother and me into a private school at a young age because they thought it would be a better education for us. This school was founded on Southern Baptist

beliefs, though you did not have to practice that religion to attend. I was baptized Catholic, though this was probably just to please my father's side of the family. Throughout my time at that school, I lived in fear of hell, of the wrath of God, of eternal damnation. It wasn't until I left to go to a public high school that I broke out of that mindset, and I had stopped the fear from taking over my life anymore.

"Do you even fucking read the Bible?" I asked, this time my voice loud. "I was raised in a Christian school, bitch." I had never called someone names or cursed at anyone I had not known, let alone an old woman. I felt my body taking over, my mouth reacting before my brain could process. I knew this is what she wanted, yet still I fed into it. "Leviticus says you can't wear clothes of two different materials, too. Look at you. Are you fucking kidding me?"

"I am not an abomination like you, you faggot."

"No sin is greater than another." I screamed this, my nostrils flared. "Fuckers!" Now, Sammie was pulling me from behind. She had stopped crying. I took a breath, and noticed the woman had stopped. She turned and approached other students, those who had crowded around to hear our exchange.

I left with my middle finger in the air. We walked back to the dorms, talking about how fucked up people like that were.

Going to a public school in high school allowed me to release the notion of what it meant to be a Christian, to follow Jesus, to accept him into our hearts and be filled with his love. I left, I discovered more in the world, in the new school. I found people who made me laugh, really laugh, so hard I cried and my stomach clenched. There were no detentions for untucked shirts or lectures about God's grace. Memorizing Bible verses became a childhood memory, though those

words stayed with me. I couldn't shake them off. I still can't. But my perception of religion changed. My idea of what it meant to follow God or a book was lost and I swept it away, far enough to live without fear.

After the encounter, I did everything I could to get away from the perception of typical Christianity and closer to what I was taught was evil. I bought tarot cards and crystals, wore necklaces with pentacle charms, lit candles and recited a saying that was printed on the back of the label—spells for money, romance, spiritual awakening. I wanted to get far away, but still, those verses were there.

The Magician: Power. Potential. Awareness.

We sat in a circle, and I was unsure what to do next. My friend Nicole joined me, after I explained to her what exactly was on the flyer. We were juniors in high school then, trying to break free of everything that our old school instilled in us. In our minds, we were rebels.

Dreamcatcher was the only spiritual store in our hometown. Books and pendulums and shapes of wooden angel wings adorned the shelves. Incense lined the front counter and filled the one-room store with sweet, pungent scents: sandalwood, eucalyptus, clove. Tarot cards packaged in small, elaborately designed boxes were stuck tight in the bookshelves. I found this store through a quick internet search, and I tried to drag as many people with me there as I could, Nicole being one of them.

The flyer for tonight's class advertised a vague description of awareness and drum meditation. I pleaded with Nicole to join me because I didn't want to be alone.

I was the only boy in the circle, and Nicole and I were definitely the youngest ones there. We felt out of place though still comforted by the others around us. They greeted us with large

smiles and told us that if we had any questions to ask. We stayed silent as one of the women, who we later found out owned Dreamcatcher, said, “They should be here any moment.”

Some discussion filled the room. One woman talked about her book deal that she just signed, and another small group was discussing someone’s husband. “I just can tell something is bothering him,” one woman said. “His aura has been so dim lately.” I turned to Nicole and smiled, hoping that tonight would be worth my anticipation.

The front door’s bell chimed and a woman walked through. She was dressed in all black, and everyone went silent. “Barb!” the owner exclaimed, “It’s been so long.”

Barb smiled back. “I don’t think there’s ever been this many people before.” She scanned the crowd, showing her teeth through jet black lipstick. “Welcome everyone.”

She moved through the circle of bodies and sat towards the back of the store. “Any way we could get a chair for Bill?” she asked the owner. “He should be coming in any second. He had to get more stuff out of the car.” A chair was placed near where Barb sat and the door chimed again.

A man, who I assumed was Bill, walked through the door. Unlike Barb, Bill wore a turquoise shirt with a beige, leather vest over it. His skin was dark and a white feather dangled in his shoulder-length hair. He was silent as he approached the circle. He didn’t smile like Barb did, and he barely looked at anyone in the circle.

He placed a drum, speckled with bright painted patterns, in front of the chair and sat. “Welcome everyone.” Finally, a smile, though not as large as Barb’s. I felt Nicole stiffen next to me, and I realized how tight I had gotten. I tried to loosen up, smile, rest my palms on the floor behind me and hold myself up.

“Thank you so much for coming, Bill,” the owner said. “I know you don’t leave the reservation much these days.”

“Glad to be here.” Bill spoke in a soft voice, fatherly and low, but it echoed through the store.

“Whenever you’re ready, we can begin,” the owner said.

Bill sat on the chair with the drum between his knees while Barb sat on the ground next to him. They both scanned the circle briefly, then Bill said that he wanted to wait another minute before starting. “Someone else is coming,” he said.

Nicole and I both looked towards the door, waiting for the chime to go off one more time.

“He doesn’t mean a person,” Barb said. She smiled. It was obvious that Nicole and I were new at this.

There was a brief meditation led by Bill. He created a steady, prominent beat with the drum and his palms, and he prompted us to close our eyes and listen to his voice. He led us in a guided meditation. I remember being led into a cave near a beach, Bill counting down from ten, for us to have an open mind and allow whatever was supposed to happen, happen. I might have been trying too hard, wanting desperately to see something or have an epiphany of some kind. I opened my eyes and saw everyone there, all the women and Nicole next to me, her eyes shut, mouth barely opened. I shut my eyes and tried again, and kept them shut for the rest of the meditation.

Once we “returned to our bodies”—Barb’s words—we were instructed to stand in front of Bill, one by one, and we would receive an energy cleansing. The first woman stood, she was older, with cropped hair graying at the roots. She took a deep breath, and seemed to be calm. He

lit a small votive candle and moved it around the outline of her body, looking directly into the flame.

The silence broke. "So, you're having a grandchild," Bill said.

She smiled. "Yes, I am." She remained still.

"It's going to be a girl," he said, pausing to take a deep breath. He moved the candle slowly from her right shoulder down to her hand.

"I know," the woman said. "We just got the ultrasound pictures last week." Her smile widened.

"And she's going to be really healthy," Bill said. "And happy."

I looked at Nicole, now terrified of what he might see in my future if anything. He remained quiet for some people who stood in front of him, only ending the candle-moving ritual with, "You are now blessed." To some, he gave warnings of health or relationships.

"He is like a fox," he told one woman about her husband. "Fun, yet sometimes sneaky. Be aware." His voice was monotone, straight-forward, no detection of emotion. Barb sat with him, putting in her intuitive thoughts every so often.

When it was my turn, I stood in front of Bill, arms stiff to my sides, palms sweat. "Why are you nervous, sweetie?" Barb asked. "Just relax." She smiled.

The candle hovered by my body in Bill's hand. He didn't say anything until the end. "You are now blessed."

I sat down while Nicole stood, and like me, it was silent until Bill said that she was blessed, too.

While Nicole sat down, I caught Barb staring at me. “Bill,” she said. “Do you see that?” She pointed at me. My heart began to race.

“Yeah, I was about to mention that,” Bill said. He was staring at me now, too.

“Does your head hurt, sweetie?” Barb asked.

I didn’t answer right away. I was wondering what they saw. A spirit by me, maybe. A health problem. I must have been quiet for too long.

“Does it feel tingly at all?” she asked.

It did. Maybe. I wasn’t sure. It could have been the nerves. “A little.”

They asked me to stand in front of them again. This time I felt myself shaking, my heartbeat at the base of my throat. They both looked just above my line of sight, without a candle this time.

“It’s the crown,” Bill said, glancing over at Barb. She nodded in agreement and I was confused. It must have read on my face.

“It’s a chakra,” Barb explained. “Like an energy center on the body.” She told me that it connects to the divine, to the universe, that mine was opening up now. “You’re going to grow up and be super connected, sweetie,” Barb continued. “This is an amazing thing.” She was sincere in her voice, her smile. But still, even after Nicole and I left, I felt the same. It wouldn’t be years until I would know what the chakras were, how I could work with them, how much I had seen beyond my Christian school upbringing. After that night, I did all I could to try to find meaning in anything, find that there was something bigger than I was out there. Somewhere.

Ten of Cups: Fulfillment. Family. Joy.

I was ten years old when my Aunt Danielle took me to the sunrise on the beach for the first time. Danielle was my mother's sister and the youngest of three. She drove an orange Volkswagen beetle adorned with bumper stickers plastered to the outside and various collected shells, flowers, and sticks on the inside. We drove with the windows rolled down while a small cone of incense burned in one of the cup holders. Sublime played into the hissing wind.

The sand was colder than I expected. Damp, too. We walked the coast, collecting shells and sea glass that had been freshly washed up by the night waves. Every now and then, we would come across a small mound in the sand. My aunt would take as many shells as she could and form a circle around the hump. She would then go into the grassy area above the shore and find fallen branches and stick them into the ground at the highest point. "When turtles lay eggs, they kick up a bunch of sand," she explained to me, adding that she wanted to help protect them. "And even if it's not, it still looks pretty don't you think?"

We found a clear area that seemed flat enough and laid out a thick, woven blanket. Aunt Danielle sat with her legs crossed and put her canvas tote bag in front of her. I watched her reach her hand in, the bag appearing flat and empty, but she pulled out a card and examined it. On it, there was an angel with its back, its wings, towards the viewer, sitting on a large rock and overlooking a cascading waterfall into a river. I watched her look at the card, study it, and she turned to me and asked if I wanted to try.

I had been taught that cards were evil, that psychics were dark and should be avoided at all costs. But I trusted my aunt; I saw the images of angels that I had read about in Bible class. I reached in and picked out my card. The ocean sang and the sun cracked the horizon in front of us.

Ten years later, I would have tarot cards and angel cards lining my dresser and bookshelves. Every so often, I would shuffle and pick a new card to face up on the top. I would read the saying on the card, think about its message, and repeat it again. I would repeat it until I remembered it, and throughout the day I would say it again to myself. Those messages stuck with me for as long as I needed them.

Five of Cups: Physical health. Healing. Recovery.

I woke up with my stomach burning. Twisting, writhing pains that only subsides when I curved myself into a “U” on my bathroom floor, in an oversized hoodie, with my shower spurring in the hottest possible temperature. The steam that steeped from the sides of the curtains comforted me barely; the heat made the aching subside.

I was in my second year of college and living in Orlando. I convinced myself, at first, that the pain was gas or indigestion of some sort, but when the pain moved from my entire abdomen and pinpointed itself under my ribcage on the right side of my back, I knew it was something else. I told myself I would be fine, to just wait it out. I called my mom around five in the morning and she told me that I should wait another hour or so before doing anything. About thirty minutes later, I drove myself to the ER in my pajama pants and oversized hoodie.

I forgot almost the entire drive. I just remember my body, hunched over the center console while still looking forward. The only thing that eased the pain was turning and bending my body into where the cramping was. The tightness became worse as I pulled into the parking lot.

When I passed and was able to retrieve my third kidney stone, Buffy begged me to bring it in so she could examine it. I knew it was a weird request, but it was Buffy.

About a year later, for the first time on my left side, I felt another stone about to pass. After more x-rays and urine tests, my doctor told me that I had a three-millimeter stone. “Shouldn’t be too bad,” the doctor told me, “You’ve had worse before.”

He was right. But while the pain was not as bad as I had felt in the past, the length was incomparable. The stone sat in my kidney, flirting with the ureter and trying to pass for three and a half weeks before I went back for a visit. Over those three weeks, the pain was manageable with hot baths and alcohol and more water than I had ever consumed before. I refused to take pain medication because I wanted to be able to feel the pain, to notice where the stone was at all times to tell if it had passed into my bladder. The doctor told me that I would need to come back in two more weeks, and if the stone had not passed by then, the last option was surgery. If the stone had blocked the urinary passage, it could result in life-threatening problems.

I told Buffy about the situation, and for the next two weeks I lived as normally as I could. The pain had subsided at some times, usually a day or two at a time. But then, it would come back, cramping and twisting at my side. I arrived at yoga class a few days later, and Buffy handed me a small glass bottle with a yellow label.

“Here,” she said. “This is lemon oil. Essential oil, of course. Not that fake stuff.” She told me that I needed to rub it on my kidneys with some coconut oil for the next week or so.” I knew not to ask questions, as that might have been seen as doubt in Buffy’s mind.

For the next week, I figured I should try it. All my usual tricks weren’t working. I scooped the firmed coconut oil with three fingers and rubbed it together in my palms to loosen it. Hunched over my bathroom sink, I bent my arm to my lower back and rubbed the coconut oil on

my skin. Next, I added a few drops of the essential oil on each side of my lower back. Each time I did this I thought how ridiculous this was. But still, what did I have to lose?

I went in for my urology appointment to get my last x-ray before potential surgery. The doctor wanted to see if the stone had shifted from my kidney into my ureter or bladder. I knew it hadn't; the pain had been minimal so I knew it was still settled in my kidney, resistant to move. I took the x-ray, the typical pants down, jewelry off scenario, and walked back to the small room and waited for the doctor to bring the results.

I had never been in surgery before, and found myself questioning the specifics of it, if my family would come up to help me, if I needed to go under anesthesia for it, how long would I be out.

The doctor entered the room and broke these thoughts.

“So,” he said, examining a copy of the x-ray, “you passed it.” I wasn't sure if he was telling me or asking me. It didn't matter. I hadn't.

“No.”

He looked up from the x-ray and smiled. He might have thought I was kidding. I thought for a moment, he was playing some joke, like it was normal for doctors to do to patients to make them at ease before a surgery.

“Well, unless my x-ray is wrong,” he said, “which it isn't, your stone is gone.”

I emailed Buffy when I got home and asked for her phone number, telling her that this was something I needed to discuss as soon as she could talk. She emailed me back and I called. I told her everything the doctor had said.

“I knew it,” Buffy said. “I knew it would be gone.” I could picture her smiling, the scarf around her neck, the confidence in her body language.

“Crazy, huh?” I wasn’t sure how Buffy could be so confident about it. There was no explanation for the stone being gone. It disappeared. It left my body, evaporating into nothing.

We said our goodbyes and I hung up the phone. I had no choice but to believe.

Seven of Cups: Possibility. Wishful Thinking. Synchronicity.

When I was younger, I would come home from school and change from my collared shirt and khaki pants into a t-shirt and nylon shorts. I would throw my backpack onto my bed, my papers and worksheets spilling out—Bible quizzes, math problems, verses copied as many times as it took to memorize them. I would spend the afternoons reading books that intrigued me, watching shows that made me laugh, cooking with my mom, helping her stir cake batters and crush graham crackers for pie crusts.

My dad had carved a trail in the woods near our property, a path that led to a large oak tree. He nailed three wooden planks into the trunk as stepping stools so I could easily climb up, reach for the branches, and pull myself up to the highest point I could get to. I would walk these trails, not thinking, but instead using the flowers as road signs, collecting leaves and acorns just because I wanted to. I would bring bouquets of wildflowers back to my mom who would place them in a glass cup and center it on our dining room table. I would climb the tree, watching the sun set through the glowing emerald of the leaves, the stems, the other trees in the distance. I would walk home before it was too dark, exhaling the sense of wonder and leaving it outside.

WAITING FOR THE END OF THE WORLD

I think it is peaceful because it is silent

(Why do I associate these two?) &

the back yard oak trees hushed in horizontal highways

roadmapping where we run barefoot because

it is too dark now. "I told you," someone said.

"If only you'd listen." But here it comes—

wrath like a moth's wing slicing the wind.

Ash like glitter like snow like dandelion seeds

like us in a matter of moments or broken
bones

or Texas Hold 'Em my first tattoo mom's mimosas

Hannah yellow lines handlebars

everything before everything after

Will it be silent

there too?

HOLE IN THE GROUND

Waxy clay stuck into the grooves of our soles as we approached the sidewalk curving into more bushes and trees. The ground here was much different from Florida's—instead of emerald blades and dirt like dark roast, pebbles and rust blanketed the earth we walked on. It was still cool outside, even without a breeze. At least, it was cool for us Floridians. While we wore hoodies and long pants, others, who we assumed were from this part of the country, wore short-sleeved shirts and cargo shorts.

“It should be coming up,” my brother, Michael, said.

“I would think so,” I said. “I don't think we could miss it.” I smiled.

We were alone on the trail. The rocks parting beneath our feet and the bushes we brushed were the only sounds around. I kept my head down, looking at the imperfect rocks to the sides of the trail. When I saw one of a particular shape, or a color that was uncommon from those around it, I would put it in the pocket. I did this until my pocket protruded into the denim with obvious suspicion. We weren't supposed to take anything from here. “Leave only footprints and take only pictures,” a sign at the beginning of the trail read.

Two months earlier, my brother called to tell me that he signed me up for a contest.

“It's a lip sync battle,” he said. “I knew you'd be good at it.”

I rolled my eyes and told him, simply, that I wouldn't do it. Michael has always been up to this sort of stuff—contests, radio call-ins, sweepstakes. He did this so much because he won often. “That boy is the luckiest person I know,” my grandpa said. “Got it in his blood.”

Michael explained that it was a contest through a country music radio station (“I don’t even listen to country music”) and how the competition was in a week (“I don’t know if I can make it”). He told me that the prize was a trip to Las Vegas to watch the Academy of Country Music Awards (“I didn’t know that was a thing”) and how much he would love to go and show me what Vegas was like (“When did you say it was again?”).

I think that he assumed I would be good at the lip sync because I had a past in theater, or perhaps because I was easily the more flamboyant of us. Growing up, our differences were obvious, and through adulthood those differences became even more obvious. When we were young, he would always be outside with my father working in the yard or throwing a football while I stayed inside, in our cooled, air-conditioned living room with my mom, re-watching *The Wizard of Oz* and helping her with house chores. He was my father’s son and I was my mother’s. As much as my dad asked me to help with the grass or begged to teach me how to throw a baseball, I pleaded with him until my mother would step in and tell him that I simply didn’t like those things that boys, like Michael, did. I would put a pair of pajama pants over my head, securing the plaid-patterned fabric around my hairline with the elastic at the waist, and dance through the house singing and sliding on the wooden floor while my mom recorded me on our chunky VHS camcorder.

Even in my early twenties, as Michael approached his late twenties, I noticed these same quirks carried into adulthood. Michael established a successful car-detailing business while I stayed inside as much as I could, reading and writing and painting. The heat in the south was something I tried to avoid in any case, and Michael soaked it up—his skin a beachy, freckled tone while mine grew paler.

Michael continued explaining the rules of the contest. “So here’s the deal,” he said, “There’s gonna be ten people total competing. It’s at some restaurant I’ve never been to downtown.” He told me that he got one of the last sign-up spots, and that he had to call in and pretend like he was me to the radio personalities. “I had to act really excited and thanked them a lot. So you have to act just as excited. Okay?” he said. I knew I could fake that.

“Just pick a song you know that you think you can perform pretty good.”

“Okay. Deal.” I sighed. I assumed he understood my tone, deciphering my lower pitch and drawn-out vowels.

“It’s worth a shot,” he said. “It’ll be fun no matter what.”

My mother and I watched my dad shout at my brother from behind the sidelines, the black line that guarded the court and the bench where other basketball players sat. My brother was thirteen and he was the best player on his team. Each week we would drive to the city gymnasium and watch a game. I brought my Gameboy to play on or a Goosebumps book to read, knowing the game would be too long for me to sit through without a distraction. My dad was the coach, and he yelled. My mother and I sunk in the stands when he would throw a fit, throwing the clipboard or almost cursing before remembering he was surrounded by kids. Often, the referees would give him warnings and, sometimes, they would throw him out.

I tried playing basketball once when I was eight. Dad coached my team, too, and I begged him to let me sit on the bench. Every game, on the way there, I would say, “Please, Dad. I’ll play next time.” The other boys wanted to play more, anyway, and I would rather watch.

My brother loved sports, and I preferred staying in—movies, coloring books, cooking with my mom. My brother broke more bones than I could count and I knew every color in the Crayola box. He knew cars, I knew Broadway.

On the sidelines, my father's nostrils flared as he yelled at my brother. "C'mon, Mike! What was that?"

My brother ran to the other team's side, held out his arms, and made a face. I rolled my eyes. I didn't get sports. I continued playing on my Gameboy next to my mom.

People thought we shouldn't have wasted a day driving out to the Grand Canyon.

"Let me get this straight," my uncle, months later, said at a family get-together, holding a Bud Light in one hand and plastered with a smile. His forehead creased in confusion. "You win a trip to *Vegas*, and you drive eight hours there and back to see a hole in the ground?" I nodded, smiled, and told him that it was worth the drive. "You're nuts, man."

We rented a car for the day and drove out through the dried, flat landscape outside of the city that entered into the brown mountains flecked with green every few miles. Brown, because it was all rock. I expected more green.

The roads skimmed the sides of cliffs, overlooking steep clay that led into more valleys and smaller towns beneath—towns with pastel-colored roofs and gas stations with only one or two pumps. I had never driven on highways like these before, and gave up about an hour into the trip.

"Would you mind driving for now?" I asked Michael. "I'll drive again once it gets flatter."

It wouldn't get flat for a while. I watched the mountains grow and shrink from the windows, the sky touching down on the rocks just on the tops of each one. I wondered where the other cars were going, if everyone was going to the Grand Canyon. Las Vegas was far behind us now, and we still had a long way to go before we got there.

I was excited for Vegas, but I didn't like the city as much as my brother did. The drinks were weak, but they were free with a dollar or two tip to the casino servers. My brother played blackjack and roulette with other guys in dark sunglasses and collared shirts while I played the touchscreen poker that lined the walls near the slot machines.

On the first day there, an older woman, I guess in her sixties, sat two seats down from me while I played electronic two-card poker.

"You gotta just keep on bettin' the max, okay?" she told me. "It's the only way you can win big here." I assumed she read my lack of confidence.

"Thanks," I said, smiling. I took a sip from my pineapple vodka, watered down and bitter. "It's easy when the max is a quarter."

You needed money to be here, I learned. And since I was in college and didn't have much, I found the best ways for me to play.

I sat at the machines with computerized dealers until my brother finished a poker game at a table with actual people, and we would walk down the Strip to every hotel we could: the Bellagio, the Wynn, Caesar's Palace, Hara's. We always threw in a dollar or two into the machines for a drink. "Just put a dollar into the machine and act like you're planning on staying. Take it slow," my brother, the gambling guru, said. "The drink is free that way." The road away from Vegas, through the mountains, could not have been more different from those hotels.

The road out here was silent. We scanned the radio until the static hidden in the music was bearable. Then it would creep slowly, and we would find a new station. The closer we drove to the mountains, the more fragile they looked to me. Rocks on rocks on rocks like giant anthills, like the anthills we would destroy when we were younger. My brother would light a smoke bomb in the summer, turn it over, and stick it into the piled dirt. Colored smoke would seep from the small holes at the top, the small tunnels the ants would travel through.

We took a table in the back of the restaurant and watched the servers set up the stage for the lip sync competition. “I didn’t know it would be this big,” I said. “There’s spotlights and shit.” I ordered a drink.

The restaurant had a bar area in the back where the stage was being set up. Booths and tables formed a semicircle around it and workers there were testing the lights and microphones. Against my will, my brother had invited some of my family to watch the contest. My father sat next to me while my grandparents sat across from the booth.

We ordered food, but I couldn’t eat. My nerves had gotten to me. Looking around, there seemed to be two main groups of people filing into the restaurant to either perform or watch the competition: younger, teenage girls that wore sequins, fringe, and cowboy boots all at once and older men with handlebar mustaches and button-ups. I realized that we were the only table without someone wearing a cowboy hat.

If I was being honest with myself, I felt bad being here. It was good to see my family, but I couldn’t help feeling like a fraud. My brother signed me up, my brother listened to country music, my brother wanted to go to Vegas. Perhaps he was doing this for me, if only slightly, as a

way to get back on stage and have some fun, to go back home and see some family. And while Las Vegas did intrigue me, I felt bad taking a spot from the competition from someone who really wanted to go. I wondered if some of the teenage girls spent hours in front of the mirrors, practicing with their friends, or the older men listened to songs and tried as hard as they could to memorize each line. But even then, I knew how much my brother wanted to go. He told me about the lights, the liquor, the people. He told me how much he loved to gamble, to listen to country music, the nightlife, beer. I decided I would do this for him.

I was thirteen and my mom had just picked me up from school. I was finally able to untuck my red polo. I knew I was telling her today. It was August, and I repeated it to myself like a song I could not erase: *Just tell her. Tell her. Say it. Do it.*

I must have been quieter than usual, or perhaps my mom had a keen intuition, but before my mouth could push the words out, she asked, “Is everything okay, Ryan?” For some reason, I felt that adding my name to the end of the question added more to the words than just a curiosity.

“Actually, no,” I said. I waited for a moment, putting words together carefully. I sighed. Then, “I don’t think that I like girls.”

My mom kept driving, her head forward. “Okay,” my mom said simply. She told me she always had a suspicion and wanted me to tell her when I was ready.

I knew that my family had to already have an idea. I was not like the other boys, the ones who played sports, got dirty, fought. I came out to my brother a few years later, after my mom convinced me it was time to tell him.

My father, when I told him, became more protective over me, ensuring no one made fun of me. “As long as you’re not *that* gay,” he said. “You know.”

When I told my brother when I was sixteen, he asked, “But how do you know?” I told him that I just did. I couldn’t explain it. Like my father, he also warned me about being *too gay*. They were worried that I would be an easy target; I tried to explain to them that I felt fine, comfortable, that things were different with my friends. Maybe my brother couldn’t understand exactly or see it through my eyes, but he always provided support. He was a senior while I was a freshman, and he drove me to school every day. “Let me know if you need anything today,” he would often say. As vague as it sounded, I knew what he meant.

I was lucky, and I knew that. Reports flooded news feeds and television networks about gay youth forced to live on the streets because of their family’s judgement. Some committed suicide. Some tried and failed. I remember watching Lady Gaga perform “Hair” during a live broadcast with Jamey Rodemeyer’s picture above her. “So I just wanted to take a minute,” Gaga said, just before hitting a chord on the piano. She did this often: talking between chords that belonged to the next song she was about to perform. “I don’t know if you all know this,” she continued. “But we lost a little monster this week,” Gaga said sitting at the piano, then exhaling into her microphone. “And I want to dedicate this song to him because,” she said, then paused, catching her breath, “he was really young.” My eyes welled during the opening chords as a slideshow began above her.

“On September 18th, Jamey ended his own life,” the screen read. “He was only 14 years old.” Then, his last tweet appeared: “@ladygaga bye mother monster, thank you for all you have done, paws up forever.”

I watched Lady Gaga singing about hair, about identity, about overcoming the misunderstanding of others. “I’ve had enough,” she sang. “This is my prayer. That I’ll die living just as free as my hair.” A black and white picture of Jamey making a heart with his hand remained above her for the rest of the song.

At the Grand Canyon, birds flew below us, catching the wind with ease like kites without string. I wondered if the birds thought they were high then, if the world always looked like this to them. The trees, which I imagined were large, grew just about a mile below us, turning into small flecks like settled dust.

The Grand Canyon stretches eighteen miles wide. I remember reading that on the flight, from a small brochure I picked up in the airport before we left that described attractions in and around Las Vegas. “Eighteen miles wide and one mile down,” the pamphlet read. And even with that information, I could not understand the vastness of that space, that quiet, surreal, terrifying space.

The edge of the Grand Canyon was not blocked off, as I imagined it would be. Instead of metal guard rails or roped off areas that pushed tourists back away from the brim, the rocks gently hung off the sides and the paved path that people were able to hike on sat close to its sharp edges. Under us, layers of rock were painted by iron and years of debris.

Maybe some of my brother’s luck had rubbed off onto me. I felt lucky to be here, and I no longer felt bad about winning the contest. “The luckiest guy in the world,” I heard my grandpa say. Now, I felt like the luckiest.

I wore sunglasses that day, and behind them tears started to form.

It was cold the night Dad left.

My brother and I were playing on our PlayStation in his bedroom when Dad told us to meet him on the back patio. Michael slipped on a jacket and I took one of his blankets, plush and patterned. I wrapped it around me. My parents' bedroom door was shut, and my mom was on the other side. I don't think he wanted her to hear.

The yellowing porch light buzzed into brightness and the sky was indigo, deep within the stars. My legs dotted with goosebumps. The pine trees watched and the moon was a glowing sliver, a bright silver eyelash. My father told us he was leaving. He told us that it wasn't our fault, that he and Mom were having problems, that there was no one to blame. I cried. We all did. My brother stayed quiet and I talked, the questions spouting from my throat. Through the windowed doors behind my dad, the Christmas tree shone. The tears welling in my eyes created haloes around each light, over each wrapped present, perfectly seamed and bowed—my mother's doing.

That night, my brother and I were silent. We tried playing more video games after a while, but we couldn't do it. We stopped trying and sat on Michael's floor in silence. We didn't know what to say.

I held hands with the girl and I already had forgotten her name. She wore a top hat and a cropped blazer with multicolored rhinestones glued to the lapels. She looked like how I imagined a Vegas performer should look, like she would fit perfectly in Las Vegas. Her lips were deep purple like a ripe plum.

The competitors of the lip sync battle had been narrowed down, and now it was between us. I was the first performer of the night, a position I knew was never good since those people were usually forgettable. However, after all ten people had taken the stage and performed, the judges, a panel of radio station insiders and personalities, narrowed it down to us. We had to perform another song on a whim, so I chose a pop/country radio hit that I thought would be best.

For both the songs I chose, I allowed my mind to focus and my body to own the stage. With my family, I always acted poised, allowing them to see a certain side of me. However, with the competition in mind, I made moves that they had never seen before in any theater production I was in. As the song started, I bent forward then arched my back with the beat slowly bringing myself back to standing. I swayed my hips, flirted with the microphone stand, stomped around with every beat. The audience seemed to like it more than I had anticipated. Men were whistling and the ladies were laughing. My family was smiling and laughing with them.

And then we were there under one spotlight, this stranger and I, each wanting to win for, I assumed, different reasons.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we officially have a winner,” Tiny announced. “Tiny” was an ironic name. Tiny was one of the largest guys I had ever seen, and his voice was soothing and deep with a Southern twang—perfect for radio.

I looked at my family, squinting under the spotlight. My brother smiled at me, a smile like my mother’s, like mine. We both had the small dimple near our nose. My grandparents watched with my father sitting next to them.

“With a unanimous vote,” Tiny said into the microphone. I felt my throat pulsing, my chest tightened. “The winner is Ryan!”

The restaurant erupted into a cheer. I hugged the girl and told her how good she was. She congratulated me. Through the crowd, over the waving arms and clapping hands, I found my brother, screaming my name and laughing with everyone else.

There was this separateness that I had never felt before, standing at the edge. I had never felt more isolated in my life, on the quiet shard of the orange rock. The silence was hypnotizing, and the wind traced my neck. But here, I felt connected, too. The earth, a mile below me, seemed to be mine. It looked like it wanted to swallow me whole. This place, thousands of miles from South Florida, reminded me that there was more land to find and places to see, and even though I was far away from what I knew as my home, I had never felt such visceral belonging before. Separate but together.

My brother was taking as many pictures and videos as he could. He reminded me of Dad, how he used to carry around an old disposable camera wherever we went. “Come on, Ry,” Michael said, “One more selfie. This is a good spot.”

I walked the edge with Michael, and knew that this was one more thing that connected us. Our bond, I felt. Together and apart. This is what we knew, and this is what made us. Our past we lived in together, our bedroom walls that touched, his basketball games and my musicals, Dad leaving, Mom’s meatloaf. Our brotherhood was defined by what we had gone through, what was said and wasn’t said and everything that never needed to be said. The quiet times, like these, when the earth opened and words weren’t necessary.

My brother and I stood at the cliffs of the Grand Canyon for a final picture together as a bird flew in the background, a black “V” in the sky just above the ground slicing the horizon.

After that picture was taken, my brother turned to me and smiled. “Damn,” he said in a voice softer than usual. “I’m never gonna forget this, man.”

“Neither will I,” I said. I looked with him, following his gaze into the stretch of opened earth.

APPENDIX: READING LIST

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