To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Emily E. Thompson entitled “The Buried, The Wasted, The Lost: Six Stories and Six Snapshots.” I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

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(Original signatures are on file with official student records).
The Buried, The Wasted, The Lost:
Six Stories and Six Snapshots

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Emily E. Thompson
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Abstract

This is a collection of short stories unified by themes of loss, confusion and desperation. It is preceded by a personal essay that outlines my literary influences and how and why I write.
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The girl—me, this pale being, no one else, it seems—wakes in a fright, tangled up in the sheets.

—Charles Baxter, Feast of Love

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I. Silent Partners: A Critical Introduction

When I sent my father a copy of Low Explosions, the most recent Knoxville Writers’ Guild anthology, in which I was published, he called from Michigan to tell me how proud he was. “You’re immortalized,” he said. He’s a sweet man, my dad, and he is unabashedly proud of me. This publication was a small triumph, not nearly, in my mind, as commendable as many of the ones good friends of mine have scored: The Alaska Quarterly Review, Glimmer Train, The Atlantic Monthly, etc. The truth is, I haven’t felt much like a writer these days. I came to graduate school to hone my skill, to make a career out of this thing: writing. But as weeks and semesters passed, I watched my peers earn their triumphs. I work-shopped their hundred page novels and lost confidence around my small stories. I read new novels in my courses and compared my voice to the voices of writers I deemed better, stronger, more important. I lost myself in other people’s words. So when my father called, I tried to explain my shortcomings to him, why this publication of mine wasn’t much of anything special. But he wouldn’t have it. “Nonsense,” he said. “There are something like 4-billion people in the world. Less than a million of those people are published.”
I still laugh when I replay those words, but I can see my father’s point. And that feels good.

I have a handful of literary heroes, real, honest-to-God, big, famous writers. These names, I tried to tell my father, truly are immortalized. I’m nothing like them, I tried to tell my dad. Maybe I’m not. I don’t exist on the same plane, and I probably never will. But I write. For some reason, I still write. Maybe I do so in hopes that I will one day reach the same level of immortality my heroes have achieved. But that’s probably not the case. I write because I have something to say. And I have a way of saying it. It’s not anywhere near perfect, but it’s my own. It’s my own way of being more than just one among 4-billion others.

Because I’ve just meditated on levels of immortality, and because it’s the best place to start, I’ll begin this paper with a look at my literary influences, my heroes.

On two separate occasions, two writer friends and role models of mine both gave me very important gifts. When I was nineteen maybe, Daryl Murphy gave me Jim Harrison’s *Letters to Yesinia* and Joan Didion’s *The White Album*. Murphy was my undergraduate advisor, and he said that my writing most reminded him of the writings of Harrison and Didion, those two works specifically. He explained the disjointed melancholy he felt was at the center of *Yesenin* and *The White Album*. Harrison is a Michigan writer and an expatriate of sorts. Like Hemingway. Like how I might define myself. His thirty *Letters to Yesenin* ponder Sergei Yesenin’s suicide, and Harrison’s own sickly mortality. He wrote that they “were an act of desperation and survival” (5). And Didion’s collection of essays *The White Album* is said to be
about “vibrations and fears,” “a mosaic of time.” Daryl Murphy gave me these books because he felt that the same disjointed melancholy was at the center of my work. This was the biggest compliment I had ever received. I wore my copies of these texts out; I slept with them under my pillow.

Years later, my good friend Elizabeth Gilbert gave me Vladimir Nabokov’s autobiography *Speak, Memory* and said it was one of her favorite books “because of its elegant purity of language—the same thing [she felt I was] capable of.” I had loved Nabokov for years and had previously read *Speak, Memory* along with everything else. However, I had never considered that Nabokov might have been, the entire time, a more crucial influence than I had given him credit for being. Maybe he was under my skin; maybe he was in my blood. I reread the autobiography the summer it was given to me. Not that I have the audacity to compare myself to Nabokov, but I understand what Elizabeth Gilbert meant. Again, this is an incredible and intimidating compliment. And I see that Nabokov *has* been with me all along, a silent partner. I’ll talk more about him when I begin my discussion of my thesis. A passage from *Speak, Memory* articulates, very well, something I want to say about “Circulation” but that Nabokov has already said better than I ever could.

Otherwise, I was fortunate enough to stumble across Don DeLillo’s small but mighty novel *The Body Artist* during my formative years. This piece is a presentation of the disjointed melancholy I still strive for, and it is a stunning example of the loveliness of brevity. Everything I write, I write in brief. Later in this introduction, I’ll tackle my reasoning behind brevity. But for now, I carry *The Body Artist* around
with me, figuratively, of course, as a reminder that it—brevity—can be done well.

And finally, there is Muriel Rukeyser. Dr. Mary Collar, who was my first instructor of critical theory, introduced me to the poet Rukeyser. Perhaps contrary to the stereotypical views about writers of fiction, I am a lover of critical theory. That’s an aside, but (I feel) an important aside. I wrote a paper defining the moment Rukeyser’s poetry becomes feminist in its nature, and during the course of my writing, I fell in love with her work. Specifically, Rukeyser’s book-length essay *The Life of Poetry* is an invaluable influence of mine. In chapter six, she writes, “there is also, in any history, the buried, the wasted, the lost” (146). This is not the text’s central thesis, but it is, in my mind, a stunning revelation, so stunning that it is the title I’ve given my thesis. The buried, the wasted, and the lost are everything I try to write about. Rukeyser’s *The Life of Poetry* is a detailed pronouncement of the importance of poetry; I believe that every writer and student of English studies must read it. In her poem “Night Flight : New York” (*Theory of Flight*), Rukeyser writes, “Between murmur and murmur, birth and death, / is the earth’s turning which follows the earth’s turning, / a swift whisper of life” (25). Again, this is everything I try to write; this is everything I have ever wanted to write.

In his poem “One for the Shoeshine Man,” Charles Bukowski captures an image and a mentality:

if you see me grinning from

my blue Volks

running a yellow light
driving straight into the sun

I will be locked in the

arms of a

crazy life

thinking of trapeze artists

of midgets with big cigars

of a Russian winter in the early 40s

of Chopin with his big bag of Polish soil

of an old waitress bringing me an extra

cup of coffee and laughing

as she does so. (61)

Bukowski, alcoholic wife-beater, got something right. He floors me, the way he captures the simple life, the marginalized life, the life that’s been looked over. These are the characters I put my faith in; to me, their stories are the most interesting. They reveal the most truth. Like Bukowski, I write about crazy life.

If anything plays as important a role in my life as literature, it is music. Music is as important to me as religion, or breath, or skin. I’ll spare this poor essay a long and didactic exposition about why music is important to me and should be important to everyone else, but I need to take the space to give it the credit it deserves. I always listen to music as I write; it becomes the rhythm behind my words. In fact, as I type away at this paper, I’m listening to Tom Wait’s “Strange Weather” on repeat. It’s my current mantra. Tom Waits and Nick Cave are the two musicians I always return to.
Waits is my official hero; I am not embarrassed to say so or to admit that I still adore him, this stranger, in the way small boys and girls idolize firefighters or ballerinas. I would say that the songs of both Waits and Cave are representations of the Sublime. Their worlds are worlds of the beautiful and the grotesque, the tragically flawed and the damned. Their worlds are disjointed and melancholic. These are the worlds I strive to create. There’s a little bit of Tom Waits and Nick Cave in everything I write; in fact, the story “Circulation” exists because of a Waits song.

So there they are—Didion, Harrison, Nabokov, DeLillo, Rukeyser, Cave and Waits. The calcium in my bones.

Who else? Arundhati Roy and The God of Small Things. Michelle Cliff and No Telephone to Heaven. Julien Barnes and The History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters. Michael Ondaatje and In the Skin of a Lion. While the body of Post Colonial literature is something other than myself, something beyond me, I find myself drawn to it. It has an elegance and an urgency I admire.

I could go on and on.

I begin this piece with a rather lengthy note about my influences because I have to. They are the only way I know how to begin. They are my beginning, my birth. If I could include them (in their entirety, like an ongoing footnote) in this piece, I would, because they are the most concrete explanation of my writing. But I don’t have to include them here because they already are here. They are me; I am them.

It doesn’t escape me that, other than DeLillo’s The Body Artist, the texts I list as my most cherished influences are works of nonfiction. Once, in an interview, Lee
Smith said of her work, “I think I have a better chance of it being true if I call it fiction. That’s paradoxical, I know” (Williamson 355). I don’t know if I can concretely say how or why I know this statement is also true for me, for my work, but, innately, I know it is. It’s like that heavily debated statement that writers only write, or should only write, about what they know. I don’t by any means think this is true for any number of impossibly gifted writers, but it is, in most ways, very true for me.

Every step I take is something I write, and in truth, all the steps I take are the only things I write. I write them as they write me; that’s the way it’s always been. I mentioned earlier that I went through a dark spate once, not long ago, because I felt an increasing pressure to write about things outside of myself, to contribute to a larger schema. I don’t know why I began feeling this way, something about feeling like I had to write about some big thing, or uncover some mystery. So I began writing about things I couldn’t possibly understand: Southern men, scientists. I became very misanthropic; I couldn’t sleep. It took me some time to open my eyes to the depression I had sunk myself into, but when I did, I knew that it was because I hadn’t been true to myself, myself as a writer. I write about Ann Arbor, Northern Michigan, Italy, apathy, lost souls, stasis, small things. These are the things I know; this is the way it has to be.

Thus, place and point-of-view are what I would consider the two most important elements of my writing. The physical spaces I write about tend to mimic concrete and real places: Venice, Italy and Ann Arbor, Michigan. I store snapshots of
these places in my memory; I try to render them as accurately as I can. I want my physical spaces to be real physical places, and it is extremely important to me that I re-create these places as accurately as I can. To do otherwise would be to disserve the places I love.

I have a harder time explaining my general thoughts on point of view. As I mentioned, my goal, always, is to create a sort of detached or disjointed melancholy. In grammar school, we learn a series of definitions: first person, second person, third. Omniscient, limited, objective. We learn that writers choose a point of view from which to tell a story, and then they tell the story in that voice. In graduate workshops, as well, we talk about the story’s point of view. Whose voice is it, and why? My thesis is my meditation on point of view. My hope is that The Buried, The Wasted, The Lost is a strong examination of different voices, and of different kinds of stories. My hope is that it causes readers to question point of view. One of its central claims, I hope, is that point of view doesn’t have to fit the old standard grammar school mold. I want my readers to question whose stories they’re reading. I want them to question comfort, and time, and space, and voice.

I write mostly in the present tense because, simply, life occurs in the present tense. What if history isn’t linear? What if all the moments that occurred in the past are floating out there, re-occurring, re-occurring, over and over, forever? Bradley, in Charles Baxter’s Feast of Love, says, “What I’m saying is: that day was here and then it was gone, but I remember it, so it exists here somewhere, and somewhere all those events are still happening and still going on forever. I believe that,” (25). What way is
there to exist, to write, other than in the present? I have made some attempts at past tense; those that I like best are included in the thesis. But for me, by and large the present tense makes the most sense.

Like Jim Harrison’s *Letters to Yesenin*, my longest story and the title piece in my thesis, “The Buried, The Wasted, The Lost,” is epistolary. To ponder and ultimately prevent his own suicide, Harrison writes a series of thirty poem-letters to Sergei Yesenin. On the surface, the letters are a meditation on Yesenin’s suicide, but below the surface, they are about Harrison’s depression, his alcoholism, about his love for his daughter. They are about loss, and, of course, they are about life. The first of the thirty letters concludes,

But I stood under
your balcony in St. Petersburg, yes St. Petersburg!
a crazed tourist with so much nothing in my heart
it wanted to implode. And I walked down to the Neva embankment with a fine sleet falling and there was finally something, a great river vastly flowing, flat as your eyes; something to marry to my nothing heart other than the poems you hurled into nothing those years before the articulate noose. (197)

When I set my eyes on writing “The Buried, The Wasted, The Lost,” I had wanted to, like Harrison does to Yesenin, address a second person. In my case, the second person would be one of four ghosts. There something incredibly appealing to me
about addressing an unknown, a character that is utterly reliant on the narrator’s
mind’s-eye. In his first letter, Harrison writes about “so much nothing in my heart,”
and this theme permeates the collection. My thesis and “The Buried, The Wasted,
The Lost,” in particular, focuses on this idea of “so much nothing,” and on the truth
that nothing is, in fact, something very huge. I take a liberty here, comparing my
writing to Harrison’s. His body of work is so incredible and admirable. But what he
does with point of view in Letters to Yesenin is what I have tried to do with my own
writing.

Besides point of view, my writing is influenced (perhaps unwittingly) by
Catholicism. I was raised in the Catholic Church, and I attended Catholic school
through high school. Catholics, I think, are very skilled at indoctrination. Maybe
they have to be in order to survive. But Catholicism—its rituals, the prayers, the
saints and their stories, the smoke and the mirrors—is very mystifying, and even
though I no longer attend the Catholic Church, I have to go on considering myself a
Catholic. It’s second nature; it’s in my skin.

When I attended that Catholic high school, I took an elective called “Death and
Dying.” In retrospect, I can’t believe the course spanned an entire semester because
we focused almost entirely on the commonly-known five stages of grief, but none of
the theories or studies surrounding those stages. It was a very “get-in-touch-with-
your-emotions” kind of course. Perfect for an all-girl’s Catholic high school. So
while the class didn’t offer many take-aways, it did get me to memorize the five
stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Years later, with
those stages in mind, I started to write the piece that is now titled “The Buried, The
Wasted, The Lost.” I wanted to consider what grief does to a person, and how
paralyzing it can be. I wanted my readers to follow Katherine as she endures her own
grieving process. It’s not perfect, but I am happy with the result.

My thought processes are almost always consumed by questions about
connections, or tangents. I share this trait with Joan Didion, who manages to relate
two or more concepts or events that may not seem obviously connected. So when I
discuss The Buried, The Wasted, The Lost, I will try to explain its life from
conception, to birth, to maturity. Its evolution happened in tangents.

The cornerstone piece of the thesis is “Circulation,” which is a reaction to one
of my favorite Tom Waits songs, “Anywhere I Lay My Head” (Raindogs 1985). It
comes from a very transitional time in my life. I had recently relocated to Knoxville,
Tennessee, and I was questioning my ability to stay put for two or more consecutive
years. I’ve always been a wanderer. I can’t sit still for very long, and I think this is a
reflection of a bigger kind of antsiness, the fear I have of committing to place and
time. So at this time, I was listening to “Anywhere I Lay My Head” over and over
again. I couldn’t get enough of it. Waits sings, “Anywhere I lay my head, boys, is
where I call my home.” I became focused on this idea, and I wanted to write a story
that would further verbalize the song’s sentiment. The first lines I wrote were, “I’ll
work on a river in Belize. I’ll let the water run over my feet, and I’ll remember that
my home is anywhere I lay my head.” After I completed the first draft, I changed
these lines slightly, because I recognized that the idea is somewhat of a cliché. In
workshop, a friend of mine even reminded me that the sentiment had been echoed by a contemporary heavy metal band. Because of this, I changed my lines to, “Afterwards, I’ll work on a river in Belize. I’ll let the water run over my feet, and I’ll remember that my home is here. Anywhere. Nowhere.” But even though the Waits line has been removed from the piece, he is still in there. He is the soundtrack behind the entire thing.

Funny enough (and this is a testament to my tangent-driven thought process), a Nick Cave song also lives between the lines of this story. “Circulation” reminds me of “Lay Me Low” (*Let Love In* 1994), which ponders mortality and death. While death isn’t an obvious theme in “Circulation,” it’s there; it’s something I was getting at. The idea of being returned to the earth is something I think about frequently.

This year, my brother Carl’s only request for a Christmas Gift is a six-hundred dollar camera. The price of this request goes far beyond any amount my parents have ever spent on Christmas gifts, all of them added together, let alone just one. But Carl, seventeen years old, is very serious about pursuing photography. So I believe that, come Christmas morning, he’ll be opening that camera’s box. Carl’s wish and his goal of pursuing professional photography have me thinking about this thesis in a different way. Maybe I should have studied photography in college; maybe I should have asked for a six-hundred dollar camera instead of (always) years and years worth of new books. What I’ve always wanted to do in my writing is to capture images in time. The best way I can describe my writing goals is to say I aim to be a verbal photographer.
For some years now, I’ve been interested in both capturing moments in time and allowing these moments to somehow transcend time. My stories have always been very, very short. For a while, I felt badly about this, but eventually I grew to be proud of my point of view. Rather than the years, I prefer to focus on the minutes and days. The best poets narrow a lifetime of events down to a few, all-telling words and images. This is how I’ve approached my snapshots: Can I reveal a life’s worth in a few lines? The six snapshots are integral parts of my thesis. They depict moments in time, or a solitary thought in a body of thoughts. I hope they are provoking. I want the reader to trouble over whose story they’ve just read. With the snapshots, I’ve tried to create collapsed time.

I aim to enmesh real worlds with possible worlds. This is displayed in “String Fingers,” where the narrator lives Ann Arbor, Michigan, in real time, but much of the story relies on the invented worlds of José’s past. I want my reader to question what is true, what is invented, what is real. I am increasingly interested in compressing space and time, which is what photography does. Borrowing a term from Brian McHale, I would call this “superimposition,” only instead of layering two physical spaces, in many of my stories, I layer a psychological word on top of a physical place. The goal is to create a “double-exposure” of mind and matter. In “Circulation,” for example, I want my narrator Bianca Nevica to think of time, space and memory as equals. I want her thoughts to be as important as the physical places she visits, and vice versa. I am interested in Carl Jung’s definitions of introvert and extrovert. If an introvert is someone who finds the meaning of her life within herself and an extrovert
is someone who finds meaning outside of herself, Bianca Nevica lives in the gray space between the two “types.” So does the narrator in “Sting Fingers.” Katherine, in “Ownership,” rejects both the physical and psychological world, and she no longer wishes to find meaning in herself or in another, namely her baby. In “Ownership,” I want a narrator who rejects all possible worlds. I want to see what is left, after everything has been rejected.

My characters have short attention spans; they find or reject meaning both in what’s inside their heads and what’s beyond their bodies, and they struggle to understand both of those things. They float between a mental space and a physical one. This is also what I try to create in my snapshots; I want to make worlds that exist between the lines.

At the conclusion of “Circulation,” Bianca Nevica has chosen mental space over physical space. She considers running, running away, literally and physically, but I’m not sure this could ever be “good enough” for her. She’d rather turn to dust, to particles, to air, and to circulate. Of course this is physically impossible and I’ve considered the fact that Bianca Nevica may seem like she’s on the verge of a breakdown, but I’m more hopeful for her than that. The story is about stasis as much as it is about space and time, and Bianca Nevica will one day find balance; she’ll find the ability to circulate physically and mentally.

“Circulation” and “The Buried, The Wasted, The Lost” are my most hopeful stories. The protagonists are able to find their answers. My other stories aren’t as hopeful, and that’s because, as we all know, life isn’t made of simple answers.
Maybe all of my characters are on the verge of breaking down. Maybe all of my stories are about stasis. I want my characters to reject typical notions of time, space, happiness, life. I focus on the buried, the wasted and the lost for a reason: there aren’t any easy answers to their very uneasy situations.

I can’t talk about the worlds in my thesis without returning to Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory*. Any successful memoir must enmesh time and space, creating a photographic double vision. Nabokov does this stunningly well, and on the first page of his autobiography, he verbalizes what I had envisioned for my own stories. *Speak, Memory*’s opening sentence reads, “The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness” (19). He explains that he knows,

of a young chronophobiac who experienced something like panic when looking for the first time at homemade movies that had been taken a few weeks before his birth. He saw a world that was practically unchanged—the same house, the same people—and then realized that he did not exist there at all and that nobody mourned his absence. . . . But what particularly frightened him was the sight of a brand-new baby carriage standing there on the porch, with the smug, encroaching air of a coffin; even that was empty, as if, in the reverse course of events, his very bones had disintegrated. (19)

Nabokov describes two ideas I had wished to convey. First, I wanted to create worlds in which the idea that our existence is a brief moment of light “between two eternities
of darkness.” Second, I wanted my characters to be what Nabokov calls “chronophobiac.” I imagine a chronophobiac as someone who is utterly terrified of passing time, but who is paradoxically afraid to exist without the security of believing that time moves on. This, anyway, is the kind of character I wanted to create when I wrote Bianca Nevica, Katherine in “The Buried, The Wasted, The Lost,” and Daniel in “The Bird of St. Chely d’Apcher.” Nabokov’s man is terrified of a world that exists without him. At their hearts, I think all of my stories ponder existence. Daniel in “The Bird of St. Chely d’Apcher” doesn’t understand how he can simultaneously be American and French. What does it mean to be a mother? A soldier? What is a father? What is an American? Whose point of view is most important? Whose side of the story is right? These are the questions I ask in my stories and snapshots. I’ve created worlds in which one time may be any time. More exactly, one time may be all time. At the least, this is what I have hoped for.

My fear for my work is that my ideas may be clichés. I don’t know how to make the subjects I am most interested in—love, loss, fear, depression—exciting and new. Somehow, good writers do it, year after year, new story after new story. In fact, those themes are probably all anyone, new or accomplished, ever writes about. I have tried very hard to manipulate point of view, space, time and psychology so that they become different and new in my stories. I have tried to create characters who readers will question, who readers will find stimulating and different and interesting. I can say that my writing is not ordinary. And I am proud of what I have done. With a somewhat heavy heart, I acknowledge the fact that I am only a work-in-progress. I
lost a lot of confidence in my writing after I watched my peers succeed with methods that I wasn’t comfortable with or even able to use. I didn’t gain that confidence back until a good friend, Lewis Moyse, wrote me an email. In it, he said, only, “You write, girl.” So I did.

I was very young when I left Michigan to attend graduate school at the University of Tennessee. In age, yes, but more so in my own point of view. In retrospect, I can hardly pinpoint my reasons for wanting to attend graduate school in the first place. I was not misguided, but perhaps I was under-directed. I was twenty-three years old. I knew very few truths other than that I loved words. I found great joy in reading them and in writing them. I thought that was enough.

Over the course of a little over two years, I learned a lot more about literature than I knew when I entered the program. And I’ve added some new heroes to the list: Evan S. Connell, Ian McEwan and Joyce Carol Oates, among many others. But I learned a lot more about my own voice, about the ways I see the world and the ways I see the written word. I have a small voice; I have small stories to tell, but I think they’re worth it. So I say to myself, “You write, girl.”
II. One

He fucked her because he still could, because she still let him. Because, *who knows* she said, feeling his weight on her back, his hand on her breast, tongue on her neck, was better than feeling nothing. Maybe he agreed. Maybe he was just too lazy not to.

Nothing happens to you. *Nothing*, which is actually something, and is actually the worst kind of something there is.
III. Ownership

My daughter, who I will not hold, was born three days ago. Monday. She was born, but in truth, I did not birth her. They cut open my stomach, lifted her out, and sewed me back up. Her birth is a void to me. I have not named her, and I will not hold her. If I hold her, if I name her, I will own her, and I am not ready.

Ethan is desperate to name her. He comes to me—she is cradled in his arms, already an extension of his body—and he makes lists. Anna, Annabelle, Brein, Bella, Elisabeth, Emily. He pushes her towards me, tries to gently force her into my arms, but I push her away, and she wakes, startled, gasping. She is smaller than I could have ever imagined; even though I do not hold her, she is close enough that I feel her warmth. It travels from her skin to mine; I shiver. Already, I am a terrible mother. She takes her meals from a bottle, not from me. I cannot feed her; there is nothing inside me to give. Inside, I am empty.

Ethan can feed her on his own, but he says he will not name her without me.

I sit alone, hiding from Ethan, from the baby. I have sequestered myself in the library. I sit on the couch—it was a gift to us on our wedding day—and I wrap myself in a comforter. I am cold, always. I stay in here; I have been in here since Ethan brought us—she and I—home. There are books for me to read, but I do not read them. There is a baby for me, but I will not hold her. I run my toes through the carpet and count to ten. I flip through the pages of a book, Samuel Beckett’s *Molloy,*
which I used to love. These days, I can’t remember what anything is about, or I don’t care. When I remember to eat, I chew my fingernails.

Down the hall, Ethan’s noises mark his time, and hers. I hear him in the kitchen as he turns on the faucet, moves his hands under the water. I hear the soap bubble and the sponge scrape as he scrubs out the sink, creating a makeshift bath for the baby. She whimpers as he guides her into the water—she is not a screamer—and he coos gently. It’s okay, it’s okay, it’s a bath, only a bath. This is nighttime. This is Ethan preparing her for bed. This is Ethan, father.

After the bath, after the water empties, suck, suck down the drain, he diapers and dresses her. He sings again, another song to mark his routine. Right leg, left, right arm, left. She gurgles and whimpers, and then he picks her up to dance. He turns on Tom Waits and sings along quietly. His voice, like Tom’s, is deep and breathy: she was fifteen years old and had never seen the ocean... Ethan is raising our girl to like good music. His girl.

When she is asleep, he steps down the hall and into her bedroom. The walls in there are pale green, celery; I painted them months ago, a day when I was excited and hopeful.

She will sleep for two hours or three, hours marked by the murmur from the television Ethan watches. I run my toes through the carpet. I count to ten, stare at the walls, the ceiling. When she cries, Ethan jumps abruptly and coughs—maybe he has dozed off—and he hurries down the hall to her. He gives her what she needs: a fresh diaper, a bottle, another dance.
Ethan comes, brings steaming tea mugs with him; he says, “Elinore, Emma, Grace.”

“No, Ethan,” I say, “Not now.”

He says my name, Katherine, scolding me.

“Name her,” I say. “I don’t care; she’s not mine to name.”

He tells me I am ridiculous; I need to shape up, see a doctor, get help. And then, “Hanna, Kara, Laura, Lisa, Megan, Maria.” I tune him out, block his voice from me entirely.

“Name her,” I say.

Pacing the room, he tells me his daughter needs a mother. He shuffles over to me, tries to embrace me. Yelling, I tell him to call his own goddamned mother if he’s so worried about it.

I stare at Ethan, and then, because tears have welled in the corners of my eyes, I stare down at my bitten nails. I am not a mother. I would like to scoop her up, open myself up, and put her back inside. Inside of me, she was mine.

I stare at my hands. Ethan, sitting in the chair across from me, stares at me. His eyes penetrate me, down into my emptiness. I stare into my hands, which hold nothing.

The baby cries, and Ethan is instantly up and out of the room. As he goes, he whispers, “Maria.” And he has done it.
IV. Two

*Lolita,* she said, the greatest love story of all time. And then she giggled; and then she brushed her blonde hair from her eyes with her fingertips. She met his eyes; she giggled, nervous. She had just met him, this law student, this attractive, new man. Instantly, almost without notice and entirely unwarranted, she thought, *I will marry him.* She was twenty-three years old; she had never seen Manhattan.

You plan your life in an instant.

This was before: *cunt, you whore, you ruined my life, you cunt, you whore.* This was before she left home for him to set up his shop in the city. Before he shoved her face into the kitchen sink and sent her to the hospital with a broken nose, a broken hand, and everything else beyond repair.

Before her plans for them deteriorated, entirely.
V. String Fingers

José asks Richie for a blowjob by raising his mangled hands in front of his face, sticking out his gray tongue and licking those dirty, cracked stub-for-fingers. Out of kindness and perhaps naïveté, Richie points toward the nearest woman, an angelfaced blonde thing sitting alone at table seventy-three, and he mouths the words, sorry, I like women. Women, he says again for emphasis, this time pointing toward his own chest. Then he smiles an honest-to-god sincere smile, pats José on his shoulder and scuffles to another table, to take another order for food or for beer. José grunts and grunts again, the best way he knows to howl after Richie.

None of us really know how José got the way he is, but we heard he fought in Vietnam, that he was sent home without his legs, voice, or ears, that what he had left of his hands grew out of his arms like parasitic weeds. Hearsay tells us that he refused any help from his family and do-gooders, anonymous or otherwise.

The bike cops tell me he ended up here from Mexico where he was doing god-knows-what, killing what’s left of his body with drugs, or sex, or poverty. Those cops say now he lives alone in an unfurnished apartment in the assisted living cooperative down on Fourth, and that oftentimes his neighbors put in late-night calls to the station on account that he blows a fog horn, day and night. Long, lonely and loud, as if it’s his mating call. Once after his shift and over a few too many pilsners, Tim, one of the bike cops, told me that a while ago he went into José’s apartment and that he had only an uncovered futon mattress, a green-plastic porch chair, an empty
half-gallon bottle of vodka and a box of Ritz crackers. The box and the bottle nested together on that chair, like brothers or lovers or soldiers, or what’s the difference anyhow.

No use issuing him a ticket, Tim the cop said, no money to pay.

Maybe these are just the things we do to make our lives better; we’re bored with our own mediocrity as bartenders or waiters or bike cops in a mostly happy and crime-free town. We question lives of others to make ours less dim. We create tall-tales and wives’-tales and grotesque fables, gothic assumptions about gutter lives, about disgust and filth and degeneration. These stories help us sleep at night; or no, even worse, they help up go to work and take our tip money from the next line of drunks that trips into our bar. Maybe José saved the lives of countless orphan babies and is considered a saint in certain parts of the world. Might be that he was a god, once. For all I fucking know.

* 

Any case, all I’ve got going for me is what’s fed to me as fuel for gossip or for spite. But if José could tell me his entire story himself, I’m certain I wouldn’t want to hear it. I’m certain that among the things he left behind in Vietnam, his mind was one. And I am most certain that Richie is a clear-eyed saint for being as patient with José as he is. That boy’s empathy doesn’t quit, and this saves the rest of us a lot of frustration. Not that José wants anything to do with the rest of us; soon as he started coming to The Pub on a regular basis, José took to Richie like shit to kitty-litter.
What I gather from José is that he thinks my tits are disgusting and that I can’t properly stir the right amount of sugar into his coffee and that the beers I bring him aren’t nearly as cold or as fulfilling as the ones Richie brings. What I gather is that any one of us waitresses isn’t shit compared to Richie. And fuck him, because I’ve taken the time to learn his routine. I pay the extra buck-twenty five out of my own pocket to make sure the kitchen sends out his wings right, all drumsticks and no wings. I know when he points to the menu at buffalo wings with those chewed up string fingers, he really wants barbeque. I take the time—my own time—to open those sugar packets one by one so he can wave his count all seven of them as I stir them into his coffee, and anyone who’s ever worked in a restaurant knows that time really is money. That man drains me, my time and money, but sad sucker that I am, I wipe barbeque sauce off his goddamn face. I claim the third beer on his tab as an accident, and I’m always certain to stop him at twelve-dollars-and-fifty-cent because if he spends anymore, the government money’ll run out before the end of the month. And I never, never—not once—complain that he doesn’t tip, not like the other waitresses do.

Had José asked me instead of Richie for a blowjob, I probably would have reacted the same way. I would have shaken my head politely said no, *no I don’t fuck with degenerate half-bodied half-wits*, patted him on the shoulder and walked away. He wouldn’t have grunted after me, I know that for sure. The man’s fucked six ways to Sunday, crazier than a soup sandwich, but I smile at him and do what he asks. But fuck him, fuck me, I am not Richie. I am not that curly-haired, anglefaced saint.
*  

I’d kill her if I could, blonde-haired, sour faced bitch. I’d strangle her with my own hands if they still worked. I’d wrap my fingers around her neck and howl, animal that I am.

*  

After he leaves the pub, he wheels across Washington to The Arena, the bleach smelling, fluorescent-light bar that’s catty corner from The Pub. There, a couple or three college kids always feel sorry enough for him to buy him a beer, or maybe they’re just sorry for the way they’re staring; after all, their mothers did teach them better than that. Or maybe to them he’s just a fool, another easy fraternity prank: let’s see how much it takes to get that thing fucked up. He doesn’t have to do work hard to communicate over there, everyone’s already drunk enough that all he has to do is nod, yes I’d like a drink. If he ever has to use the bathroom, some of the college boys in there graciously offer him a bump of coke, or maybe even a line, but he hasn’t got the finger skills to hold a key or a dollar bill. Anyway, he’d rather be sedated. He’d rather that curly-haired little waiter from across the street would pick him up, kiss his mouth and carry him home and make him feel human again.

He can hang in over there, over at The Arena, until closing time. There are always enough free beers or someone always has a few good pills, he gets to where he just doesn’t care about shit anymore. He wonders, when was the last time he actually had shit to care about? He remembers his birthday, but he doesn’t care
enough to add up the years. He must be sixty, sixty-five, but he feels like nothing, like nowhere.

He knows he probably has grandkids out there somewhere, American, Vietnamese, Mexican or otherwise. He remembers being a kid, running through busy Detroit streets, running because he was late, once again, for homeroom at Cass Tech. He remembers swimming in his high school pool, his one joy being that school policy was for all swim classes to be conducted in the nude. He and all those beautiful black boys, none of them ever swam a day in their lives, but they were too proud to admit otherwise so they went in headfirst and surfaced, naked and gasping and flailing.

Isn’t that how they all went into Vietnam, every single one of them? He remembers his first wife Abilene, that’s who that cunt blonde waitress reminds him of. He remembers that fucking terrible and obligatory sex, movement, movement, nothing else, no passion, no love. He remembers all of those cunt women he fucked just because he could, because he had that right, because fucking them was better than being beaten or killed or what-else. He remembers that sweet, sillyfaced, curly haired boy from high school, the one from the swimming pool, the one from the locker room.

He tries to remember the last person who met his gaze. He knows that the curly-haired waiter only pitys him, but it least the boy has enough grace to meet his eyes.

*
He’s been drinking himself to death for years and more specifically for six days. He hasn’t had a bite to eat since Sunday, since Richie ordered him the chicken wings he likes so much.

When he finally dies after years of already being unhuman, he’ll be alone in his apartment, no company besides a used-up bottle of vodka. He’ll die alone, but where he’ll really be, where he’s already been for months and months, is in the arms of that sweet, sillyfaced waiter, Richie, the one who, when José closes his eyes, picks him up, carries him home, makes him feel human. That’s where he’ll die. And that sweet, sillyfaced waiter will always be there with him.

The bike cops will say that he moved, found another city’s space to waste. A transient, José will have moved on, by bus or death, or what’s the difference when no one misses you or ever asks after you again.
VI. Three

You, baby, were born. Still. When we were four and five and had not yet learned what it meant to be born. Still. Still-born. A mass of baby eyes and baby skin, fingers, toes. Blood and after-birth. And no breath.

The whole white room waiting, waiting, waiting. And no breath.

Daddy said she was tired. And waiting. Bright eyed, ready—oh—with outstretched arms.

Nine months, waiting. And no breath.

Waiting, in a white-tiled, sterile room. Fluorescent lights. Cold, silent. And no breath.

And the room at home, we, four and five, splashed with paint. Filled with baby crib, and baby clothes, and baby dolls. And no breath.

She held you for hours, blood and after-birth, red-eyed and nauseated, inventing things she did not do. She held onto you for years. Years. And no breath.
VII. Circulation

The apartment I share with Jamelah is quite literally crooked. The living room is higher than the bedroom, and when I peer in at Jamelah while she does her reading or listens to music, I feel, even ever so slightly, that I am peering at her from some great distance. And when I splash dishwater onto the floor, it trickles downward, from the kitchen to our front door. We’re used to all this now, to the way the washer shakes and tumbles somewhat downhill from its original standing point; it jiggles and jumps as it washes our clothes. I’ve grown used to the clothesline, too. It hangs over a canal, yawning and stretching all the way to its hook on the Arsenale building, some fifteen yards from our crooked window. I’m used to the wind and the rain, and I no longer hang my underwear or socks on the line. Jamelah hasn’t taken the hint, and sometimes Stephanie from downstairs knocks to return her lonely garments, fallen soldiers. Or sometimes these socks, underwear, bras—all too big to be mine—land in the canal where they slowly drown, if they aren’t first poisoned to death by filth, and gasoline and disease.

*  

I keep an ongoing list of oddities I see in the canals, items that don’t belong there but are there nonetheless as I hurry past them on my walks to school, or to the rizzo pane, or to the bars. Shoes, a book, an entire pizza, a dead cat. Gatto, I said as I ran past. Gatto morto.
My ongoing list of canal obscurities hangs on the cupboard above the kitchen sink. The list is crooked, but only because I hung it that way. This morning, Jamelah used a blue marker to add our eighteenth item, some guy’s vomit, because last night we watched a stranger hit his knees and puke into the canal outside Café Blue. Filth and disease, that’s all the canals really are.

*

In Detroit, a little boy on the bus asked Jamelah what she was. A lady, she said, but that, of course was not the answer the little boy was looking for. He said he thought she might be One of Those Mexican Italians. He was four, maybe five, and his mother or sister or aunt slapped his knee, and he shied away, embarrassed and sorry. For Jamelah, identity is a common misunderstanding, but she fits in well here, in Venice—olive skin, and black hair and oversized breasts. I am the blonde; I am the one whose hair everyone wants to grab and pull. I am called Bianca Nevica, Snow White. Stranger. But even so, I am more at home here than Jamelah, the tourist. I am a stranger; this fact is my comfort.

*

Nights when I do not study at cafés or drink at bars, I sit on the lawn furniture in our crooked apartment and listen to Jamelah talk to on the phone, talk across time zones, to her mother, her boyfriend, her sister. She twirls her hair in her pointer finger and recounts the days: we learned a new verb form, or we saw the Tintorellis. This, our life here, is for Jamelah a semester abroad. She will pack in everything, and she will get back on a plane and go back home.
I do not call my mother to tell her about the museums or the verbs because I do not want to tell her what she does not want to hear: after this is over, I am not coming home.

* 

Everywhere I go, I hurry. I am a runner; hurrying is my pastime. I am quick, but not neglectful. I know the importance of seeing. I run; I cross bridges to Salute and Ca’Rezzonico and San Silvestro, my favorite churches, my favorite buildings. I turn corners until the scents of rizzo panes—sweet and salty, and warm, and new breads—get into me. I stop to take inventory at vegetable stands, catch my breath, go on. It helps, as I cross the bridges, to plan meals to make for Jamelah, something to look forward to. I run, weave my way through the traffic of tourists, and run on. To Ferrovia, where I watch the trains come in, listening to the skidding sound of steel on steel. The chaos of travelers, coming and going. This is a comfort. I run; we are all lost.

At the Academia bridge, I am halfway home. I stop at the top and watch the boats come in from the Lido. Count the boats, keep running. My pulse beats into sidewalks, networks through the cracked stone, meets me again a few strides down the path. Sometimes, I do not know where I am going, but I keep running.

* 

As often as possible, I pay the museum fee to cross the Bridge of Sighs, the bridge named for the last sounds Venetian prisoners made as they were led from their cells and to their deaths. Three, four times a week—I cannot get enough of it. I cross
the bridge, and I stop and gaze out at all those thousands of tourists taking pictures of what I am inside. I am inside history. I cross the bridge feeling what it might be like to be a prisoner. And I feel the echoes of the past, the vibrations of bodies and brains which died, which were born only to die, those echoes which have been resonating since creation. I cross the bridge, and I head to my apartment, free.

*

I watch the boats—they sway back and forth, triumphant on the water—and I feel like I am drowning.

At the end of the year, Jamelah will pack for home, carefully wrapping her souvenirs, her gifts for her mother, her material memories. When we travel, shop or wander, I don’t purchase much; frankly, I don’t want the baggage. Jamelah knows I’m not going back; she asks what I’ll do, and I tell her the truth. I don’t know.

I’ll stay in Venice and continue running. I’ll stay out of the canals. I’ll head south to Tuscany, get work in an olive orchard. I’ll pick olives, roll them between my hands, look to the sky, move on. I can go to Scotland or Ireland, get wet when it rains somewhere in a green and rolling valley. I’ll hop on a plane for New Zealand, Bali, or Singapore. Afterwards, I’ll work on a river in Belize. I’ll let the water run over my feet, and I’ll remember that my home is here. Anywhere. Nowhere.

Or I will go to Wyoming, Utah, or Idaho. I will disappear into the dust and re-circulate in the thin, sweeping air.
VIII. Four

A strike to the face, a punch in the stomach, your breath escapes you, and—
even if for only a few seconds—you’re not entirely certain it’ll come back. Maybe—
even if for only a few seconds—you don’t even want it to.

He met his father again after twenty years, after the heroin addiction, after the
divorce, which was more of a running away than a divorce. There were years when
his mother could afford to feed them nothing but hotdogs and canned corn. God. He
hated hotdogs. He hated corn.

Most years, his shoes were too small.

His father, inevitably, quit with the needles, quit with the bottle, and found
Jesus in a new woman named Roseanne. And, lucky man, he started all over again: a
new city, a new house, a shiny new car and a shiny new wife and two new kids.

It was almost as if he, his brother, his mother, had never even existed. Maybe
they hadn’t. Wasn’t much to hint otherwise.

His shoes were still too small.

What he remembered of his father took place in an instant. Son, he’d say,
tucking him into bed, always be wary of the elephants in the room.

He was seven years old when his father finally hit the road. I won’t miss him,
he thought. He won’t come back. I don’t even want him to.
IX. The Bird of Saint Chely d’Apcher

When he was a young boy living in Saint Chely d’Apcher, France, he dreamed of being an American. This would have been 1983, and he would have been five years old.

He understood that he was, in fact, American, and that he was living in Saint Chely d’Apcher so that his father, an ornithologist, could study birds at the college. He also understood that he (Daniel), his father and his mother would one day soon return to America, to Northern Michigan, where his dreams of becoming an American boy would come true.

Being only five, he troubled an awful lot over this concept: identity. He didn’t understand how he could simultaneously live in France and speak French but also be an American and speak American, or English, as it was called.

But—he was told—he was. He existed as both. Somehow it worked.

In Saint Chely d’Apcher, France, in 1983, he was very interested in these things: the 1979 Ford Mustang; the Petoskey Stone (Petoskey, which was also the name of the town in Northern Michigan to which his family would eventually return); and snow. He had no interest whatsoever in birds.

He walked to school each morning with his mother. She would not hold his hand, as he would not permit her to do so. When he remembered, he would bring his Petoskey Stone along with him. He kept it tucked in the pocket of his brown corduroy trousers, this souvenir from a home he had never seen, and he would rub his
thumb along its polished surface as he and his mother walked. His thumb rubbing the stone, his feet hitting the stone path: this was a cadence he could understand. He liked the idea that this stone was a fossil and that it was more than 350 million years old, older than himself or his mother or his father, or anything else in America or France, or elsewhere. He liked the fact that, as his mother told him, a Petoskey Stone could be found nowhere else but in Northern Michigan, and almost exclusively in Emmet County. He liked the fact that the Petoskey Stone had a true home, and he imagined that when he returned to Petoskey, in Northern Michigan, in America, he would also have a true home.

His grandparents had made their money out of snow, and in 1983 they were still the proprietors of one of the area’s most popular ski resorts, waiting for their son to return home and oversee the family business. Would this ever happen? Their son, as smart as he was, as passionate about birds, was hardly conscientious about the workings of day to day life. Like his birds, he lived in clouds. As often as the grandparents wired money to their son’s temporary French bank account, they sent Daniel letters, which his mother would read to him at bedtime. Always, they remembered to mention any recent sightings of the American automobile: Mustang. They wrote to him about American life: pizza shops and television programs and winter sledding. Daniel read and re-read his letters until he could recite them to himself, until it was like those words had always been a part of him. He read and re-read his letters, and he found that he could hardly wait for the day he would go to America.
Because placing blame is as human as skin, Daniel began to resent the work his father loved so much. Once, playing alone outside, he came across a small brown bird, matted into the ground, dead. Daniel kicked the bird into the earth over and over, until it stopped looking like a bird at all, but rather a mound of dirt or an anthill, and he ran inside to his mother, where he cried into her skirt but would not tell her why.

Sometimes, later on, the bird found its way into his dreams; or it would visit, uninvited, when he thought about Mustangs, or his grandparents, or America.

Then, just after he celebrated his sixth birthday, came the lucky time when Daniel and his parents packed their minimal belongings and took a three week holiday throughout France. The trip ended in Paris, where he might have enjoyed the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, or the Musée du Louvre—he had always been a very scholarly boy—but he was too preoccupied with thoughts of the impending flight to New York, then to Detroit, then to Pelston, Michigan, where his grandparents would be waiting with a Mustang to take him home. Three flights and a car trip: a very long journey for a young and anxious boy.

The bird came along, for each leg of the trip.

Daniel found that becoming an American boy was hardly difficult at all. Sometimes he missed not holding his mother hands during their long walks to school; sometimes he ached to hear the fluid tones and inflections of the French language he knew so well, but for the most part he found America to be very new and very exciting. He was thrilled to learn that a school bus would come for him every
morning; and he was even more thrilled when he discovered he could read on the bus as it traversed the eleven-mile stretch of long country roads to the school. And so, it was during his sometimes but not often bumpy bus rides from home to school and back again that Daniel learned to multitask. This skill was the most important and most life defining talent Daniel would ever need, and he became proficient at it before the end of his sixth year.

He was a solitary boy. He felt that he didn’t need friends as long as there was work to be done, and there was nearly always work to be done. Who knows, his mother or father would project, where did Daniel acquire his seemingly inherent need to always be working? But he was always working at something: new readings, always very advanced for his age, mathematics, biology, history, art. It didn’t matter. His mind spun: constantly.

Sometimes Daniel felt something pecking into his thoughts—a pesky but not devastating annoyance—and he’d detach himself from his work only to find that the bird was visiting. Sometimes he could shoo it away rather quickly; other times it stayed on for a while, an uninvited visitor. He didn’t know what it was, only that something was off, maybe even wrong.

But he wouldn’t permit it to bother him, now that he finally had a home, a place to belong, a Petoskey, Michigan for the Petoskey Stone.

During these so-called formative years, Daniel did make one good friend, Lorne, who was a very tall and a very interested boy. Through typical small town gossip, Lorne learned that Daniel had come from France, and this fact fascinated him.
endlessly, as he had never been taken much past the borders of Emmet County. Unasked, Lorne began to join Daniel on his schoolbus bench during the trips to and from school, but Daniel didn’t much mind. He learned that he could tune in and out of Lorne’s unwittingly one-sided conversations with ease; he learned that he enjoyed helping Lorne with his homework, or even doing it for him. He learned that company was something he could pay as much or as little attention to as he desired. In Daniel’s mind, the friendship was perfect. He would seldom find a relationship as fulfilling again.

*  

Years later, Daniel did these things: he had his first beer at 14; he lost his virginity to Patsy Korpinen at 17; and at 18, he gave the valedictory speech at his high school commencement. To prove to himself that he still could, he recited his speech in front of his bedroom mirror in English and then in French. The bird was there, bearing witness that he could. When addressing the crowd of his 120 peers and their 500-some guests, he used only English. Three-months later, he and Lorne drove together the 250 miles to Ann Arbor, Michigan, where they would both attend The University of Michigan, living in separate dormitories.

*  

If there was ever a perfect fit for any lost soul in the world, the University was it for Daniel. He found that he could achieve almost complete anonymity; he could escape into his books, the back rows of lecture halls, a handle of Jack Daniels.
He studied French, Dutch, German, public health. Sociology, anthropology, law, paleontology, history, film. It didn’t matter; he studied it all. He was a sponge. He lost himself in words; he became the words. His bank account, his grandparents’ bank account, was bottomless. He ate out. Mexican, Thai, Italian, Hungarian, French. He became a connoisseur. He was a regular at the State Street liquor store, the one that checked IDs but not the dates listed on them. He could have anything he wanted. While the majority of students around him assumed humble existences, saving pennies for a weekend burger or a two-for-one beer special at the corner bars, Daniel disappeared into delicacies. Everything was possible.

However. There were too many words. He was overwhelmed, always, by the amount of work that needed to be done. He had his courses, always more than the suggested amount; he had his directed studies, his promises to professors. There were his obligations to dimmer students, those who paid him to tutor them in French and Latin. He had his weekly phone calls home to his grandparents, an unspoken contract securing that money would always be there provided he always had something to say. He loved his grandparents, but like everything else, love was a mere obligation. Something to keep him from disappearing.

More and more, the bird was always there. Nothing was possible.

Remember: Daniel’s first beer on his 14th birthday, one pulled from Lorne’s gifted six-pack of warm Labatt’s, would not be his last. Far from it. Over the years, Daniel had perfected his coping mechanism, a not-at-all uncommon way of dealing with those things we are unable to deal with. Once, after returning home from a party
Lorne had taken him to, Daniel remembered the half-gallon of Bushmills he had purchased earlier that day and stowed in the cupboard above the sink. By now, he would have been a junior. 1998. The party had been particularly bland. The kegs had blown out early. The sophomore English major Daniel had been working on, a petite thing named Annette, had left early, stumbling down Hill Street on the arm of another guy, someone tall and bulky underneath his sweater. Daniel hadn’t had sex in months. His work was stagnant. He was expected home soon for the Christmas holiday. Everything but the Bushmills seemed completely devoid of possibility. So he drank it. All of it, half a tumbler at a time, until the half-gallon bottle was nothing but a bottle, empty. It was a surprisingly easy task, took maybe 24 or 36 hours at the most, and all he had to do was ignore a few phone calls, stare at the walls, pour another half-tumbler. Maybe he dozed off once or twice; maybe he used the bathroom. But otherwise, he was thrilled to discover how easily he could commit himself to the bottle of Bushmills, how easily he could focus on his reading and on his work while doing so. The alcohol, dulling as it may have been, fostered in Daniel and incredible sense of clarity. Afterwards, after a shower and a winter walk to buy a sandwich and a case of beer, he finished his papers. He took a nap. He called Lorne to say that, yes, he would drive back Up North with him on Wednesday; he called his grandparents to say he would be home soon. The bird was nowhere to be found.

*
In 2003, Daniel would have been in the middle of his second Master’s degree, still in Ann Arbor, still at the University of Michigan. What could he say? Winter suited him.

He worked part time at a bar, not so much to supplement empty pockets since his pockets were never empty, but to supplement emptiness in general. He was a host, taking customers to booths or tables after their IDs were checked. The work was brainless, but the beers were free. It was the sort of bar where, after his shift, he could settle into a corner table and work on his course obligations. It was the sort of bar where nobody, give or take a waiter or two, would notice how many beers he had in one sitting. He was not happy, but then again, he wasn’t unhappy.

It was winter, January, the morning he left home for work. He was working the lunch shift which suited him just fine, because once he was finished, three or four in the afternoon, he could spend the rest of the day reading and drinking. He could finish his applications to the University of Alaska’s Northern Studies program. He had a day and an evening worth looking forward to. The walk to work from his house, which was really an apartment in an old white mansion that had been sectioned off into studios and one-bedrooms, wasn’t long. Perhaps it took ten-minutes. He listened to the sound of snow, crunch, crunch, beneath his booths. He watched his breath leave his mouth in white ribbons.

Eleven AM, just before the lunch rush, Daniel stepped outside for a moment’s worth of fresh air. He heard sirens, and honest-to-god, he had a thought. *Funny thing,* a fire in winter. He went back to work; it turned out to be a very busy day.
Funny thing, a fire in winter, especially when what’s burning is your home, only you have no idea that it’s burning because you’re not home and no one knows you well enough to find you and tell you. He found out when he walked home much later that night. He turned the corner, and there it wasn’t. What did Daniel do? He turned around and walked back to the bar. The bird laughed, and then flew on.

A few weeks later, after the help from the Salvation Army and the phone calls to insurance agents and lawyers, Daniel walked from Lorne’s to the site of his former home, where he planned to survey the damage. Wasn’t much too it. Days earlier, Salvation Army volunteers had poured through the rubble and soot and collected anything salvageable, so Daniel had already been given what was left of a lifetime of belongings: his banjo, which was in surprisingly good condition, a few kitchen necessities (pots and pans and a blender, unusable but somehow comforting), and a pewter box filled with some knick-knacks, a little red matchbox Mustang of all things. But he had wanted to see it, what was there or what wasn’t, so he went.

He took a pull from his flask and walked to where he guessed the entrance to his apartment had been. The ground was severely burned, and he watched his steps to make sure his boots stayed relatively clean. They had been purchased with the emergency stipend from the Salvation Army, and he felt a particular need to keep them looking new. He didn’t know what he should feel as he paced the ground, watching his steps. He certainly didn’t feel anger, because he hadn’t had very much worth losing. His books, maybe, but the thing about books is that there are always more to be had. Was it sadness? What was there to be missed?
Daniel paced the property for a few minutes more, and he was preparing to
leave altogether when he noticed something small and familiar down by his new
boots. Bending over, he realized it was the remnants of a small, red dish he had kept
on the window ledge in his kitchen. There had never been much to it; it was just a
little bowl, a home for pocket change, a loose button, those sorts of things. It
appeared that the bowl had exploded in the fire, but there, matted into the ground was
what remained even after the building had collapsed and the ground was raised and
the Salvation Army had come to scavenge for leftovers. Daniel pulled his gloves
from his hands and dug the melted, red glass out of the charred earth. And there,
underneath where the glass had been, he found his childhood Petoskey Stone. Who
knows how long it had rested in that red dish. Who knows how long it had gone
untouched, unloved, forgotten. And now, here it was. It had survived the fire. Daniel
was about to pick it up when something stopped him. Call it an urge. He thought of a
little boy in little brown trousers. It was him; he was that boy. He remembered the
bird.

He stood, straightened up, smoothed his pants and put his gloves back on. No
longer caring about the soot and ash, he kicked the Petoskey Stone into the ground.
He kicked it until he couldn’t see it any longer, until the toe of his right boot was
filthy with dirt. He buried his Petoskey Stone like he had buried the bird, all those
years ago in St. Chely d’Apcher.
X. Five

It started to pour. We were in the stacks, studying. Someone always leaves an umbrella behind, and we decided to find it. Molly and me.

When you live in the mountains or on the coast, you should always plan for rain. But we hadn’t been there long; we didn’t know the rules.

On the second floor, we found documentary films, pastries, two cups of coffee, mine black and hers sugared down. We had all day, nothing to look for but an umbrella. We found a tube of lipstick in the bathroom, Ambrosia. It was not a shade that either of us would wear.

Books on the third floor.

Books on the fourth floor. American. We found short stories we both loved, or would love. We made lists of the novels we had never read, but had faked. Moby Dick for her, and anything Steinbeck. The Great Gatsby for me, Invisible Man, The Sound and the Fury. Really, I never had.

Books on the fifth floor. British. More lists. An embarrassment of neglected novels. Flipping through Bleak House and Emma, we resolved to read everything we hadn’t but should have. Together.

Someone always leaves an umbrella behind, but that day, we couldn’t find it. Stuck in the library, we spent the day waiting for the rain to pass, making promises.
XI. The Buried, The Wasted, The Lost

I walk Venetian streets; the scent of a passerby’s pipe hits me, and Edward—my first everything—comes back, stronger than ever.

A glass of milk at breakfast invites Isobell Salus to the table. Her hands hold mine, as cold as the cold milk traveling down to my insides, and she lists for me the things she will miss.

I will not let go of Cara. She is always here, the fire taking her house down, her down, always. And I wake up in heat and sweat, grasping, grasping for my Cara.

Tansey haunts me, her accidental departure always in my head. I call and call for her, not knowing if she can hear.

I keep my ghosts. They live with me, inside me, as I go through each day breathing in air and moving my legs to walk and shading my eyes from the sun. Some days I want nothing more than to lie in bed and talk and talk with them. Some days I want nothing more than to hold fast to them in waking dreams. I keep my ghosts. Won’t, can’t, let them leave.

* 

Isobell,

I left America for your Italy because I was going crazy. Weak spirited, I packed up my things to take them away from my life. Said goodbye to family and friends—the living ones, the ones who are still around—and promised to write.
Haven’t. The letters I write are to you. And Edward, and Cara. Tansey. Words lost even as I write them.

Now I need to find what’s left after you’re pushed out, gone. Maybe that will be nothing, an assemblage of, only patches of color peeking through piles and piles of dust. But if that’s me, I have to find her. Twenty-three years old and I can’t stand on my own.

I kept some photos after you died, the ones you showed me one night before the cancer, when I asked you about your most beloved place. We leafed through boxes of photos of Italy, you and Italy, and you told me about growing up in Venice. About crossing the bridges every day, about walking home. About learning to cook in your mother’s kitchen. Repeated recipes to me, out loud and in Italian and beautiful, like a song. I asked you to take me there. “Someday,” you said, smiling for home.

That night I told you my most beloved place was you, your house. Said I felt homeless sometimes, the way my mother and I never get along. I was fifteen, Isobell, and you were my mother country.

I held onto those recipes, Isobell, those photos, you.

So you died. So I lost you, the only mother I had let myself have.

Seven years later, and I’ve lost too many people. Edward, too, has left me, and I am afraid. Maybe he isn’t dead, not dead in the sense that you are. But what’s the difference? He is gone with the rest of you.

You said you would take me to your Italy, so I came, fled.
You are not my mother; I shouldn’t have to hold on so hard. Seven years you’ve been gone.

I looked out the plane’s window as I was landing in Venice, tried to imagine a home in my head. Tried to imagine myself alone. But you all followed me here, or I dragged you along—I don’t know. I cross bridges afraid of falling, sinking, never rising.

*

Edward,

So we broke up. That night on the roof of the parking garage. We broke up. But you couldn’t stay away too long. Not from my body. I thought my body would be good enough, the way I thought sex would remind you of three good years and bring you back.

You told me sex was all you wanted, but I held on anyway, grasping your back too hard, willing you back into me. I held on so many nights after you left, pulling you into me. Trying to pretend I didn’t want you so you’d want me. Reverse psychology gone so wrong, and I’ve run to Venice to get away from you, too afraid to be near you. Too afraid I won’t be able to let go any other way.

*

Cara,

In my dreams there is always fire. I wake up sweating; the red flames are always there.
You were supposed to come home with me on the bus that day, and I waited and waited for you to come to school. Even at recess, you weren’t there. We were going to work on our science project; Dad and I had gone to buy the supplies. At the grocery store, he said, “What kind of food coloring do you want?” “Cara likes red,” I said, so that’s what we got.

At the end of the day, just before last bell, Mrs. McKern came into our room. “Class,” she said, not smiling, hardly moving. And then she told us your house had burned down. Down and down and to the ground. And you weren’t coming to school anymore because you had died.

I closed my eyes, saw red food coloring, and not you.

* 

Tansey,

Do I believe in heaven, and are you there?

The first time I met you, you were crabby, sweat sticking your blonde hair to your forehead. “I look like shit,” you said, “and I can’t wait to take a shower.” But you were smiling when you said it.

We were moving into college—can you believe it, college? Michigan, August. The humidity was as thick as fog, and we were sticky and hot, hoping silently for our parents to close our dorm room doors in on us, on our expanding world.

You were the pretty blonde girl with an attitude and a voice people couldn’t help but hear. It was easy for you, being the center of attention. “Isn’t there someone
here to carry my boxes up these stairs? I am not going up and down and up and down in these shoes. I just won’t do it.” A hardened Barbie Doll.

The resident assistants were exasperated; one said, “Look at this little bitch with her designer everything. Who does she think she is?” And I think I fell in love with the idea of being your friend that very day.

Later that night, you found your way through the confused halls to my room, and you offered me a joint. And after, we roamed the streets of the small campus in search of something to do, to join. “College is all about the friends you have,” you said, knowing and intelligent.

So late, we found no one but ourselves. That was fine.

Days, weeks, months later, our little college had become—like most things of this world—too small for you. You ached for more. You were always looking for something to take you away.

I had tests I wanted to pass, grades I wanted to get.

I’d hear you calling my name from down the hall. “Get your shoes on, I’m coming. Isn’t there anything to do tonight? Let’s take a drive; I need to get out of here.”

“Tansey, it’s Tuesday.”

Through smoke, our adventures came back to us in different shades of light and laughter. Blinded, I never thought I might be losing you.
One weekend night, after the parties had ended, you and I sat outside smoking cigarettes and talking off the alcohol. I told you I didn’t think I believed in God, or heaven.

“That’s okay,” you said, “but you’re wrong.”

*

Edward,

You drove me home Easter Sunday when I was eighteen, back to college from your parents’ house. The kind of day when the air leaves damp fingerprints on your skin and all you want to do is walk the neighborhood streets, look up and up, at the sky. It was like we were living that day in the old photos from your family’s album. Images old but precious captured in browns and whites and yellows, too full of light and life to be black and white. But I had been uncomfortable with your family, and nervous, and I ate the salmon brunch quietly and bite by careful bite, thinking, *I’m a vegetarian, I’m a vegetarian, I’m a vegetarian.* You held my hand under the table; afterwards you thanked me. “You’re precious, Baby, precious.” That’s what you said.

Back to your house near campus, and we were quiet all the long drive. But I held your hand tight and you, every few minutes, lifted our clasped hands and kissed my fingers. We were silent because we had said it all earlier that weekend, whispering in your parent’s living room, about moving forward together, toward sex. We were both nervous, driving back home on Easter Sunday.
Parked in your car beside your house, you looked over to me and—smiling slightly—said, “We’re home.” (You were nervous). I walked with you through your cluttered house—I will always remember it as blue and cluttered, always full of many people and many cats—and we stepped the steps up to your room. Too nervous, so we lay on your bed and spooned. Your arms holding my stomach and chest tight, your breath moving up and down, up down, up down—a lullaby on my neck. I fell asleep thinking of the hundreds of times we had slept so nicely next to each other. Fell into sleep waiting for more. I woke, kissed your face over, and over. You opened your eyes, sighed. I said, “Edward,” and said replied, “Baby, I know.”

I swung my leg over your body so that I was on top of you. I slid my hand between your pants and your skin, reached down. I kissed you, slid my tongue against yours, tasted you. And I kissed you all the way down your body, slid off your pants. You unzipped my Easter dress, ran your hands over my breasts and down my back, scratched my skin with the tips of your nails. You were nervous, so I worked you inside me until you sighed. And. And I could feel you rising into me and up me, lifting like temperature. The red of a thermometer. Rising, rising. Every bit of you, every conversation we had ever had, each kiss. Rising, rising, I moved with you.

* 

Tansey,

Did you find God, Tansey, all those times when I wasn’t with you? In all those long nights and powders and needles? You called out for more, more, always. Did you find God, Tansey? In the vomit and the shaking and the screaming? In the
jesusfuckingchrist what-the-hell-are-you-doing-to-yourself nights? In all the weight you lost? One-hundred-twenty pounds, down and down to eighty-nine. Tiny battered bones, howling muscles, trying to hold you up.

Me, trying to hold you up.

One night, you had coke. Another, heroin. What could I have done? I let you go, always, to find ways to take you away.

You’d come to me sometimes, in a panic, always.

Needing help with a history paper or a biology exam or an art analysis, you’d say, “You’re so smart, Katherine. Please help me. Please, please, pretty please.” Red eyes, from tears for once. Tugging at your blonde hair, tugging too hard.

I was smart, Tansey; I am smart. But you were, too. I told you; I told you a thousand times, like a mother, “You just need to work a little, Tansey.” But you’d blame it on stupidity, the first indication that you were a liar. I know how you passed; it was because of me. I helped you, I did.

In all the wrong ways.

That last night of our freshman year, after we smoked and sneaked into the aquatic center, I ended the night swimming, slippery water on my skin, slippery water around my altered mind. And after I ended my night with you, there swimming, you went on. Who knows where you went, but I know what you did. Much later, almost morning, you came crawling into my room near dawn speaking a language I did not know. That night, your face was not yours, and I was frightened.
You crawled into my bed, hid your face in the crook of my arm, between the folds of my worn blue pajamas.

“I’m going to die, I’m going to die, I’m going to,” you sang, a slow and steady song growing slower and slower as you faded into sleep.

“What did you take, Tansey?”

You were out. I willed you to be fine. And I rubbed your scalp and your back and believed every word that ran through my mind.

I am a liar, too, Tansey. I never did admit I might lose you.

*

Isobell,

When you left for the holistic cancer center in Texas, I thought there was hope—good hope—that you would come back to me. Sixteen and naïve, I was holding on with all the strength I had.

I came to you when my real mother couldn’t get me to pull a brush through my chlorine-burned hair or iron my uniform skirt or look her in the eyes. Came—full force—to your house, to you.

Your own baby, Anna, had been—during those formative years, those pretty-good years—my best friend. The first time I came to your house, I met you in your kitchen. You were making your spaghetti sauce, singing. Sometimes, these days, I look into my own kitchen and expect you to be standing in there, your black hair pulled into a high ponytail. I gravitate toward you and your hair, your hands that
smell sweet like basil, your calm voice always singing. But you are not here and I
am struck cold at the loss of you.

That first time I met you, you held out a wooden spoon for me to test the
sauce. “Just a little something more?” you asked.

I tried my best to be a daughter to you—you must have known—all those
times when I came to your table to talk. Chocolate milk and talk. I wished myself
into your family where it was just fine to be fourteen and fifteen and sixteen. And
angry, and scared. I never did mind those times when the cancer, the chemotherapy
made you angry and scared.

Once, in your kitchen, you pulled your hair and a bit of it fell out. You
handed me that lock of your hair—that bit of tired black—and said, “Remember me.”
I didn’t cry because I thought strength would help. I hugged you.

I said, “I will.”

You left for Texas. You know you died. And I wonder if it was like we had
said—a sort of leaping.

A big breath, and then none. Then a burst. Anything but pain.

*

Tansey,

Our world was too small, and so you left. I remember relief, Tansey. The
tests I needed to pass, the grades I wanted to get. Nothing in my way. Not you—in
my way. But you, the magnet you were, I missed you. I saw you sometimes, when I
gathered the strength for a weekend with you. And sometimes you left me, for other things, for drugs. I closed my eyes, remembered you as you. Your pretty blonde hair and balloon-pop laugh.

    I was too small for you. Had I been larger—better—I might have said more. Maybe five times I said, “Tansey, slow down.” But I never believed me, and neither did you.

    The corner of North Halstead and Armitage in Chicago. I was on vacation, had just bought new running shoes. Staring at my feet and studying them—their bright blue and yellow lines—I pictured myself running, pushing and pushing and never stopping. A dog-walker with six or seven confused dogs passed me on that corner when Alexis called to tell me you had died. I stopped running, Tansey. My world stood still. “How?” But I knew. Heroin and coke and some vodka. Someone left you passed out on your couch. I could kill, Tansey. I could die.

    On the corner of North Halstead and Armitage in Chicago, I stood and cried. The confused herd of dogs clambered on, and I closed my eyes. But I heard them as they passed, yapping, yapping. I opened my eyes, and I caught the eyes of other people as they spun by too slow, and those eyes were not yours.

    Those eyes were not yours, not yours. Traffic and dogs, strangers and my new shoes: all too, too slow. Tansey, dead.

    Do I believe in heaven, and are you there?

*
Cara,

We were five when we met. At Sunday mass, our families sat in the same pew; our parents had thought we’d make good playmates. While the choir sang hallelujah, we hid on the floor between pews and played make-believe, two prisoners trapped between bars of stocking-legs and high-heeled feet. You bit your father’s calf in a valiant effort to escape, but we were forced to rejoin the world of worship. After mass, we went to your house, shed our plaid and polka-dotted church dresses, created our own empire in the tree-house in your backyard.

We colored, mostly. Hidden behind the blue and pink tree-house walls, hunched over crisp white paper, we whispered the images we wanted and poured them out in different shades of carrot, lemon, jungle and sky. “Draw me,” you said, “and I’ll draw you.” I scribbled lines and lines of black hair. I drew you a pogo-stick and big black eyes. I wanted you to jump so I could see your hair bounce with you, your eyes wide at the wonder of nearly flying. You drew me next to you, taller by a head, short-short strawberry-brown hair which paled next to your black. Same big black eyes, and that was the miracle. Even our mothers said so, in coffee-conversations at the kitchen table as we played. Same eyes.

We tacked that first picture to the bare blue wall of your tree-fort.

Sunday after sanctifying Sunday, and days in between. Five months, and we had the walls around us papered with our simple little scenes. An art-empire.

*
Edward,

Remember the river, and how we had to jump in from the bridge, swim a mile out, swim a mile back. Freshman year of college, my first day swimming with the team, first day meeting you. Your black suit, stuck to your skin. Your eyes green, the color of the river. And your hair, my favorite, that mass of brown-blond curls that I wanted, even that first day, to touch. To simply touch. Me in my key-lime suit, green like your eyes, like the river.

I jumped too close to the shore, hit my ankle on a rock. Blood all down my heel and you helped me through the rocky-shore and to grass, green like your eyes, like the river.

“Nasty cut.” You with that smile and those hands holding my ankle. You and your hair.

“Yes.”

“I’m Edward. Are you okay?”

“I’m okay.”

Our first shared words, melted down into my memory. Into almost nothing. Words, I would tell you, years later, are everything. You always over-analyze, you would say.

“I’m okay,” I said, already planning our first date, our first kiss, and enjoying—never wanting to stop—having you hold my ankle.

*
Cara,

After the fire, on the phone to someone, Mom said your little sister believed you had simply gone back to the house to get your toys.

“Poor girl,” Mama said, “She waits for Cara to come back.”

I ran up to my room and found my own toys; I opened the window and threw them down and down, and they made fire-popping noises as they hit the ground.

*

Isobell,

Before the cancer, we cooked. I walked home with Anna after school, the excuses I gave my own mother somehow always enough—tests, projects, weekend parties. And we cooked. My own mother was never a good cook, anyway.

But you, the magic. Just your kitchen was sometimes enough, the clinking of the pots and pans that hung from hooks above our heads. Your spice rack was filled with spices I had never tasted. Anna and I wanted to taste saffron, so you whipped something up, threw ingredients in, your hands your only measurements. Mixed batter for bread and told us about Italy, about family.

You laughed your way through stories; I could tell the really important parts by the size of your smile, the humming noise you made after you told the best part. I told you my stories, too, in a low tone that grew as you asked for more, wanted to know more, more of me.

*
Tansey,

It’s never a good idea to tell a dead person to go to hell, because maybe that’s where she is. But I am angry, Tansey, and these are the words that come to mind.

*

Edward,

Tourists, as they wiz through the Guggenheim, barely pause, or give a painting a moment to settle, or stop to breathe one in. They rush for the famous ones, pass the others by as if they don’t exist.

On our anniversary, you took me to the art institute and walked me through the galleries. I stopped at the paintings I liked best, always looked much longer than you; your attention was on me. You said you took me to the art institute because you didn’t have the words to tell me how much you loved me.

“Paintings do better,” you said.

You knew me well.

We tried to guess the names of paintings before searching their placards. You were always way off, and when I laughed—too loud—passersby shot me disapproving glares.

In love, I didn’t care.

We used to stay in bed long after our classes had started and ended; you painted my toenails, once. We went to bed early just to be next to each other and naked.
Once, when Cara came back in a dream, you took me to the shower and washed my hair. Said, as you made too much lather, you were cooling me off.

I’m cooling, I thought, cooling.

*

Isobell,

Your slow dying was the only thing that made me feel like an imposter.

“You’re wrong,” you said. “You have grown into me, into us.”

I went home late, stepped up to my parents’ room, and bent down to hug my sleeping mother sleeping. She woke, asked if I was all right.

“I’m going to need you soon,” I said.

She sigh-smiled and held me tight.

“I don’t know why it’s been so hard for us,” I said.

She sigh-smiled and held me tighter.

*

Edward,

In Venice, there are no cars. No driving, no parking. No parking garages. One less tie to you. Parking garages remind me of you. The absence of them, too.

We always parked at the Thayer Street parking garage. It wasn’t convenient because all the places we ever went were a long distance away. But the Thayer Street garage had been the first one we found, and from then on it was something we always did.
I can’t count the number of times you and I drove into that garage together and walked out hand in hand. Smiling and happy in love.

It was odd, that time we had to park on the seventh level, on the roof. There was a festival in Ann Arbor that night, or a football game. You were going to hear a concert, and I, uninvited to your show, was going to spend the evening with Tansey. You could leave me in her hands, be rid of me. There was a festival that night, or a football game, and every single space we passed was filled. We were getting nervous, driving up and up and up.

And then we were on the roof.

It was one of those nights when it wasn’t exactly raining, but the air was wet. Wasn’t winter yet, but you brought your coat. I was cold, but I knew not to ask.

I got out of your car, and it felt the same as my first mornings in Venice. Windy and wet and cold and different. Different, sensing my freedom for the first time. Being alone, being only me and alone. Foreign.

Freedom, the word you threw at me that night at the Thayer Street garage, to end us.

I was on the roof, and I looked over, into your eyes.

You said, “I need freedom.”

I bent my head, stared at my shoes, said, “I know.” Nausea pushed through me. And I willed myself to get over you. But I didn’t. Couldn’t, haven’t, can’t.

I’ve tried, but I’m a failure. So I came to Venice where there are no parking garages. And I am trying. But it’s hard, breaking habit.
Tansey,

Maybe I would have been a better friend, had you had only casual addictions. Those words, at odds. Nothing about you was casual, except maybe your hair those last weeks. Remember how you used to take hours to flatten it, to make it all straight? Too preoccupied after a while, you let it go, irrational and unintelligible and wild.

I could forgive you, but if I hate you less, I may forget you more.

Walked in on you that night, needle in your arm and a cloud in my throat. Dark room and a light on so all I could see was you and the sick-sick thing. You know what I thought, Tansey? Why do I waste my time on you? I Left. Wandered Ann Arbor alone, snow and rain coming sidewise, washing my face clean and cold. As cold as desperation and the loneliness of being alone. My skirt—my favorite skirt, the pink one you gave me—soaked straight through and stuck between my legs, my thighs numb. I stopped in at Cosi for something to eat—it had been all day, and you know how I get faint. Couldn’t eat, Tansey. Couldn’t wrap my fingers around the sandwich and lift it to my mouth. I Just couldn’t. I went back to find. You were in the kitchen, trying to work the toaster. Vomit all over you, and the smell turned my stomach around and around, sick circus tumblers. Pieces of you, grotesque and rotten, all over. You didn’t notice. Or you didn’t care.

“Tansey.”

“You were supposed to come earlier.”
“Tansey, I did.”

“Liar.”

I was exhausted, Tansey. You bent over the sink—I was amazed you made it to the sink—and vomited, the sickening sound of you coming up from inside. And you peed uncontrollably, dripping onto the carpeted kitchen floor. A grown woman peeing in her clothes, in her kitchen. But I wasn’t surprised, not one ounce. I thought, this is old news. Old news.

Took you to the bathroom, ran the shower cold, so cold you shivered before you were even wet. But you weren’t shivering because of the water. Drug shivers. I stripped you down—like Isobell when she was too tired from her drugs and Anna and I, her real and almost real daughters, bathed her. Wished you were Isobell. Moaned and whispered and wished you were Isobell. Slid you into the shower and washed you clean. Other times, you had been nervous about me seeing you naked, touching you naked. But I was used to this from all those times with Isobell. And the dim blue light of Isobell’s bathroom, and her lavender soap hit me and took my breath away. I wanted her Tansey, not you. You slumped against the wet, tile was, lifeless, and I washed your face and hair.

Soaking wet for the second time that night, I said, “Edward and I broke up.” Conversation is easier when it’s one-sided, isn’t it Tansey? “Edward broke up with me, and I don’t know what I’ll do. Tell me you’ll remember this in the morning, Tansey. Tell me we can talk about it, then.”
You lifted your lifeless hand, put your finger to my nose, said, “Still have me.”

Wandered Ann Arbor alone, snow and rain coming at me sidewise, washing my face clean and cold.

* 
Edward, 

Didn’t things start to go wrong when I told you my hopes, when I sat on your couch and told you I wanted you forever?

“We’re too young,” you said. “That’s too much.”

I felt different that instant, sitting on the couch, a new person I did not want you to be. Put my hands through your hair, said, “That’s okay. We can wait.” I was lying, lying as I looked you in your eyes told you I didn’t mind. My eyes ached to look at you, and I did, pretending I could get you to be what I wanted.

You went cold then. After that, you would not kiss me as long, or just because, or with your eyes open because you said I was too pretty not to look and you couldn’t decide—kiss or look—so you did both. After that, I opened my eyes mid-kiss to see yours, closed. What were you picturing in your head? It wasn’t me. Not me.

When you wouldn’t look me in the eyes, I knew I should stop loving you. But I couldn’t. Just couldn’t. Holding, holding on.

Once, when you hung up the phone too early, I called you back, said, “What’s the problem? I told you I was okay with indefinite.”
“I don’t believe you,” you said. “I see it in your eyes. That’s why I stopped looking.”

On the phone, I had to say I loved you three times before you said it back. I stood in my kitchen, twisted the phone cord around my fingers, and waited, on fire.

Finally, you said it, and even then I felt no good. No good and wrong, like where we were headed.

You used to let me wear your watch when I was feeling playful, just slip it off your wrist and onto mine. You stopped that, saying you had to know the time, always looking for excuses to go.

*

Cara,

Bad dreams still, and I wake damaged and in the dark. I have to stay there in that heated dark grasping my pillow and wanting water. Sometimes I wake my roommate—somehow too loud no matter how I try to silence myself—and she needs to know. “Just dreams,” I say.

Mom said I couldn’t go to the funeral, and I stayed home with a neighbor, in my room, hiding.

But some days later, somewhere in town, I saw your mama. She had burns all over, all over and everywhere. I hid my face in my mama’s stomach, and when I lifted my face away, her shirt was darkened from my tears and your mama was gone.

*
Isobell,

My mother came with me to your funeral, sat next to me as I stared, not believing, at the altar. She did not hold my hand or put her arm around my shoulder. But I could feel her, ready to make her move if I were to break. I played strong, and for a while I thought I wouldn’t fall.

After it was over, I rose from the pew, went to your closed-casket and then walked away.

I walked away from you, and I stood on the church steps of the church, crying, shaking. My mother took me firmly, held me. I fell into her, and she held me.

I was thinking, shouldn’t you hate me by now? But she wrapped me in herself and held me as I cried.

*

Edward,

In the middle of the night, I wake up wanting you. Cried today when I smelled the scent of a pipe and was carried back. Remember, after we broke up, when we tried to have an affair, no strings attached. “Just sex,” you said, “You’re so pretty.”

No strings attached is a lie. It’s a fucking lie.

*
Tansey,

On the vaparetto, on the way to work, I met an American who wanted to know how the public transportation system worked, where I worked, why I had moved to Venice.

“The vaparetti are just like buses—on a schedule, at the Guggenheim, because I needed a change.”

I wanted to tell him that I’m haunted, but I knew he wouldn’t understand. I wanted—as the vaparetto continued on and we passed San Marco, Salute, Academia—to tell him how you overdosed. About fire and freedom and cancer. How you were fucked-up and on drugs. And I couldn’t tell him that, Tansey. I didn’t want to ruin his vacation.

You overdosed, Tansey. And I came to Italy to forget. The taking of drugs, the shaking, the shaking. Convulsing like a fish ripped from water. The dying. I came to forget. But still, the urge to break down, to scream at strangers that you died.

*

Edward,

I took the long way to the Guggenheim today. I didn’t want to work, so I procrastinated getting there. I paid admission to cross the Bridge of Sighs. A sigh, an indication of sorrow or weariness, or, in some cases, relief.

I re-felt, today, the feeling of you leaving me, the gasp I made when I realized you were gone.
And then I crossed the bridge, and I went to work.

*

Tansey,

On the Italian news today they said America’s in luck because drugs are less and less affecting the lives of her youth. I put my face in my hands and shook.

I wasn’t there, so I pretend, the scene of your death staged like a play in my made-up memory.

You were alone, I know. They had left you and gone on to the party, deeming you unfit to attend, which means black bruised eyes from melting eye-liner. Hair not curly and not straight, but frizzy, though you would never admit it.

You were alone, and asleep. And beautiful even in your ugliness, I’m sure. And when you woke to find they had gone, you took more and more and more.

Sitting on the toilet because in the movies people who overdose are always locked in bathroom stalls, shooting. And because I always ended up in the bathroom with you, holding you up, pushing your head so the toilet (not I, not you) would catch the vomit. I picture you shooting, taking and taking and taking. And shaking, Tansey, until you are just a blur. A blur and a fall and a death. A needle in your arm, dangling.

And me on the corner of North Halstead and Armitage on my cell phone. And me in Italy, trying to hide. And Tansey, dead.

*
Isobell,

I chose you to be my mother. A new mother when I couldn’t get along with my own, needed guidance, needed anything. I came full force to your house for warm dinners, a kiss goodnight.

I wash the dishes remembering the wet rag wiping your sweating head, remembering my efforts to keep you cool, anything to help.

The waiting, the wanting. Will Isobell ache from chemo today? Will her appointment run over the dinner Anna and I have prepared, copied, from her handwritten cookbook? Will she be too tired to eat, fall asleep before I can kiss her forehead, say ‘sweet dreams’?

Later, after my mother and I were beginning to get along, to be a family, she waited up for me at night. Half awake, no matter what time I came in, so I could come up to kiss her. I knew, all those times, how she felt. The waiting for you to come home, to wake up, to fall asleep.

The waiting, that last time when you went to Texas. You went with your husband, joked that it was your second honeymoon. And we smiled, because smiling helped.

You never came home. Waiting and waiting, a mother wanting her baby, a baby wanting her mother.

I stayed in Michigan longer than I should have for my birth mother. To keep her from losing me, me from losing her.
I went to Milan a while ago, saw da Vinci’s *The Last Supper*. Perhaps the most beautiful painting I have seen, and it reminds me only of you.

Your last supper.

The pasta Anna and I had tried to duplicate; you were too tired.

I saw da Vinci’s *The Last Supper*, glorious on the wall of Santa Maria delle Grazie. I didn’t cry, but tears were in the wells of my eyes, forming from the need for you, *mia madre*, the mother I was not born to. My virgin mother.

*

Edward,

I kissed someone today.

Kissed. He leaned over me on a park bench in *Campo San Stae*, and we kissed. I wanted to kiss an Italian, so I did. And I wanted to kiss on a bridge in Venice, so I took him—his name is Gian—to *Ponte Accademia*. And we stood there, and we stood there, and we kissed. His hands cupped my face, my breasts, and I thought, *I am kissing on a bridge in Venice.* And I wouldn’t have stopped for a hundred centuries. Four a.m. The *rizzo panes* were about to open; I could smell the scent of their baking breads. I could smell their scents, the smell of Isobell’s kitchen, flour and egg and basil. The waking scents of Venice—just like home—and I was awake, and kissing. I had nowhere to go; the next boat wouldn’t come for another hour. He wanted to come back to my apartment. But I would never let him, even as he spoke to me in his Italian; begged to me beautifully to let him come *a casa con me.*
I said, “No, non ti amo, non ti amo.” I don’t love you; you can’t come home.

*Cara,*

I realize I am some sort of strange for holding onto something—someone—I lost when I was seven. Small girls splash through puddles in the campo as I walk to work. They giggle as their feet hit the water, as the water hits their faces. I think of when we, as children, ran barefoot through the banks of sand at the beach. Our toes picking up the sand, our toes shoving through the water, our laughter rising as we reached deep water, and dove.

I see you and me in the small girls. But I pass older ones—groups of preteens and teens huddled, heads close, outside shops, gossiping—and I don’t find us in their faces. We were only kids together, Cara. So why are you with me, seven and with me still?

I let myself live through pain, Cara, because living through pain is better than living alone. That’s why I have kept all of you. Kept you safe, no harm, house-fires in dreams only.

I came to Venice, a city that stands on water, safe from fire. I came to Venice, where I was not a child. Here I am only me. Me and my ghosts.

Can I burn you out, kill you the way you died?

*
Edward,

When I kissed the Italian, it felt good. And I’ll do it again, just so you know. Just so we’re clear.

*

Tansey,

I carry your heartbeat. Remember this with me:

The night after I stopped keeping track, you fell over and into me as I sat on your couch, and there you were against me, beating, beating. Too fast. Too fast. Too fast. Stop. Start again. Too fast. Too fast. I transferred your heartbeat to me, one of those nights after I stopped keeping track and you fell. Transplanted you to me, and now you are in me and with me.

The sameness of our routine, here in Venice, even after you are dead.

I carry your heartbeat with me, run to it like a song through the gardens, through the fog. I wave to the man I always wave to. I pass the children I always pass. Your heartbeat carries me, like a song, too fast, too fast. Your heartbeat, louder than mine.

I am running with you; I am running away from you.

*

Edward,

If you want to know, Gian is my third since you. Even when you and I were (your word) casual, I was sneaking. But those other two didn’t last. Lost because of you? Every time I opened my eyes after a kiss, I expected you, your brown eyes, the
way I knew that you were smiling without even glancing down to your mouth. Every hand I held, I ached for your fingerprints, your warmth.

With the second one, I woke from a nightmare calling Edward, Edward. Opened my eyes to find a startled, hurt, someone. He could never touch me after that.

Edward, keep a secret—I didn’t care.

*

Isobell,

Yesterday, I retreated to the gardens—i giardini—to hide from my roommate. I had been annoyed, you know, because it was always me doing the dishes and mopping the floor and doing the laundry. Etceteras. The sorts of things my mother has—all these years—always complained about. What goes around comes around. I say this with a smile, you know, because I am more and more seeing things I never saw before. So I was in the gardens just sitting. Sitting alone, being alone. And there was this nonna, this grandma, walking hand-in-hand with her grandbaby. It was dusk, and everything was the loveliest shade of gray, gray-blue. And that baby pulled away from her nonna and tottered over to me. She slapped her chubby baby hands down on my knees and, bella, she said. Beautiful. Grazie, I said, e tu.

For just some seconds, Isobell, that baby was mine. She had given herself to me; I wanted to take her. And there I was in the gardens in Italy, thinking of you.

I was once yours Isobell, remember? But I belong to someone else now.

Grazie.
Tansey,

You have been the hardest to let go. With Edward, there was the telling, the saying we were going to let each other go. And anyway, he’s still alive. He’s not mine anymore, but he’s a different kind of ghost. And Isobell. I knew she was going; I had time and time to make my goodbye. And Cara. I was just so young. My memories of her are coated in the magic of make-believe, of childhood, of dreams.

You. You chose your journey. You did not say goodbye. You were a junkie, Tansey. Those are not nice words Tansey, and I hate myself for saying them.

Days, Tansey, just passing days, help me with you.

On days off, I walk. Cross bridges to Salute and Ca’Rezzonico and San Silvestro. Turn corners until the rizzo panes—the smells of Isobell’s kitchen—get into me. I stop at vegetable stands, buy melanzane and carciofe, and broccolino for dinner, and I keep walking. It helps, as I cross bridges, to plan meals for myself, maybe for my roommate, too, if she’ll be home, though I can’t count on her; I won’t.

And so I walk, weave my way through tourists, and walk on. To Ferrovia, where I watch trains come in. The chaos of travelers, tourists lost in Venice’s maze, somehow a comfort. I walk back towards home, weave my way through tourists and will myself to get lost with them. At the Ponte Accademia, I am halfway home. I stop at the top and watch the boats come in from the Lido. Count the boats, keep walking.
I think of you while I walk, especially when I am wearing those shoes. Watch my feet as I walk, think, *Tansey, Tansey, Tansey*. I have you in me, every step.

The hardest one to let go because I never got to say goodbye, not even once; I always pretended you weren’t going.

I walk, and I want you there beside me. So I can show you the places I know, take you to *Salute* and sit on the stone steps with you, and smile. So I can speak to you in Italian; so you can tell me you are okay. I watch the boats. I watch the tourists. I talk to you.

Tell me you’re with God, Tansey. It’s what I need.

*Edward,*

I’ve been dating that Italian for some time. Gian. Nothing serious, but a step. The niceness of being with someone real, flesh and bone, not a ghost. He takes me to dinner at his father’s restaurant, which is expensive and good. Last night, I drank too much wine. Got drunk and laughed through dinner and after dinner, and smiled as Gian and I kissed. I felt his face, and I felt his lips, and he was real. We roamed corners of Venice—through *Santa Margherita* and past its last open restaurant where patrons were trickling out, tired and full—until it was so late I felt dawn coming. I fell asleep drunk in my own bed, alone. Alone and happy. No one in my head. I woke and realized this: I laughed in a restaurant with someone I like. I spoke and sang in Italian. I stepped with my own two feet, thinking only of me. Me and Gian.

Last night you were gone, and I was free.
Isobell,

I miss my real mother. Been here in Italy so many months I’ve lost track, and I fall asleep missing her voice, her face, her smell. She makes a bed perfectly, no wrinkles in the sheets; my skin itches for sheets she has washed and dried. It’s good, me missing living people. I call home; her voice is real and sweet and true.

Isobell, I’m glad I had you when I did. Needed you so badly, then.

But your voice is fading. Don’t cry. I won’t forget, but I’m going to let you fade.

* 

Edward,

My apartment in Italy has one light, only, and I improvise with candles. The red one is mostly between my nails because I have scraped away at all the wax. My fingers are numb, but I will not stop scraping. I am unkempt, lately. Even my hair. My red roots are turning back to their boring brown.

To be adventurous, I tried one of Isobell’s recipes and cried over the stove when I could not make *gnocchi con pomodori*. I am a child here, re-learning how to speak, to read, even to groom myself. Re-learning life. I am hiding in my Venetian apartment with numb fingertips.

You come to me, sometimes. I stand over the stove boiling pasta, and I feel your lips on the back of my neck, just like our first kiss. Four years ago, when I wanted to cook you dinner and you brought daisies, you stood behind me at the stove.
Kissed my neck. Turned me around, kissed my eyes, my nose, my lips—finally—my lips.

This morning, while soaping my hair in the shower, I talked to you about Barthes and Descartes. Just like old times, and I was expected when I turned off the water and stepped outside the curtain, you’d be there.

Remember all those dreams I used to have, those early nights I spent in your bed? Sweating, screaming for Cara. Twisting myself up in your blue sheets, sweating and screaming. That first time, you lit a cigarette and, there in the dark, all I could see was the glowing red tip and twisting white smoke as it lifted and swirled to the ceiling.

I said, “Please don’t. There’s too much fire in my head.”

And I told you about being seven, and Cara’s house falling, falling down. What it did to her as she was in there dying. What it did to me, never leaving my head, always burning

You held my hand.

I crossed thirty-two bridges today, some of them repeats, as I backtracked. But still, thirty-two crossings. I run over the bridges, better exercise I guess.

Running reminds me of Tansey. Running in Tansey’s shoes, the ones I was wearing the day she died. Remember how I told you I loved her, all those years ago.

“She’s dangerous,” you said. “You be careful.”

But. I loved her, and when—wearing those shoes—I found she died, I could not say the words for months. Her death, a silence. Silencing.
I run over the bridges, you on one side of me, Tansey on the other. I reach to grab your hands, pull you along. But I stop. Suddenly I stop.

I do not know where I am going, what I want. But I need you to leave. I have to push you away.

* 

Tansey,

In the gardens I remembered something good about you. Your smile, Tansey.

Just those little things that made you smile: swimming, sharing spoons of chocolate. I had forgotten, too caught up in the memory of heroin. I was forgetting completely. I found you again, today in the gardens. Two women walked by, one of them smiling so big. And there you were. The real you, the one I’m going to let myself remember.

* 

Edward,

With Gian, there are is hope for the future.

Relief.

With you, it was always me planning something. Young and in love—too in love, too young—I planned my life around me and you, me and you. And even after we broke up, the hope, the hope, that you would come back. Holding my breath, waiting for you, for our life. You, like a favorite song, so ingrained in me, such a part of me, I carried you everywhere, not realizing.
With Gian, there will be none of that. Just a kiss, a smile, a time-being.

Today he said he loves me. “Ti amo,” he said. “Ti amo multissimo.”

I’m not there yet, and I know you don’t care. Probably haven’t thought of me in months. And I’m glad; I’m okay. Because you’re fading from me, too; I am letting you go. In just some days, you’ll be gone. You’ll be gone. Not dead, not a ghost.

Just gone.

* 

Tansey,

I wake from a dream, startled by nothing. I close my eyes and focus on my heart, beating, beating. Slow and steady, solitary. Your heartbeat is gone, Tansey. In my silent sleep, I let you go and did not feel you leave. It must have been slow and pretty, like you should have died but didn’t. We must have had a nice goodbye, but I felt nothing as you left, as I dropped your hand, gave you a push and made you go.

* 

Mom,

Sorry it’s been so long.

I gave a dinner party last night, my first Italian dinner party. Had six guests: Gian, his parents, and three of their friends. Yesterday, before the party, I took a walk, realized I haven’t written you about Venice. *Che bella*, Mom, *che bellissima*. 
I went around my campo, stopped in at shops, bought candles and wine and potpourri. Went to the *rizo pane* and picked out my favorite bread, fresh and still warm. Found a new tablecloth at the outdoor market, which sometimes crowds the streets on Sundays. Candlesticks too, almost like the ones you have, the ones you use on holidays. Things I need to make my home.

After shopping I just walked. Venice is a painting some days, and I feel like Alice—in Wonderland—caught somewhere I might not deserve, but glad, so glad. Glad isn’t the word, Mom. *Allegra.*

I just walked, past the fish stands, where I always hold my nose. Into the gardens, which rest on the part of Venice that almost isn’t Venice anymore, on the open Adriatic Sea, almost all water. Closed my eyes and breathed, listening.

And walked.

Over all the bridges and past my favorite bar, where the beer is too expensive, but I go anyway. The tables are silver, and at night I sit outside under an umbrella tree and watch the passersby; they hold hands, laugh, sway. Sometimes there is music. In Venice, there is always music somewhere.

To the Bridge of Sighs where I hear all the prisoner-ghosts. I sat there a minute and listened. Yesterday they sounded like music, a pretty song, like hope.

Through *San Marco*, where orchestras play at night, and I listen as I stare up at the stars. The stars are prettier in Venice, Mom. Sometimes when I can’t sleep, I go to *San Marco* and count them. Count them until my eyes are heavy and I am ready, willing, to sleep.
Past my favorite shop, a cloth shop where the colored velvet hangs on wooden rods in the windows. I always want to extend my hand, touch. I always wish I could sew, like you, just so I could touch that fabric.

All the way to the Academia bridge and then Salute, my favorite church. Sat down on the steps and watched the gondole going as far as they could until the Adriatic was too wild and they had to turn back.

Sometimes I forget to think about Venice. Just writing, Mom, I remember.

Bought a cone of gelato. Chocolate, my favorite, tastes better when you think about it in Italian. Cioccolato.

All these things, Mom, all these things.

Stopped in at the Guggenheim. My favorite, Magritte’s Empire of Light, reminds me of Venice, the way the clouds just take over. I look at it every day; sometimes that isn’t enough.

Walked home, over all those bridges, ready for my party.

Prepared the food all day, bathed my kitchen in garlic and olive oil and basil. Took my time, just standing in my kitchen by myself. Prepared the pasta perfectly, made my own new sauce. Something I invented, something mine.

Played music, songs simple and American. The ones you and Dad like, songs I grew up to. I was worried the guests wouldn’t get the Tom Waits, but when they arrived, everything blended so well, just blended so well. Our voices and the music and the taste of my good food on our tongues.
We talked for hours, through the dinner and *tiramisu*. Not a perfect dessert, but it was my first try. I smiled, said, “Dinner parties remind me of home.”

Gian’s mother asked me about home. I told her about you, and holidays and college. Late nights laughing over chocolate or chocolate milk, and art museums, and cooking. I asked Gian about growing up in Italy. He said he has been lucky.

I rose to refill the wine; I felt so much life in the room, like heavy air, leaving fingerprints on my skin. Life. My guests, and you, and my ghosts. Different degrees of life, all blended so well.

Gian told so many stories, and soon we realized it was after two. But we laughed, decided to take a walk. Gian’s mother asked me to take her to my most beloved place, so we began crossing bridges. I ran over the bridges; my guests laughed, then followed, our footsteps echoing in the darkness. Took them to *Salute*, and we sat on the steps. The night *vaporetti*, swish-swished through the water. Gian’s mother asked, “Is this your best place?”

I smiled. “One of them,” I said.

I took them to the gardens, and we sat on benches in the darkness and listened to the water. It was dark; I couldn’t see its green. But I closed my eyes, knew it was there.

Some time passed, and I let my guests go; they were tired. I was tired, too, but wanted to sit, alone in the gardens.

I sat on a bench in the dark and listened to the water, crashing, crashing against the stone banks. Listened only to the water, finally louder than the ghosts.
And then I thought of you, Mom. *Mia madre.* Please come for a visit; I’d like the company.
At midnight, diluted with moonshine, we rigged a raft to Nick’s truck and headed for the put-in, seven miles up interstate 40, in Waterville. The moon was not full, but nearly. Night was clear as day.

Less reckless than everyone else, I tucked a note under Nick’s windshield-wiper. *We put in a little after midnight, Tuesday. If something happens to us, contact my mother in Cleveland. 216-664-2676.*

Scott held my hand, helping me into the boat. I was hardly brave; even in broad daylight, I had my fears. Whitewater, rocks. Foot-entrapment. Injury. Pain. Loss. Death. At midnight, the moonshine was my bravery. And his hand.

I had come to Tennessee for him, said yes to the gamble. Under the near-full moon, what, really, was one more gamble?

We pushed off, bound for the first rapid, bound for all of the rapids.
XIII. The Years

Years and years later, she settled down into the cozy brown armchair in her son’s living room to think about everything.

Had she really almost never lived? Had her birth been, her father’s words, a miracle? The calm but serious doctors performed an emergency cesarean section, lifting her tiny body—a girl, tangled dangerously in her own umbilical cord and resting upside down in the womb—from her mother’s hemorrhaging body.

Had she been baptized in Saint Patrick Church in Elk Rapids, Michigan as Elizabeth Ann by an elderly priest named Father Edward Pruis? The priest had been going senile for some time, and he almost let the baby slip from his hands as he slid her into the basin. Her Godfather, Michael Tustian, her father’s childhood best friend, caught the baby before the priest’s hands failed her. Michael Tustian and his wife Ellen were killed three months later when a drunk driver ran a red light and slammed—sixty-five miles an hour—into the passenger side of their Ford. She had been entrusted to them, spiritually and otherwise, in the case of an emergency. But she would never know them, with the exception of the framed photo her mother displayed in the foyer.

Had she wanted to be a ballerina, a young girl twirling and leaping to her grandmother’s Liberace records on weekend visits and holidays? She loved to perform in front of a crowd. On every holiday—Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter—she rehearsed in her grandmother’s basement while all the cousins played catch and
her aunts and uncles and parent watched football and chatted about things: the weather, prices at the grocery, Cousin Henry and his failures, another year gone by. She made costumes from her grandmother’s scarves and furs, treasures from long ago, from before Grandfather’s heart-attack, when he and her grandmother attended the symphony, charity dinners, election night festivities. After dinner, she’d ask everyone to gather in the great room so she could perform her dance. An accommodating audience, they always asked for an encore.

Had she really become a better athlete than ballerina, always a star on her school track teams, eventually competing in state and national competitions? Where had the ballet shoes gone? How had she become such a good runner? The answers were simple. She had no flexibility, but her muscles were lean and strong. She was a natural runner. Her senior year, The University of Michigan offered her a seventy-five percent scholarship to run track on their varsity team. She signed her acceptance, and she moved away from home.

Had she lost her virginity to Andy Szoltec at seventeen, right there on her childhood bed when her parents were out to dinner with friends from out of town? She wasn’t in love, but, like everything else, she approached the situation with common sense. He was a good boy; he was kind to her. He had taken her to prom, and maybe he even loved her. She wanted to get it over with before going away to college.

Had she pledged a sorority during first semester of her freshman year? She honestly, at that time, believed that she had always wanted sisters and that this was
her chance. Of course she loved her two brothers, one older, one younger. But she yearned for all-nighters spent giggling and gossiping with the handful of her closest sisters, chewing on licorice and talking boys and sex and dreams. In later years, she and her closest friends planned to quit the sorority—it was all bullshit anyway, just a money trap—but they never did. They liked the parties, the social status, and the invitations to fraternity events that their less attractive classmates were never offered.

Had she graduated in the top-five percentage of her college class, despite being an athlete, despite being a sorority girl? She had always enjoyed her studies. Her father had taught her early on that, his words, anything worth learning was worth learning. During her Sophomore year, she decided on Accounting, and she approached her classes with the same ferocity that she approached sex with her boyfriend Anthony, a senior member of Delta Tau Delta and a pre-law student.

Had she had her heart broken at twenty-three, not by Anthony whom she had given up on years ago, but by an actor—Jake—she had met when she was living in Chicago and working in marketing? He was married when she met him, but he told her he couldn’t stay away from her big black-brown eyes and her smile. He left his wife, and then he left her, and she felt as if she had nothing more to live for. But she did.

Had she become one of the most successful female partners in her marketing firm in Chicago? Had she been promoted through the ranks in only three years? After her heartbreak, her focus was singular. It paid off.
Had she met her husband by accident, when she hurried into a new bar in Lincoln Park because she didn’t have an umbrella and she wanted to get out of the pouring rain? She was soaking wet. He wasn’t. It was his bar; he had opened it just a week before, and he had been waiting for clientele like her. The rain stopped, but she stayed. It was that simple, and it wasn’t. How could it be either?

Had she and Matthew married in the Upper Peninsula, in a small ceremony with only their parents and siblings as witnesses? It snowed their wedding night, and in their suite in the winery where they were married, she promised to love him forever. And she had.

Had they had three children: Luke, Sarah and Seth? Had Seth been born with Autism? Had Sarah always struggled with math?

Had Matthew died when she was eighty years old? He went the way we’re supposed to, in his sleep, and that made it easier on her, but also it didn’t.

Had she, out of loneliness, asked to move in with Luke, to be closer to her grandchildren, to watch granddaughter Sienna perform dance recitals in the living room? Had she planned to live and die here, in this house, surrounded by her children and her grandchildren?

Had she really almost never lived? Here, years and years later, in her son’s cozy brown armchair, it was very hard to tell if she had existed at all.
VITA

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