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MOMENT MOSAIC (THIS POEM MAY BE CONFUSING): A COLLECTION
OF CREATIVE WRITING

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ABSTRACT

This manuscript of both poetry and prose explores the ways in which words and images, and their implications, communicate thoughts and feelings of moments, imagined moments of others' lives, moments of discomfort and awe in my own life, moments of reflection, of release, of inundation that we share collectively—across borders, beyond television and computer screens, through skin and bone—as *people* who dream, desire, deteriorate, and endure. My creative language attempts to capture the indefinable complexity of the human experience, and my settings and plots attempt to provoke readers' formations of meaning concerning relationships, longing, and what some might call controversial subjects—tough human experiences, that I believe must be examined and imagined for individuals, as members of society, to approach compassion.

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Introduction

Life in Writing (and Why “This Poem May Be Confusing”)

My first job as a cashier at a grocery store solidified that, above all, I am a writer. When business was slow, I scrawled stream-of-consciousness poetry onto rolls of receipt paper. When I would rather cry than talk to another angry customer, I arranged the cereal box displays to create amateurish pop-art. When I requested a promotion, I wrote out my exact proposal in order to achieve ultimate precision of language. I believe in using words and their implications to most properly communicate thoughts and feelings. I also believe that creative language captures and allows us to share the indescribable space between words and thought, the indefinably beautiful emotion and complexity of the human experience. For that reason, I feel most purposeful manipulating words and syntax to create meanings *beyond* words, exploring the moments, the meanings, of the interconnectedness, struggles, and beauty of life.

Since I was a child, I have maintained a writer’s imaginative and curious perspective of the world, and these attributes have fueled my passion for exploratory learning and writing. One illustrative moment was an evening when my father was filming my older brother and a four-year-old me in front of the Christmas tree. Dad asked, “Do you have any questions about Santa Claus or Christmas?” First, my brother probed the normal childlike concerns: does Santa have a wife; where does Santa keep his reindeer; how many Santa suits does Santa have? Then, it was my turn to pose a question: my eyes wide and my hands twisting together with excitement, I shrieked, “Why does—does people have—have eyes?!” Every time I re-watch that home movie, after laughing at my inept self, I realize that my ripe imagination and constant search for enlightenment through learning are part of my ingrained personality.

Similarly, a few poems that I wrote at the age of nine, aside from being humorous, demonstrate my developing imagination and exploratory conception of the world around me. These poems especially reflect my ever inept, yet developing curiosity:

“Kisses”

Are kisses a symbol of love?

Are kisses a sign of friendship?

Or are kisses for a sign that you’re growing up?

Do you know?

It is such a mystery.

How did kisses develop the reputation that they’re symbols of

love?
A little peck on the cheek.
A big one right on the lips.
Kisses are a great thing in my opinion.
They are the, or one of the best things in one's Love life.

"The Wind":
The wind is blowing all the time.
It is causing leaves to move from its surroundings.
The wind is blowing, blowing everything in sight.
Some say it's God whistling or just blowing.
But can we prove that the wind is caused by God or just the wind?
This poem may be confusing¹ to you but isn't life confusing?
Don't you think that life can be wonderous like the wind?

"Love"
Love is in your Heart, Body, and Soul.
Love is more than I can explain.
Could we live without Love?
I'm saying can we live without love in our lives,
without husbands and wives?
Without hugs or kisses?
It's a total mystery Love What is Love.
Is it Marriage or just liking someone a lot?
The truth is that no one knows what love is or it means.
It's just love.

Although it is evident that I was unclear on what kisses, the wind, or love really meant in the greater context of humanity, nature, and society, I knew there were deeper understandings to be reached beyond my young frustration with their abstract elusiveness; and to me, this action of following an idea until it makes sense, until it gains meaning, is the process of a writer.

¹ I find it comically poignant that when my vague understanding of the wind conflicted with my vague understanding of God, I admit that I am thoroughly confused. This moment in the poem, when I am most challenged by my thoughts and admit it on paper, is significant in that once I had acknowledged my confusion, I could begin to see it as a question to pursue, as opposed to a weakness that I should brush under the rug in fear of the unknown. This admission of confusion ignites my curiosity for the world around me, even when faced with contradiction and occasional senselessness. As opposed to giving up on the disagreement of ideas, I chose to seek understanding and awareness in order to approach my own intellectual comfort and to be better prepared to help others with their confusion. I do believe that writing has helped me become more compassionate and intellectually sharper through the process of committing my inner thoughts to ink, allowing them to be what they are, and exploring their composition and meanings.

These poems demonstrate that I began to gain confidence in constructing meaning in this way, by exploring an idea and allowing it to sit with me. The purpose of writing, for me, is to approach an answer, a meaning that makes sense, that is true, and that is never stated outright on the page; the “answer” is an inner-feeling of fulfillment, of beauty even when addressing conflict. Writing forces us to be thoughtful, to acknowledge complexity and confront discomfort. For that reason, I believe creative expression is the most important way to form bonds and is a necessary skill in human communication and decision-making because it allows us to imagine, travel through an idea with ourselves, develop compassion and a thoroughly examined morality that might prevent violence and foster understanding.

As a writer, I explore and discover meaning through writing and new experiences because these forms of expression provide a vehicle for inventing perspectives and capturing the complexity of the human experience. I believe that, perhaps most importantly, one concrete image can communicate eons of pain and beauty simultaneously to people all over the world, broadening the reaches of empathy and human understanding, calming and bringing about the co-experience of suffering and the undefineable moments of being human that most of us avoid, but that writers massage, ingrain into their brains and their fingertips until the subconscious reveals its unspoken significance, and we reach the end of a story or poem and can only sit still, emotion welling in our eyes, a smile creeping across our lips, and let out an endlessly meaningful, universe encapsulating sigh.

Gray City, Gray

Rain vibrates the street,
suffocates carved names—
a boy's tissue-paper nose
is a spider grasping silk
against loom-threads of water.

Sewer grates carve
the child's molten cheek
as he lowers a box onto his head.

Wet cardboard skims
temples, weep lips.
His flit nose
clenches the fragrance:

The moldy fibers
of his father's olive uniform
unraveling.

In the Motel Pool

Amidst the Rockies,
the bitter water, so warm,
was me, no division
between my rippled skin
its silking waves.
Saturation—a homely nightmare,
waking me in sheets of sweat,
wordlessly warned, *routine is orthodox.*

Terracotta wrapped the droplets,
pleated them into my skin.
I scribbled my damp fingers
through his airy hair,
pressed to the stale pillow.
Ran my knuckles along his arching back,
circled with my thumb
his thumbprint belly button.
An aged tee-shirt scent,
our soapberry tongues.
And the water, a part of me, returned,
urged, *mountains or your world.*

My, My, Young Lonely

My, my, Young Lonely,
wrapped in the under scars
of a future waiting for worth,
a bucket of rain so cold
it cuts.

You watch the elephants,
breathless.
Their lychee eyes wink
out spikes of rain—
you wonder if *they know*:
crying on a porch swing
in a fetal position,
tossing tears into a salad,
holding breath underwater
in a bath
until things float,
and limbs feel like rubber.

Body Overtakes

She slid, gripping her chest
(soft sweatshirt appliqué),
from the hair dryer chair
to the salon floor.

Paramedics

. grip . pulse .

. grip . pulse .

. grip . pulse .

—record the time.

Her husband squints
through the glass door,
grips the handle:
a metal coolness on his shivering joints—
Remember:

The soft tip of a pen,
liquid ink streaming from the tip—
traces the bottom of her nerve-filled foot,
writes, *I love you: remember.*

Unhappy Atlas

How do I separate myself from them?

A brain follows the path of the sun.

I am not here yet.

A body floats, twists a corner of the world.

What does it matter.

*A body of organs
shits on your forever.*

I don't own a thing.

A you is the difference.

A difference worth a moral?

Sink with your feet tied.

Home Is Dead when He Fights

That summer
in that house (that cage),
my elbows carved dents in the linoleum.
Your pencil, pocked with baby teeth marks,
dragged on your homework,
etched your name on the table.

Your dad will come home
I know this.

The fruit balances atop the bowl
and promises not to slip, bruise.
I know *this*.

He will come home
twist the brass lock of our room,
the bolt hammering its socket,
the silent war still raging.
I know.

Manifestations of an Ice-storm

He kissed me, ribless.
Muted thumping of my
soft boots against
pavement,
the slap of elastic
(a memory). And
I chewed his gum.
Sweet mint,
limsy. Mint meant
sweet, meant
meaning to.

Water laps into the tub,
and I blow a bubble, soft.
My aubade, pop, edges
sear, my breath escapes—
soda fizz fills a glass.

Recoiling, the gum
mows my tongue:
guitar strings squeak
under pressed fingers.

Monosyllabic, plastic kiss, scrape or bite—
sweet mint meant retrofuturistic, meant
soft boots pounding blacktop, means
fingers and pop means
shouting with echo and nothing
de-stressed, his jeans.

Democratic Republic of Congo

Garbage stinks the wind.
The girls make a circle,
paint stripes on nails,
braid hair on skulls,
roll magazine strips
into beads. Cool hair gel
bites the baby spots
between Ester's follicles.
Jagged rocks
stab her fleshless bottom.

The same big-handed man,
who bellows from the lunch table,
yesterday appraised a double line of
neon skirts, paisley blouses,
rug-dresses that swallow caving chests—
twisted Ester's bony shoulder: *You come with me.*

She pounds her hand
on an anthill,
watches the tiny bugs panic
and chew her fingers raw.

Unrecorded History

What could we really know
of dropping freefall from a tower,
molten glass soldered to our pants
like clumps of snow—
the last choice, doubtless.

Sunset Today

My legs ache from bruises—
too much running.
And the sky says *veer*
from the pressure behind his eyes,
the gasoline on his cheeks.

I want family pictures
a day he doesn't care,
and outside, calm nothing
of human summer
settles upon the tree lace
across the street—
leaves tremble,
a presence in their own reticence.

We have full stomachs,
microwave pizzas,
tart margaritas,
and arms that fold our skin sturdily
within each other's t-shirts.

The air sits in want.
To be shifted by our bodies
or an open window.

Crash or Dream

I am not a vein in a peach pit.
Metal chairs unfolding on a wet night
of suspended eyes,
dilated cheekbones.
Call the police
before the victim exits the car.

The beagle-lab
sneezes black, drops tongue,
and massages my bleeding palm.
A stop sign blinks red—
again memory (a cardinal's body),
remembering the memory again
(behind the lattice elm).
I watch I sleep I melt.
Heartfelt is the bass-drum airbag—

I never knew
I could love so much
but no one.

Spider Daedalus

The Daddy Longlegs' appendages
squeak like buttons making love.
Her flimsy body lowers
from the cold radiator to the hard wood floor.
She skimmers listless
to the corner, a castle of cedar—
folds her wire legs around her acorn seed body
and lowers her abdomen to the ridged wood
where she returns to stillness.

A long thread of her web
stretches from her lifeless body
to a tile in the ceiling
and bows in the drafts
of doors opening and closing.

Loss of Footing

As I peered in the window—
his swollen skin, heartbeat brain
floating behind the steering wheel—
rain pelted my elastic organs,
wrapped in an old black dress.

A seatbelt breathed with his chest
as delicate webs of memory
cast toward his mother's body—
two towns, featherweight, away.

Eyeless, he knows
that outside the car,
not only do I watch,
but the rain spills up to the clouds.
And without the rubber soles of his feet,
the tender skin weaking his eyes,
he would evaporate, too—

Like the rain,
like any pinpricked fingertip.

Stuffed Me

Green is a cheetah.

Orange is a polar bear.

Black is a pterodactyl.

I name stuffed animals.

A snake, Blue.

A motherless elephant, Red,
and the purple wrinkled walrus.

I wear Yellow, the coral-colored fish,
where my collar bones collide,
thrust foreword,
nude and ribless,

when the heart aches
that caffeinated ache,
that beady, black-eyed flush of blood
before crying.

After Him

As he runs the treadmill
above the kitchen,
she hears the Corelle dishes
quiver off their droplets—
she knows his heart pounds
like the dishes clink,
and he is here.

That night in bed,
she turns over numbers
in the darkness,
feels the bed jerk
under his restless legs, tossing.

She wants to reach over,
rest her cheek on his back,
feel the give and take of breath
but remembers the dishes—
nearly cracking
from the murmur of each other.

Consecration

Soft water devil
street-cleans her thighs.
Sun pinks the window,
remains eternal:

A numb pain melts the bed sheet.
Still crickets whistle
beyond the thickness of the grass,
remain eternal:

She smells steaks in the morning;
is it really him burning?

Motion in General

*Did you mean, **What happens during an abolition?***

A personal account:

... cramps ...

... aftershock ...

... metal ...

... dilation ...

—her liquid eyes swing
across the blue computer glow—

... anesthetic ...

... emotion ...

... Motrin, Tylenol ...

... static ... suction ...

... three daughters now ...

—her trembling thumb pierces
a half moon of blood in her lip—

... peace with God.

Civil Night Movement

Your malnutrition overtakes
the stop-start of your heart,
evicts that vague form of race—
manipulates the bedside lamp into seeing.

Partake in the wind chimes:
the deaf gales of the city
and all that surrounds—

wet silk layers of saliva
on the skin of an apple:
suspended mid-fall
between limb and sewer.

Curiosity

Your lip will stay that way
—Mom on the couch.

The glazed inside
of my bottom lip
wilts in the open air.
Lip skin
to chin skin:
two foreign fabrics
soft each other,
sparse with velvet hairs.

Stay rubber in the air?
Or hanging from my gums,
ripe silk sex against stinging breezes
or a bloody fingernail
splitting from the untouched flesh of a nail-bed.

Said

Look both ways.
Marry me someday.
Put your hands up.
Can I take your order?
You are *not* gay.
In the name of the Lord.
Watch the trolley car, please.
The kids in Africa
eat rice in cups of cockroaches.
Make yourself presentable.
You are piss ants.
Do you miss me?
Hold your nose.
Make yourself penetrable.
Imagine. you. are. *blank*.

Batteries

Batteries corrode, not arteries,
so why does the acid leak so plainly
from God to his brain
as he lies on the ceramic floor,
beads of heat storming his back,
Earth becoming a swirl of darkness
with no mother to clean the mess?

My mother found the brown,
seeping batteries
soldered to the sockets
of my Easy Bake Oven
and threw down sheets of blame
onto my charred cheeks.

How could I have known that things—
living things—
electricity within us,
seeped, rotted, and molded itself to its maker?

Me as Us as Loner

A virus
wilts marigolds
to silent husks
on the bleeding palm of labor.

A loner
once asked me,
if I sing to myself
would my life make a difference?

Everyone stares,
as a mass descends
from my tiny milkbath uterus.
Everyone cries,
but the pain is a merciless drug
so tuneless I wonder,
if I make two of myself
would my life make a difference?

Gitmo Waking

You're home,
the hallway light
traces your door.

Where you are,
reach for glasses—
remember you aren't allowed to see.
Where you are,
iron bars distort fluorescents.

Where you are,
forget your eyes.
Where you are,
a whimper echoes nowhere.

A Dead Friend's Facebook Page

Then, what is she, other than
a screen-lit photo,
a cloud thinning the air upon
her living eyes,
pulsing smile?

Seahorse

I said hello to me, light,
and no one smiled back,
but I'm ready
for the waves to pummel,
drag my thighs along the rocks
and never say sorry—
only whisper,
this is life this is life this is life.

I will keep my eyes open,
let the current sway me
to battered and bruised, red wounds
salted with tiny shreds of skin,
say nothing but know all in me
because I said hello,

What I Could Be

Whispering pine trees know
the difference between
being so close to breathe your breath
and being shorn to feathers.

Shredded nails
and your crisp skin
dance along the bedsheets
as maybe you wonder
what I could do to you,
what I could be.

I want to see you dance again.
—Neil Young

I love—
will I be senile?

Make tea.
A dragonfly's wings clap like an engine,
the buzz of summer, arisen
like a sprinkler system set to blister,
a morocco on some exotic
sweet sweat night
where bugs are the soundtrack.

I dance so carelessly, drugged so,
chords hypnotize, harmonica's pain
makes me want, so badly,
a dream.

Daybreak Form

In a quiet, dewdrop morning,
tiny beads of water
collect on my skin—
cool breezes conjure
the ocean's surge.
Morning loves me
and your rubber skin,
a beat just beneath the surface
lifting, dropping
my torso, my head,
as I drape my essence on yours.

Death Sequence

The shower's sweat
trickles her kiwi peel arms.
Her deep plastic eyes
wilt on the pillow, and
porcelain Jesus shoots a dead glance
as she says to the boy:
I can't tap your heart.
I can't touch your toes.

The boy,
thrown from a bridge,
his lips swell
against the churned earth,
suspended a lifetime
in a scabbed subconscious.

His soft tongue maneuvers
inside her weep lips,
crawls to the base of her brain,
feels her dream:
her corpse
staring up from the stream,
open wrists ask God *why*.

She forgot how to sit in the bath
without the water scorching her nose,
how to walk along train tracks
without her hands pressed to her ears.
How to see that a burning man's skin
neither rises to the sky
nor sinks to the dirt
but glides the air—
dust, black dusk.

From Phone and Bedside

With each eyefall of a day,
we lose more of ourselves,
drag quantum tracings
of daylight, calcium, water
speeding here, there.
Here, there, we disappear
like our mornings.

Simultaneity is relative:
length contracts, here to there,
a speeding barn-pole fits inside
a smaller garage—
where do we go?
Where do we go, here to there,
shrinking
headlong
into the sun?

Pause and Circumstance

I can't put my hand on my stomach. Don't put your hand on your stomach. It's beating; my stomach is pulsing, pounding, with a heartbeat. I don't know if it's mine or its. I remember as a child, lying on my mother's chest, slipping to sleep by the soft lull of her heart, but mine is not a mother's heart. Mine is a giant clock ticking away the moments until the entire contents of my womb flow out of me; and into a jar.

I know too much to be well-adjusted. I know about the vicious car crashes that kill people just like me, about disasters that massacre entire cities. I know how tiny a baby's feet are at ten weeks. I know what Oprah has for breakfast during her "spiritual cleanse," the tiniest details of her exercise plan, and that I shouldn't sit for long periods of time in a hot-tub or under a laptop. I know that tap water can give you cancer, that spring water is just filtered tap water, and how cell phones can create tumors. I know that airplanes are safer than driving, somehow, according to some statistics somewhere. I hardly know the whys. I know that the president walks his dog twice a day, but I don't know why this is relevant to know. I thought I knew—inside and out—how to have sex without getting pregnant—condoms, pills, shots, diaphragm, foam, fucking pulling out every time; fuck. I know my girlfriend resents me because I got her pregnant, that I feel like less of a man, like a child, because I didn't protect her from this pain. I know I'm worn down. I know I can hardly focus on the road in front of me because I haven't slept in ten weeks because a collection of cells has been growing inside her. A life. A life that will ruin my life unless we do this. And I hardly know what all of this unknowing and knowing means as I drive absently with my heart in my throat.

"Are you ready for this?"

"How can I be ready for this?" He can't even grasp how hard this is. So many opinions weigh my heart down to my stomach and flood the tiny space this baby made for itself. I wish it would overflow and a crashing wave would peacefully sway the baby to death, back to the blackness from where it came. A hurricane could hit, ripping the walls of my uterus, bloating my abdomen so far out that it feels like a balloon about to explode into tiny red shredded pieces of what I used to be. Everyone said I was lucky to have a judge that even approved my abortion, but I don't feel lucky. His huge face gawks down at me still, contorting his mouth into a wet, wriggling earthworm that wants to douse me in foul mucus for making this decision. I have no one now, and Drew can't even begin to understand my body, this pain.

The thickness of guilt in the car makes me too tense to breathe and the heavy trees past the window make me dizzy as they float by like I'm in a TV screen, like I'm living a life to be watched, like I'm a character, like I didn't make this decision.

Sometimes I look at her and see everything I used to, the small stature of someone like me, just as regular as me, comfortable, a little messy, but still beautiful with wisps of brown hair framing her molten eyes and lips. She sits so perched, strapped into the seat like this isn't the most drastic, the most preoccupying, the most not-even-need-to-wear-my-seatbelt decision she's ever made. I love her like this. But when the broken shadows of the trees along the highway creep across her face, I see a stranger—a hard stranger who will never know me.

"I was just asking, May. You don't have to turn everything I say into something else. I'm here. I'm driving us three hours to the clinic, and I've been with you every step of the way. I'm here. I'll be *there*. This hurts me, too."

He doesn't get it! Why is he making this about him when it's entirely me who has to do this!

"You don't get it, Drew. You don't understand what I'm going through. I feel like my head is so full of opinions and actions, and decisions, and possibilities. It's not fair that I'm the one. Nothing makes any sense anymore! I'm the one going through everything." My sobs blur the word everything into nothing but sound.

It's like I'm in the car with a total stranger. I know his face, I see the nestled eyes and stretched mouth and wide arms that have helped me and held me so many times when things mattered, but never this much and never so little. We aren't connecting anymore. We don't get each other. He doesn't understand that he helped create this tiny baby in my stomach and now I live with it. And I have to kill it. Me.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry I argued. We have to do this for each other. I love you." I say it. What does it mean anymore?

"I love you." It sounds like an echo of someone else's voice.

She reaches to the steering wheel and grabs my hand, large in comparison to hers, and guides it down to her leg. She pats the still surface of mine and then grasps my fingers so tightly. We look at each other for a brief second of pity.

Her eyes are glazed with redness and tears. I do love her. I wipe a droplet from her cheek and look to the road. We're close.

For the half-hour of waiting in the operation room, I have only the company of Drew, this stranger I've loved for years, and a long, serrated, hollow tube, glaring up at me from the table like it wants to terrify me.

The beating returns to my abdomen, like pulsating menstrual cramps, as the doctor walks into the room with a shot in his hand, anesthetic. He says a few things about how there shouldn't be much pain during the operation and how considerable cramping afterward is normal, but his name, his detailed description of the procedure is static.

I'm given the anesthetic and everyone's quiet. When I had my wisdom teeth removed, the nurse soothed me into blackout by asking about my painted fingernails, but in this room, all three brains are phased by simultaneity: discomfort, isolation, disgust. I float into the high of the drug, but the clock stays straight on the wall, ticking, beating, burning into my memory.

"Lie back."

I feel pinching. I hear the mechanical hum of a vacuum, and I sing a song to myself. I sing Duran Duran's "Hungry like the Wolf" because it's the first thing to pop in my head. I sing it slowly, waveringly. "In touch with the ground I'm lost and I'm found." If I abandon this awful song to search for another one, I have to risk pausing to feel the present. The distant vacuum sound swells the room and makes my head feel like a marshmallow, expanding into a soft gush of coagulated sugar. "Mouth is a live all running inside. And I'm Hungry like the wolf." Drew is looking away, at the art on the walls, a poster of the stages of pregnancy, I cry. "I'm on the hunt I'm after you. I smell like I sound. I'm lost and I'm found." I forget the song—I make myself. My eyes see glass through the tears as I gaze at the speckles on the ceiling, so distant as stars from the earth—sucking, scraping inside me, like noise—and it's done.

"All done. Okay, May? You just rest here, and the nurse'll escort you to the post-operation waiting room."

I feel like my stomach is creeping up my throat, but at least it's over, all I can focus on is May. I'm too sick to focus on anything else. I take her hand, and she grabs it, so hard, and collapses into me. "I'm here." I guide her into the post-operation waiting room for her to sleep off the anesthesia, but she won't sleep. She sits on the tan leather bed with her eyes open wider than I've ever

seen them, staring at the blank white wall. Her hands grasp her stomach as I coddle her from beside.

She nods, turning her head slightly toward mine, and mumbles, "It's still beating." She tightens her arms around her abdomen. The only thing I can say, "I know." But I don't. All I know is that we have to wait because that's what room we're in.

The Others of Just One on a Staircase

Housing 4,000 students on a daily basis, Lincoln High School is large for a small town. Armies of different students and teachers pass each other every day without knowing names or even feeling an eye spark of familiarity with someone's face. Typically, one student might know 80 people of the 4,000, depending on different classes, lunch times, homerooms, locker location, etc.

One day, Danielle saw one student one time who stuck in her head so much that she scanned faces every day since just to maybe see him again.

He was walking up an empty stairwell in front of Danielle and her friend Ella at about 7:30, a time, Danielle's favorite time, when the school is strangely empty and full of shoe-floor echoes until fifteen minutes later when the first bus arrives and floods of students fill the halls, making a serene institutional building a monkey house, where Danielle would rather hunch her shoulders over her homeroom desk than gossip carelessly with friends she vaguely cared about.

"I think Greg and Mariah broke up again," Ella said, just to say.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"... Well, Greg's always been mean to her. He flirts with Jessica in History," Danielle informed.

"Oh. I don't know Jessica. Is she cute? As pretty as Mariah?"

"She's blonde. She's nice and smart. A little annoying because she's always so happy. Like, the fake kind of happy."

Ella laughed. "Mariah's definitely not like that. She's more of a prep than anything."

He opened the door at the second floor steps and began trotting in front of them. Danielle saw his eyes flash over them, and his face turn red. She sensed his horror at being forced to walk in front of two older looking girls, especially because his pants were ill fitting and made his bulky stomach flow over the rim. His butt was also large, an ugly large that wanted to burst out of his back pockets. He was an odd shape, and he was aware of it. And Danielle was aware that he was aware of it, and she felt a tinge of embarrassment creep up her throat. She only hoped that Ella would also be aware.

"Don't you think she's more of a prep, Danielle?"

"I guess so. She wears khakis. And polo shirts." Danielle knew he was listening, knew he took one look at their tight jeans, name-brand shirts, and lean, straightened hair, and trudged forward with stiff shoulders pushing in, unconsciously trying to protect his faraway heart. She knew he was thinking about the five thick books that awkwardly drooped in his left arm as

compared to the simple patterned folders Danielle and Ella strategically swayed at their sharp hipbones.

Get the conversation away from clothes, Danielle thought.

Ella piped up, “Do you know what’s for lunch today?” *No*, Danielle subconsciously scolded, *what’s worse than talking about food around a self-conscious fat kid?*

“I don’t know. Probably pizza. It’s Tuesday. Um. . . what. . .” Before Danielle could utter some other conversation changer, it happened. On the stairway between the third and fourth floor, the boy tripped, his left foot catching the rim of the next step and the weight of his ass and the five Honors books piled in his arm pulling him sideways and down to the left. But his right arm still held the railing, and his whole head and body swung around under his arm toward the wall like some twirling girl dance move that ended with his face to the audience, Danielle and Ella, whom he stared at with squinched eyes asking *please God reverse time, and please God let them just walk by, and Jordan, just act like nothing happened*. Worse, his shirt lifted, because of his stretching right arm, to reveal the freckled belly that bulged over his pants. And all he could do was sit there, legs bent and extended in some unthinkable bodily contraption, his outstretched right arm reaching to the railing and framing his giant body and circular face like some little girl ballerina circling her arms over her head.

The girls stopped, two steps behind him, with lips still and eyes wide for one second, Danielle thinking, *what worse could have happened?* She knew the power that two pretty girls maintained over an over-thinking, overweight tenth grader, even if he never saw them again. After that one second, the only impulse anyone could have after watching such a clumsy human movement, falling up the stairs and swinging around to frame himself as in some awkward, intentional performance that ended with a contortion of limbs and red, scared expression—the only impulse for any human was to laugh. And they did, Danielle regrettably but involuntarily. She had to laugh as they walked past him like a car glide widely around a roadkilled skunk.

“What did you say was for lunch, Danielle?” Ella asked, trying to call attention away from the hard-to-watch boy that just unfolded in front of them, falling so slowly and so uncontrollably, that it was like they just saw him naked and begging to crawl inside his body until he disappeared.

“Pizza.”

Once they were out of earshot onto the fourth floor, Ella’s presence relaxed, and Danielle knew she would talk about it. Talk about it and ruin it, ruin the un-interpreted with words.

“Oh my God. Can you believe how that kid fell?” She let out an uncontrollably loud cackle. Danielle’s mouth pulled itself into an unavoidable smirk, but her eyes were wide, thin layers of paper blocking in rivers of pity

and glaring to bottom of rows of lockers, a distractible cornfield beside a fatal accident.

“Ella, I’m going to homeroom.”

“What, you’re not going to walk with Brad while I walk with Eric?!”

“No. No, not today.” Danielle’s stomach twisted while the haze of early morning compassion dissipated as all the other, other thousands of others came and ruined the clinical feeling of the near empty school.

The Contracting of a Womb and Long-Distance Goats

Christmas 1996

Gabriella hugged her snowman mug with thinning hands, slipping three of her knobby fingers through the handle, trying to steal the warmth of her microwaved lemon tea. Her glassy eyes stared restlessly at the three envelopes lying in front of her like a game of solitaire on a white plastic TV tray; the TV turned to *A Charlie Brown Christmas* on mute. One letter was a perfectly impersonal white business envelope, with her typed address in a rectangular screen:

Mrs. Gabriella Bliss-Stenson
Apartment No. 4, 8th Street
Peachtree City, GA 30269

A bill. She set it beside her on the waterbed centered in front of the TV in the main room of her new apartment. She preferred it to a sofa. Lately, she rarely moved from the gelled-water mattress that reminded her of a perpetual bath, forever submerging her body in the life-blood of the human race, forever confined to a home like a womb.

The middle letter on the tray was in a wide, sky blue envelope with the scrawling red ink of her cousin Dorothy's handwriting. A sympathy card, no doubt, boasting some generic saying like "Sorry for your loss," "My deepest sympathy," "God must have needed Bryson on his birthday," "Christmas must be hard." *Hard*. *Hard*. By now, Gabriella knew that these things were just commonplace, just polite, like the realization that when people are gone they are gone; their bodies are buried or burned, their minds as elusive as egg whites, sifting through her fingers into the steel garbage can. No folded cardstock, no painted daisies, no God will reverse time, sucking the egg whites and the bleeding yolk out of the trash and into the obliterated shell of Bryson's deteriorating skin. Gabriella didn't need polite. She needed her waterbed, her womb. She flicked the switch of the overflowing shredder by her slippered feet and fed the pity-blue envelope into the grinding teeth of the machine.

The third letter was the last, a maroon envelope in the shape of a card addressed to Gabriella's apartment, but written "To Leland and Linda Rosenfeld." A slight smile crept across Gabriella's peeling lips, and she glanced around her small apartment, at the tall cream door, at the stout oven and microwave, at the red curtains of the shower hiding in the bathroom, at Charlie Brown and Lucy gesturing on the screen. Her hands pulled the edges of her pale pink robe tight at her throat. No one was watching.

According to the return address, the sender lived in Farmland, Indiana. Gabriella carefully lifted the tip of the envelope fold, hardened with the saliva of the unknown sender, an intimate adhesive strip that attracted Gabriella's vulnerability. She wanted to smell the saliva, to maybe lick it back, but she resisted for fear that Linus or, God forbid, Lucy might see. She pulled out a green Season's Greetings card with a wreath on the front. Inside was a meaningless message typed in red that Gabriella ignored. What she did read was the handwritten note inside:

Leland and Linda,

Hope this year has brought you cheer. Vince's MS has been acting up lately, so we're all a bit on edge. The kids are managing with their schoolwork. Elizabeth is pulling B's and made the soccer team. Jared unfortunately got into a fight and broke his collar bone. I'll spare you the details for my sake. We finally got our insurance company to cover his seizure medicine, so he has been seizing much less frequently, not in school anymore, at least. I have been busy keeping the house and raising, birthing, milking, and feeding the goats. I should send you a picture of the last birth we had; it was just miraculous to watch, despite the loss of the mother, Daisy, and much of her blood. It was very sad. We have been able to slightly supplement our income with the money we get from the corner store that sells our milk, but still, most of the money comes from Vince's plumbing business, which is threatened by the worsening of his MS. Goats are what we love, and we will never give them up, but Vince may have to find an office job maybe at the local power plant. I'm sure it will work out.

Best Wishes; say hello to Jeffie for us,
Melissa and Vince

With wide eyes, Gabriella read and re-read the letter from Melissa and Vince of Farmland, Indiana until her eyes hurt and the sharp pain of concentration struck her forehead. Gabriella smelled the mist of the letter, smoke and glue and a hint of gardenia perfume, and set the card back on the TV tray. She stretched her sore knees and legs up onto the waterbed, pulling a knit blanket to her chin. She didn't bother to turn out the lights or turn off the muted television as she drifted into dreaming of large cartoon goats birthing human baby after human baby, covered with lakes of blood and stiffening with the debilitation of muscle spasms, dizziness, and double vision. Melissa and Vince. Vince and Melissa. Vince must brush Melissa's hair from her eyes when they dance at weddings. Melissa must settle her hand in Vince's waistband during movies. Vince must twist quietly in his sleep while Melissa lies awake feeling the pulse of the bed, thanking God for this love, this person. Gabriella, Gabriella and Bryson.

Christmas 1997

Gabriella sat down on her water mattress with a white TV tray in front of *The Price is Right* on television. She began to eat a chicken Alfredo Banquet meal, but pushed the tray away when the mail fell through door slot. In the stack of five pieces of mail, Gabriella grabbed just one, a wide green envelope from Melissa and Vince.

Leland and Linda,

It's the holiday season again already. Can you believe it? This year has been a good one for us, as long as we stay positive. Vince found a new job at the power plant. He says so far, he just has to push papers and type up correspondence, but he's working his way up. We had to up his intake of steroids, Novantrone, Betaseron, and Cytoxan because his symptoms are staying as bad as they were last year, but at least he's not on his feet all day. Elizabeth is excited about her new pet hamster we bought because of her good report card. She's becoming very interested in Zoology. In her class, she dissected a small shark and a crayfish (she wants me to tell everyone that). Jared has been helping with the goats, mainly because he dropped out of school. It's not for everyone, I guess. And frankly, we can use all the help we can get around here. He could make a nice farm business if the bank would loan him money to buy some land. I have also been tending our beautiful goats and caring for our prize-winning one, Melody. She is the first daughter of Daisy, who died in childbirth last year. She is a slight thing but she gives milk like a miracle, a true winner. Hope you enjoy the outfit for Jeffie we sent along. He should have fun with it.

Melissa and Vince.

In a thick bubble wrap envelope on Gabriella's floor was a tiny leopard print dog's outfit. A twang of guilt leapt into Gabriella's throat, and her eyes softened. She remembered—although realistically it was imagining—Vince, a crippling man, pushing buttons behind a button-covered desk, Elizabeth, a young smart girl with pigtails cutting ravenously into an embalmed creature and reveling in its guts, Jared, a tough, muscular boy thrusting a wobbly baby goat across his wide, tan shoulders, and Melissa, an exhausted friend, with a checkered bandana on her head and ripped blue jeans hugging her curvy legs, careful fingers clasping a fountain pen and writing effortlessly about her curiously easy life. Who are Leland and Linda, Gabriella wondered. How do they know Vince and Melissa? Through school? Or family? And what kind of dog do they have? Will their dog miss this outfit? Will they think that Vince and Melissa are ignoring them during the holidays? Do the couples ever contact each other throughout the year? And if so, do they mention these cards, wondering why Leland and Linda never get them? I have to tell them who I really am, she thought.

Gabriella retrieved a pen and notebook paper from her end-table drawer and drafted a letter on the TV tray.

"I love hearing about your family. You really brighten my holidays with your cards. But I'm not Leland and Linda. I'm Gabriella."

No. Gabriella crossed that out.

"You are not writing to the right person. Leland and Linda don't live here anymore. I do. I'm Gabriella and Bryson. We are, we are Gabriella and Bryson."

No. She crossed that out, too. She started again.

"Thanks so much for your cards last year and this year. I'm sorry we didn't get a chance to respond. We've been very busy with our jobs, but we love hearing from you. Maybe we could visit you someday soon? We would like that. We've been enjoying the Georgia sun and our dog Jeffie loves the gift. We want to do anything to take away Vince's pain, but we know we can't do that. Not with a letter. I wish we could tell you about miraculous goats and our smart and helpful children who dissect things and throw wobbly goats across their strong shoulders, but we can't. We mostly watch TV nowadays, the Christmas specials this time of year, game shows, Oprah when it's not about tragedy, and the food network. Paula Dean is my favorite. We eat whatever my mother drops off outside the door. We like taking long baths in the middle of the night, only to return to our waterbed, feeling the small waves on our vanishing muscles. It does get lonely. It does. We are really just in love. So in love every day. It drips from our pours. Holidays are hard. Christmas is hard. Harder than our love ever was.

Linda and Leland"

On December 26, 1997, Gabriella mailed the letter in a simple white envelope.

Christmas 1998

After Christmas dinner with her mom and dad and her aunt's family at her homestead two towns over, Gabriella returned to her apartment. Though surrounded by people at the dinner, Gabriella could not stop thinking about Melissa and Vince. How are they this year? Did they send another gift? What should I get for them? Something for their goats? Or maybe a Chemistry set for Elizabeth. Maybe money to help with their medical bills and their goat's milk business. Vince must have gripped Melissa's shoulder as she wrote the letter this year, bending over to kiss her on the hair, his softener scent pouring over Melissa, concentrating on their life details but encircled by Vince's love. As soon as she stepped inside her apartment door, she paged hastily through her mail looking for Vince's and Melissa's card, but none

came. She scrambled to the end-table, pulling out a notebook and a pen.

“Vince and Melissa,

We haven’t heard from you this Christmas. How is everything? The goats? And Elizabeth and Jared? How are you, Melissa, busy with bottling and selling milk? I hope everything is ok with Vince’s MS. You two were always so in love. It just seems like a bad omen that you haven’t written. I saw my family today. Made me want to be around friends like you instead.

Gabriella”

Christmas 1999

Gabriella lay flat on the dirty wooden floor of her apartment, the telephone ringing every ten minutes, her mother begging her to come to dinner again this year. Gabriella’s new black and brown terrier, Jeffie, licked the soles of her socked feet. She didn’t feel like eating. She didn’t feel like turning on the television to watch *It’s a Wonderful Life* on mute. She no longer craved the comfort of an amniotic bath or the lulling water of her water bed. She twitched on the unbending floor acting like a goat soaked in blood and stiff, autopsied sharks, the stray nails on the floorboards nicking her skin and the hard wood straining the arch of her neck. She wondered how a goat felt while being born, pushing long, knobby legs through a pulsing uterine canal, and every stiff hair of her body matted to her skin with fluid and sharp smelling blood. Gabriella broke so hard through the uterine opening that the mother goat split in two, ripped apart by the baby she sheltered in her warm stomach. The baby’s only glimpse of her mother, and the mother’s only glimpse of her daughter, a shutting of her globe eyes and returning to aching darkness.

Gabriella’s face crinkled with the sinus pain of crying so violently, and she slammed her skeletal fists on the dusty floor, shot up onto her bruised knees and retrieved the telephone. She returned Indian style to the floor, leaning against the edge of the unsheeted water bed-like an awakened baby goat crying for its mother, testing her legs for the first time.

On the next ring, Gabriella placed the receiver of the phone in her lap. “Christmas is hard,” she repeated emphatically three times in three different ways. Not to her mother on the other end, or to Jeffie, eyes agape. It was not the other side of the world listening, not Melissa and Vince, Leland and Linda, wives and husbands, Bryson, Bryson. Enduring Gabriella’s words was no one distant. No one imagined.

Assholes

That day I asked Wanda if I could switch departments. For the fourth time. I rehearsed this conversation in my head—I even wrote it down—because Wanda did *not* move her front-end people to different departments, even if it made me miserable, even if it made me want to quit altogether.

“I just wasn’t made for a customer service job. I can’t deal with the customers anymore.”

“Well, what about the two years you’ve been working here? How did you do that?”

“It just . . . *changed*. Since I’ve been trying to get a GED and maybe get into college soon, I can’t come in here and be bummed out by the shallow customers. Serving them and telling them they’re always right. I need something to grasp, something that doesn’t make me feel so . . . so *low*.” I knew what I was trying to say, but I couldn’t say it in a way Wanda would understand. She was disassociated from any human feeling from her two years training in business college and her lifetime of ignoring anything true. She was afraid of truth because it’s unknown, so she would never *know* someone like me. I started to cry. “I’m just. I’m just at my breaking point here.”

“Well, I can see what I can do for you in Produce, but I might have to cut your hours.” She ignored my crying, and almost seemed suspicious of it. Like weakness was something you were never supposed to show, like a plastered smile and strategic ignorance *were* strength, and why didn’t *I* know that?

“I don’t care I’ll take anything. Anything other than the front-end.”

“Ok, well I’ll see what I can do.” She probably just went back to her office and waited for the phone to ring.

It was true what I said about customers. Most all of them. They are rushed, and they are particular. Out of supermarket context, they’d be called assholes. They *are* assholes:

“Sir, could you slide your credit card again. It didn’t register.”

“It’ll charge me twice, then.”

“No, the machine knows not to do that, sir.”

“Yeah, well, I’ll bet it does. I’d like to talk to a manager.”

“Ok, sir.”

“Ma’am, you can’t purchase cigarettes with your EBT card.”

“Well, why the hell not?”

“It’s just for buying food, ma’am.”

“Then I’ll just buy this candy bar and get all the cash back.”

“That’s not why the government issues those cards.”

“It’s my fucking card, girl.”

“Ok, ma’am.”

“Do you have any coupons today, ma’am?”

“Yes, I’ve got a coupon for Kraft cheese with three triple coupons. There.”

The machine won’t take her Kraft coupon.

“Ma’am it looks like you bought Sargento cheese. And these triple coupons have to go with other coupons, in order to triple them.”

“Well, why do they even have coupons then—if you can never use them?”

“ . . . I don’t know, ma’am.”

“Hey, hey, wait a minute. Those peaches are supposed to ring up 95 cents a pound. It said so on a sign back there.”

“Well, they’re ringing up 99 cents a pound, sir.”

“I see that.” . . .

“I can send a bagger back to check the sign?”

“Yeah do that.”

“The bagger said the sign reads 99 cents a pound.”

“Oh. Well take ’em off then.”

“It’s only 4 cents difference, sir.”

“I said take them off.”

“Ok, sir.”

They are rushed, and they are particular, and they are dumb. They are assholes. And I’d lost my patience.

My first customer that day was an infamously horrible one, probably the worst one that came in the store. Edith. She was a woman in her forties that looked like her sixties because she’d gone to the tanning bed so many times her skin was blackened and about to slough off in wrinkles. She was a tiny lady with a gray boy haircut that framed her perfectly evil, dark brown-eyes, black eyebrows, pink frosted lips. She always wore jeans that ended before her ankle boots began and her laugh was the phlegm gargling of dried tar from cigarettes.

“Hello, ma’am.”

“Hi,” she reached over the conveyer belt to touch my hand, “I’m gonna be a pain in your ass, honey.”

If you know you are a pain in my ass, can you not rise above it?

“I want double paper in plastic. Show me everything you bag. Don’t put my milk in with my bread. And keep the plastic wrap separate.” All this

was said as she was compulsively arranging her groceries into nonsensical groupings onto the conveyer belt.

And yes, she wanted to put one ream of plastic wrap in a doubled paper bag inside another plastic bag. A meaningless, obsessively compulsive waste. And we are officially trained never to bag anything with the bread, except eggs. She wouldn't know this because she probably never let anyone bag her groceries before infecting the cashiers with her anxiety. Sometimes, customers even get pissed if you bag chips with the bread. Customers are very particular about their bread and eggs. The other rule we learned is not to put detergent or deodorant with anything edible, but no customers really ever cared about this rule. When it comes to hairspray chemicals infecting their apples, I guess people don't care so much as when it comes to candy bars misshaping their bread.

So I bagged Edith's order after scanning it and taking her money. I let her check each bag. Half-gallon of green tea with half-gallon of milk. "No, that'll be too heavy. With all the stairs I have to walk up," she huffed, exasperated at my stupidity. She reached into the bag, took out the milk and set it in front of me, all the while exaggerating her struggle to prove that she had a right to be so particular. I doubled two paper bags, set it down in a plastic bag, and then placed the milk in. She said, while checking and re-checking the contents of the four other bags, "Here this can go in there, too," and threw a block of cheese toward my personal space and into the milk bag.

I bagged the yogurt and French dip and steak (in a plastic bag first to avoid blood spills) together. Colds go together. She approved that one, but took out the singular steak and put it in a different paper bag.

I bagged the caramel sauce and green beans together. I found making the bags sarcastically light pleased her.

When it came to the plastic wrap, I threw in some paper plates too. Non-harmful grocery things usually go together.

She was visibly angry and flustered over this gesture, pulling out the paper plates immediately and looking around for a manager. "I said I wanted the plastic wrap bagged separately. Are you just that incompetent?"

I could feel the tears boil behind my eyes. I was wrong about being at my breaking point earlier. *This* was my breaking point. "Yes, ma'am. I guess I am. But maybe it's because your orders are completely asinine. It is just *plastic wrap!*"

Edith stood across the steel bagging area with a sneer on her face, moving her paper plates to one double paper in plastic bag, moving the caramel sauce to another double paper in plastic bag and mumbling hateful annoyances under her breath.

"Did you hear me? It's just *fucking* plastic wrap, Edith!"

"I heard you, you, you asshole. Give me my bags. Little asshole."

"I'm an asshole, Edith?"

Edith grabbed her bags from the counter with no help from me, and she went straight to the service desk with her cart. "I need to see a manager about that cashier you have. She's very stupid and rude, that one."

I heard Carrie mumble, "Ok, let me call a manager for you" as she stared at me, curious.

Once I was beyond the double sliding doors on the sidewalk, a plane flew overhead and seemed to stir up the wind and fill my itchy work shirt with warm air. A customer, a middle-aged man in a wind-jacket, stopped beside me to watch what was unfolding beyond the glass doors: Wanda was red-faced and speaking frantically into her walkie-talkie like she was reporting a felony. Edith started in on her about the poor service, about how it's pathetic that there is nothing Wanda can do to punish me now that I walked out. As Wanda tried to help Edith move her groceries into her cart in a frenzy, she hit Edith's arm and spilled her cat food cans. They rolled across the floor in tangents, and Edith's face changed from pissed off to enraged as she kicked one of the cans that grazed her foot.

"Jeez what happened in there?" the man asked. He seemed to share my calm acceptance of the mundane scene—mundane once you are above it, in the clouds with the crows and the sunshine.

"Oh you know—people," I replied.

"Yeah. Peeh-pole."

Missing Persons

I never realized that milk cartons list the details of missing persons so specifically, Mary thought to herself in her trailer, *The Wheel of Fortune* shifting across the TV screen, David Hasselhoff, the German shepherd, poised at her slippers. Mary turned the cool carton over and over in her sweaty hands until her palms felt ripe and red, matching her Irish cheeks, so plump a bite seems inviting.

Mary just returned to her trailer from a funeral for a dog, 20 miles away from her hometown of Vega, TX, a small stretch of farmland, high school football pride, and scant job offerings at corner stores, weight-loss clinics, and the local Burger King, where Mary is a manager. Vega's deep blue mystic skies never disappointed, and Mary stayed because that's where her mother and father lived and died, and she knew no better than David Hasselhoff and a musty, breeze filled trailer beneath the giant VEGA water tower and two blocks from the LORD IS GOD gas station.

Mary rarely ventured from Vega, but she had to say goodbye to Steve Martin, her friend's dog, who actually was more of a friend to Mary than her *friend*, Carmen. At the funeral, Steve lay at the center of a warehouse room (styled like a church) puffed up with formaldehyde and methanol, soon to be whisked into a 1500 degree furnace. David Hasselhoff sniffed Steve Martin's matte, chemical-drenched body and paid no attention, feeling nothing. Mary wondered if the chemicals had signaled to David that Steve was not his species. Steve Martin was always kind to Mary, lobbing used tissues and toys at her feet any time she visited Carmen, so she was disheartened that David wasn't upset as well. She blessed herself and pulled David's chain tight around his neck until he yelped enough that Mary was satisfied. Mary's eyes closed in pride—David felt the pain of losing Steve, too.

Still wearing the black sweater dress that outlined every skin-fold of Mary's apple-shaped body and the half-inch black heels that burst with Mary's foot flesh, Mary began to feel the frozen pain on her hand from turning the cold milk carton over and over. In three shades of bleeding ink, Martin Monasco, a brown-haired, blue-eyed mulatto boy, was last seen by his sister at the Bike Park on 12th Avenue and 5th Street, Vega. He was printed on this carton. He went missing at age 7 but is 15 now. Mary's eyes flashed between the two photos of the boy, one a smiling school picture with a glimmer of youth, a picture of a real child who had just come from eating a lunch of fish sticks and rubber green beans and a tiny serving of chocolate milk, and the next, a projected image of a falsely pock-marked young man with empty fear in his newspaper print eyes. Those boy's eyes, that turned up at the corners and had just been brightened by a photographer who ordered jestingly "say 'fuzzy pickle!,' that in the second picture were void of any sign

of being loved or loving, of feeling the difference between being lost and being thrown to an incinerator with no playground friends present to say goodbye—those eyes prompted Mary to perform her ritual of leaving: she kissed David Hasselhoff on his cool, wet nose, said a quick “Our Father” above her bowl of holy water, and set out the door of her trailer to the bike park, four blocks away, on 12th and 5th, her heels clicking the blacktop under the wobbly weight of her body.

As Mary approached the intertwining ramps, rusty jungle gyms, and play equipment of the park, she stood on a patch of grass about 20 feet from the park’s only occupant: a little girl sitting on the edge of a long wooden bike ramp, dragging a naked Barbie doll back and forth through the mud and humming softly.

Mary studied the ins and outs of her surroundings, the swings swaying in the light breeze, the stains of gum, abandoned beverages, smashed bottles collaging the pavement, and the occasional tractor or delivery truck trotting by on the town’s main road. Mary sized-up the girl, whose hair was knotted and ratty and whose sweatshirt hung from her limbs.

“Hullo,” Mary yelled.

The girl stared at Mary’s stout frame with contempt in her eyes for any stranger who threatened her dirty playtime with the dirty Barbie doll at the dirty park. A dirtball, Mary thought.

“Hey! Did you know a Martin Monasco? A little Mexican boy?”

The girl turned her attention back to her naked Barbie, clumps of twigs and dirt in her yellow hair. The girl twisted Barbie’s limbs backward so her torso and head were seemingly thrust forward and vulnerable to any menacing thing.

Anger engulfed Mary. She approached, laboring with red cheeks and short breaths. Who would show such nonchalance about a missing little boy? What if he was kidnapped by a rapist? This little girl better start showing some fear for her safety or Mary would have to take her home and feed her cookies and show her a little something about worry, God, and helplessness.

Mary reached out to shake the little girl’s shoulder and started, “Listen, do you know Martin Monas—”

Before Mary could squeak out the last syllable, the little girl bit Mary’s pretzel ball hand with her tiny mouth and sharp, tiny teeth. Mary screamed, between wheezing thick breaths that made her words come out like a foghorn, “OUCH! WHAT ARE YOU DOING, YOU STUPID RUNT!”

The searing pain on Mary’s hand reminded her of her father’s tackle box, full of gummy worms that looked like candy with menacing hooks at the ends. One weekend her brother and she stole the tackle box and sneaked out to the creek by their house to fish. Her brother was the first to thread a naked

hook with a real mucused worm, squirming at the ends directionlessly. Mary's brother flicked his rod to cast, but the hook caught the tender, thin skin under Mary's eyebrow, digging into the bone underneath and poking to come out the other side.

Mary wailed with pain, just as she was now in reaction to this little girl's venomous bite. She wanted to ask the GOD IS LORD gas station why God would cause her such meaningless pain when all she was trying to do was experience nature, to help a little boy.

After her brother and Mary ran home, her father locked them in their room, giving Mary nothing for her bleeding gash. The skin above her eye singed and over the next few months, the cells mutilated to scar tissue that forced Mary's left eyelid down further than the right.

This little girl's dirty tongue mowed the flesh of Mary's hand just as the worm flailed across Mary's wounded eye. She was overwhelmed with the sting of punishment and the putrid liquid that arose when that vision of herself as a martyr, making the world a better place, standing up straight, and forcing others to bow down to morality, became stripped and thrown back into the pit of her stomach like a naked, limp Barbie doll that Mary must purge—relinquish all of the things she liked about herself.

Mary squeezed her fist, rolled her crunching bones inside the blanket of her skin, her fingernails cutting into her palm. She snapped her hand free from the vice and punched the little girl in the cheek. Mary's plump arm extended to the cheekbone of the little girl, midway between her eye sockets and her quivering nostrils. Without studying the reaction of the little girl, Mary straightened her spine to regain composure: "You better wise up you know that?"

She thought of David Hasselhoff at home, pawing at the mail slot, waiting at the door for her return. Martin Monasco was suddenly an annoyance. Why would I leave David for a lost face on a milk carton? There are faces everywhere. And they are all lost.

The little girl gripped her cheek with her tiny flower hand and watched warily as Mary treaded away over wood ramps and through puddles of sick and spilled beer cans. For the first time in a long time, the little girl remembered her mother.

Fast Food at the End of the World

We came upon Barstow, an accidental town that sprang up because of the many converging highways and the resulting sexless truckers that by now don't mean anything. With each wiry step our own sexes became more obsolete, mine like a bloody nuisance and his like a dangling afterthought. The checkerboard of abandoned fast food restaurants was gray and peeling with dilapidation. After the solar wind killed much of the western hemisphere with its atomic burst, the sky turned a smoky maroon in which black clouds hung like the last fetid breaths of God. A pair of golden arches, a pan-seared red and yellow McDonald's, was the first restaurant on this stretch of crumbling I-40, and remembering the days of quarter pounders and milkshakes, we set off, feet thumping pavement, to that false shelter, offering some strange semblance of home.

He ran through the glass doors, half melted and streaked with warped pictures of French fries and snack wraps, boasting 99 cents and 1 dollar. He approached the drive-thru window from the inside and stuck his head out of those familiar tiny windows that open sideways. How many exchanges of clinking coins and greasy bagged food have trailed quantum tracings of different arms (brown or peach, smooth like a baby or threaded with millions of thick waxy hairs), different sleeves (blue Spring jacket sleeves or white t-shirt sleeves or no sleeves at all)—arms and sleeves—stretching repeatedly from car doors over and over in some dimension where Barstow is still a city, the world still the image on a map? Exchanges for anything with any arm or any sleeve are now useless.

I waited for him to live out his spirited break from our new starving reality. I stood by the drive-thru order machine. The menu was pelted with bird feces, shards of brick and roofing from some unknown, and even the sticky carcass of a scorpion hung, pinned to an ice cream cone by its third bloody rib; its needlepoint tail crying a tear of venom. The black plastic covering of the machine had long ago melted to form stalactites from its body to the ground. Its innards consisted of a circular microphone and a bundle of frayed wires that might have reminded me of daffodil stems before flowers were killed by the silent rupture of the sun.

"May I take your order, ma'am?" He cupped his hands around his mouth to shout at me from the window.

"Jack don't." He was always happier than me, and it never crossed my mind when I would sit on the back porch swing staring at some distant air with tears hurting my eyes and a book with empty train tracks or a wistful young girl on the cover strewn carelessly on my lap, or when I would carry a fourth basket of laundry from the basement only to slam it on the kitchen table and run up to the bathroom to submerge my body in warm, cutting

water. It never crossed my mind that his approaching and joking, his blowing on my eyes to reduce the moisture, his laughing and brushing my hair from my face, his taking me to rent some Oscar-winning movie to watch that evening, or his pouring shots of tequila and setting up Monopoly on the kitchen table, laundry folded and stored—it never crossed my mind that *that*—would help me survive the apocalypse.

“Excuse me? Ma’am, if you don’t want any food, please pull through and let others order.”

“Jack.” I warned him even though we both knew without having to see it: a smile was creeping onto my lips.

“Ma’am. What’ll it be?”

“I’ll have a cheeseburger,” I mumbled.

“Ma’am. You’re going to have to speak up.”

“I’ll have a cheeseburger. And a caramel sundae.”

“Nice choice, ma’am. Are you sure you wouldn’t like anything else? Perhaps something to share with someone? Some fellow traveler?”

“Jack.” I coughed his name in a laugh. “I’ll have cherry pie. Do you have that? Oh, and a Caesar salad with . . . with bacon crumbles on it.”

“Ma’am we got anything you want back here.”

“Then I’ll have chicken with noodles over mashed potatoes. A chocolate lava cake. Moo goo gai pan. Broccoli. Mandarin Oranges. A buffalo chicken salad with hard-boiled eggs on the side. A cool glass of milk. An English muffin with butter and elderberry jam. Hmm. Chocolate pancakes with butter and syrup. Hot green tea with orange. A sweet potato with butter, cinnamon, and sugar. Fresh green beans with salt—thick salt as big as sesame seeds. Sunflower seeds! And rice and refried beans with nachos and Mexican cheese and hot peppers. A Christmas ham with pineapple. Homemade pizza. Broccoli pizza with garlic seasoning.” My voice was lifted, sounding fresh to my own ears. I never even liked ham with pineapple when my mom made it in my homestead in Minnesota, before Minnesota was drowned by a boiling Lake Superior, but any meal is better than grass and chicken grease and cold canned corn, even when that meal used to be the foaming swine of my holidays.

“And Chicken Saag?” He added to my list like he thought he was getting in on this.

“This is *my* order, sir.”

He stared at me from around the corner, stretching his neck and shoulders through the window to show me his bottom lip was pushed out and quivering.

I laughed. “Ok. And Chicken Saag. But that’s all I can afford.”

“This one’s on the house, babe.”

I walked around to the window, and we hugged, smiling a while and

breathing heavy with the weight of survival drifting back onto our shoulders as the lightness of our game faded.

“Taste is just a feeling,” he stated softly and abruptly.

“It’s a memory now,” I corrected.

“Let’s try to make it to the beach today. We could camp in an old hotel. See if there are fish.”

“Okay.” Anything is really okay when there’s nothing left to do but keep going.

He hoisted his body out of the narrow window, and we set off down the rotting road. With each heavy step, we sprayed puddles of chocolate milk onto our naked legs, and with each warm breath, the grease of fried Serrano peppers trickled down our temples.

We pointedly fixed our eyes forward—to the winding tree stumps bordering the highway that reached like severed arms to the smoky maroon sky—without a glance back to the McDonald’s, reduced to a crumbled page from a magazine, torn and dragged through a murky puddle. With each new step, our bodies ached for everyone to come, without our memory.

Christina Seymour

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Academic Vita

English major with Creative Writing emphasis and minor in Sociology

Bachelor of Arts, English

August 2007—May 2010

Penn State Altoona - Altoona, PA

Relevant Coursework: Poetry and Fiction Writing to the Advanced Level, Peer Editing, Literary Theory, Women's and Minority Literature, American Literature, Japanese Literature, Pre- and Post-1800 British Literature, Postmodern Literature, Honors Freshman Composition, Writing About Art, Discourse Analysis, Sociology of Deviance

Study Abroad, English: The London Perspective

May 2009

London UK

Relevant Coursework: Post-1800 British Literature: Westminster Abbey, St. Paul's Cathedral, Dickens House Museum, Tower of London, Windsor Castle, Tate Britain, *Romeo and Juliet* performance at the Globe Theatre, National Gallery, British Museum, British Library

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Transcriber

*PSU Altoona English Department
(Dr. Sandra Petrulionis)*

Mar. 2010—Present

- Transcribed the journals and letters of Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mary Moody Emerson from microfilm copies and images of original handwritten documents.
- Created and organized data into an Excel spreadsheet.

Annotator/Research Assistant

*PSU Altoona English Department
(Dr. Sandra Petrulionis)*

Oct. 2008—Present

- Annotated journals of Mary Moody Emerson, Ralph Waldo Emerson's aunt, as part of an NEH-funded digital edition of this unpublished manuscript series.
- Researched 18th and 19th Century authors, the Bible, Classics, philosophical movements such as Stoicism as well as Emerson's genealogical and geographical history in revolutionary America.
- Proofread various grant proposals and essays and gave detailed feedback.
- Received and handled professional correspondence.
- Worked with microform as well as original, handwritten documents.
- Instructed other student researchers on the annotation process and possible avenues of research.
- Utilized interlibrary loan and databases of literature, periodicals, the Bible, philosophy, general information, and biography.

Literacy Corps Volunteer

*Altoona Community Education Center
(Mr. Patrick Baney)*

Jan. 2011—May 2011

- Taught and tutored adult learners on basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills as applicable to the Language Arts, Science, and Mathematics portions of the General Education Development test.

Researcher and Writer

*PSU Altoona Sociology Department
(Dr. Nicholas J. Rowland)*

Aug. 2009—Dec. 2010

- Completed a discourse analysis of godlessness in American media.
- Co-authored a scholarly paper in American Psychological Association style.
- Utilized an issue-focused reporting method and researched newspapers in periodicals databases.

- Created original coding system for data in Excel.
- Presented findings at the Annual Pennsylvania Sociological Society Conference.

SUPPORTING EXPERIENCE

Bagger/Cashier/Tree-house Associate *Martin's Food Markets* Nov. 2005—Oct. 2008

- Created and implemented craft projects and activities for children ages 3-9.
- Obtained certification in CPR/AED for children and infants.
- Bagged groceries, gathered carts, cashiered on both regular register and self-checkout.

PUBLICATIONS/PRESENTATIONS:

Creative Works: Seymour, Christina. "Chamomile Tea." *LiveWire*. 28 April 2010. Web.
 _____. "Drew's Casualties." *Hard Freight* (Fall 2009): 20-21. Print.
 _____. "Fair Response to the Headline 'Bjork Attacks.'" *Mind Murals* 1 (2009). Print.
 _____. "Fast Food at the End of the World." *Backbone Mountain Review* (2011). Print.
 _____. "Pause and Circumstance." *Hard Freight* (Fall 2009): 4. Print.
 _____. "Pause and Circumstance." *Three Rivers Review* 15 (2010): 72-75. Print.
 _____. "Reflection." *Hard Freight*. Photograph (Fall 2008): Cover. Print.
 _____. "Said." *Backbone Mountain Review* (2011). Print.
 _____. "Stuffed Me." *Backbone Mountain Review* (2011). Print.

Poem on Exhibit: Seymour, Christina. "Home Is Dead when He Fights." September 2010-?. *Speak Peace—American Voices Respond to Vietnamese Children's Paintings*. Wick Poetry Center, Kent, OH (Touring Nationally and Internationally).
 *Note: Also appearing at the 2011 Association for Writers and Writing Programs Annual Conference. Washington D.C. 2-5 Feb. 2011.

Presentations: Seymour, Christina and Mark Singer. "Godlessness in American Newspapers: Patterned Discourses of Non-Religiosity, 1999-2009." Annual Pennsylvania Sociological Society Conference. Mansfield University, Mansfield, PA. 22-23 Oct. 2010.
 _____. "Godlessness in American Newspapers: Patterned Discourses of Non-Religiosity, 1999-2009." Eighth Annual Penn State Altoona Undergraduate Research Fair. Misciagna Family Center, Altoona, PA. 13 Apr. 2010.
 _____. "Streetlight Mosaic." Beyond Words: Sigma Tau Delta 2011 International Convention. Wyndham Grand Downtown, Pittsburgh, PA. 23-26 Mar. 2011.

HONORS	AWARDS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Penn State Altoona Student Marshall for Arts and Humanities, Spring 2011 • Schreyer Honors College • Phi Kappa Phi • Penn State Altoona Honors • Sigma Tau Delta Chapter President, Fall 2010—Spring 2011 • Sigma Tau Delta Chapter Secretary, Fall 2009—Spring 2010 • Dean's List every semester 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russo Award for Critical Writing, Spring 2011 • Penn State Altoona Honors Scholarships, Fall 2008—Spring 2011 • Superior Achievement in the Liberal Arts, Fall 2007—Fall 2010 • Penn State's Evan Pugh Scholar Award, 2010 • Undergraduate Research Award, Spring 2010 • 2nd Place in Penn State Altoona Undergraduate Research Fair, Spring 2010 • Altoona Majors Scholarship, Fall 2009—Spring 2010 • Penn State's Spark's Award, 2009 • Outstanding Achievement in French, Fall 2007—Fall 2009 • Minnie Patton Stayman Award, 2009 • Jane Patterson Kazmaier Lower Endowed Scholarship, 2009 • Silver Quill Award in ENGL 221W, Spring 2008