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LEAVING IS A
CONCRETE BLOCK

JOANNA L. GRISHAM

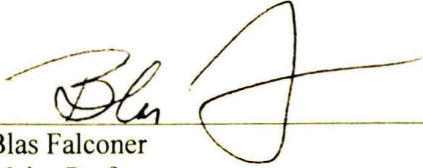
Leaving
Is a
Concrete Block

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts Degree
In English
Austin Peay State University

Joanna L. Grisham
2008

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Joanna Lee Grisham entitled "Leaving is a Concrete Block." I have examined the final paper copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted to partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Blas", followed by a large, stylized flourish that extends to the right.

Blas Falconer
Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend
its acceptance:

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Barry", followed by a large, stylized flourish that extends to the right.

Barry Kitterman
Professor

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jill Eichhorn", followed by a large, stylized flourish that extends to the right.

Jill Eichhorn
Professor

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Joanna L. Grisham

4-21-08

Date

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Thank you to my family who has (unknowingly) supplied me with enough material to continue writing for the rest of my life.

And to Jenny—sometimes, even for a writer, there are not enough words. Thank you.

Foreword

This thesis is a compilation of poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. Each of the pieces in this thesis speaks to the theme of truth and the unending journey of finding one's own truth and learning to believe in it.

The poems "Love over Breakfast," "Nocturnal Feeding," and "Straight and Narrow is a Difficult Path to Swim" explore both the chaos and the bliss of love. Religion and the complexity of understanding faith are themes present in the poems "Sunday school #26" and "Sunday or Voluntary Blindness." The other two poems "Spelling Test Make-up: M. Kemp" and "Shift" were written about important friendships.

The pieces of nonfiction in this thesis address a variety of issues that ultimately refer back to the larger theme of finding truth. "Acceptance" and "Michael" explore sexuality and relationships, while "Love: 2 ½ Times" (an experimental memoir) deals with transcending heartbreak. The main focus of "Thursday: Featuring Porcelain Jesus," "Underneath," and "Leaving is a Concrete Block" is family—for better or worse. "It's Never Unconditional" is a piece of flash-fiction—an autobiography in 100 words—that tells the condensed story of my life up until this point.

Finally, the fictional story "It's Not in the Clouds" is about a young woman, much like myself, who is searching for truth and acceptance from her family, friends, and especially herself. This story is part of a larger work in progress.

*I never really got there
I just pretended that I had
What's the point of instruments
Words are a sawed off shotgun*

Radiohead~ “Jigsaw Falling Into Place”

Contents

Sunday school #26.....	1
Acceptance.....	2
Spelling Test Make-up: M. Kemp.....	5
Michael.....	6
Nocturnal Feeding.....	11
Love: 2 ½ Times.....	12
It's Never Unconditional.....	14
It's Not in the Clouds.....	15
Straight and Narrow is a Difficult Path to Swim.....	33
Thursday: Featuring Porcelain Jesus.....	34
Sunday or Voluntary Blindness.....	37
Underneath.....	38
Shift.....	40
Love over Breakfast.....	41
Leaving is a Concrete Block.....	42

Sunday school #26

City gate locked for beggars and lepers
leave with willing insides. Call me out

to read in *Exodus*—liver, heart, and lungs
aching, longing. Cast me out until I lie.

Because I lie, cast me out. Although
I have given you everything—all of it.

Say my name is written down—chosen
one, chosen few. *Do not blot me out!* I cry

from the hillside above the country church,
where I sit among the cattails and weeds.

Acceptance

Until I was five, I refused to wear a shirt. Actually, I didn't wear much of anything at all. My favorite outfit consisted of Smurf panties and cowboy boots. Often, I accessorized with an oversized hat or Supergirl cape, but I never wore a shirt or pants...or shoes. No one seemed to mind my near nakedness. In fact, there's a picture of me at my third birthday party wearing nothing but white cotton panties and cowboy boots. There I am, blowing out the candles, surrounded by guests, holding Lynette Louise (my Cabbage Patch doll), half naked and smiling. The only distinction in my appearance that day, from any other day, is the barrette my mother managed to half-ass attach to my hair. Barrettes marked special occasions, as I generally refused to wear those, too. My family photo album, until kindergarten—when clothes became mandatory—depicts a scantily clad child straddling tricycles and dirt bikes and digging holes in the muddy garden.

My first crush was on David Bowie. The first time I saw the movie *Labyrinth*, I was mesmerized by this beautiful, androgynous rock star. Of course, I thought he was a woman and that really annoyed my mother.

"I want to marry her."

"Don't say that, Joanna Lee. Girls don't marry girls."

"Well, I'm going to."

I was serious about David Bowie. Well, as serious as a four-year-old can be about a celebrity crush. I memorized the soundtrack to *Labyrinth*, reenacted scenes from the movie, and continuously professed my love for him until my next crush came along a year or two later. Pee Wee Herman. Maybe it was his boyish innocence, or the way he laughed like my great aunt Myrtle. Maybe it was his skin-tight, grey suit and little red bow tie.

I wore three bras in the eighth grade: two sports bras to flatten my breasts as much as possible, and a regular white one that fastened in the back. This one was to ensure the other bras would stay in place. I prayed every night that God wouldn't give me breasts. I wanted to look like my brother. I wanted to go topless like I did when I was little.

That was the year I cut off all my hair. The year I wore baggy jeans that were ripped around the bottom with flannel shirts and Air Walks. The year I played air guitar with a hockey stick in my bedroom while banging my head to Rage Against the Machine and Nirvana. That was also the year that, despite my best preventative efforts, I acquired breasts. I wore two XXL t-shirts over my three bras every day and hoped no one would notice my chest.

I was practically a straight-edge in high school. I went to church three or four times a week. I didn't smoke, drink, or cuss. I didn't date. I did not have sex. I used my True Love Waits commitment as a sort of Get Out of Jail Free Card, so I didn't have to worry about being asked on dates for the most part. I was marked a "good girl" early on, with no expectations from anyone to do more than hold hands on a hayride or lock arms at a football game.

My senior year of high school I heard that the football players were rating girls in the locker room. I was labeled "hot, in a goody-goody way." They compared me to the Football Queen and said they thought I was prettier in the face, but only about a 7 overall because I didn't put out. They referred to me as "not the kind of girl you fuck, but the kind of girl you marry." I suppose this was meant to be a flattering statement; however, it pissed me off. I wanted to be the kind of girl you "fucked" even if I didn't intend on doing any actual fucking. On the other hand, I wondered what boys thought happened to all those girls they fucked when they began to look for wives.

I have kissed five girls and eight boys. This seems sort of pathetic to me. Most twenty-five year olds I know boast numbers well into the twenties and thirties range for kissing partners. The truth is I

never really liked kissing all that much until recently. It's so intimate. More intimate than sex, really. I always felt like I was losing part of myself every time I kissed someone. That's why I never kissed the same guy more than a couple of times. Even that was too much.

The last time I kissed a boy was a few years ago. My girlfriend had just left me and I decided I was through with women. Maybe I could become bisexual, find a nice boy to date, forget myself a little. One night, after too many drinks, I found myself drunk-dancing with my friends at a club. I'm not sure how it happened, but, somehow, this guy's tongue was in my mouth. It took me about fifteen seconds to figure out what was going on. I had an anxiety attack and my friends practically carried me out of the club as I gasped for air. On the way to the car I prayed that God would forgive me. That he wouldn't hate me for being gay.

I still pray.

Spelling Test Make-up: M. Kemp

The 5-slap mating call rings truer
than money-love. Blue-green paper-
clipped promises attached to the
folds with stickers that read *Wow!*
and *Great!* and *Super Job!* while
you stare into the coat-room pretending
not to feel your blood cool and boil
and cool and boil. Alcohol in your
future wife, dead Daddies under
the bed, Jesus on the mainline.

Michael

I entered my sophomore year of high school with low self-esteem and even lower expectations. I had recently lost 35 lbs.—by way of starvation and Ephedrine—and grown 4 inches over one summer. Considering that I had always been the awkward, funny, side-kick type—to my cousin’s petite, blonde, Homecoming Queen-type—I had no reason to believe that a sudden alteration in outward appearance would affect my social life. After all, I had already secured a place in the popular clique by providing self-deprecating humor, sarcasm, and home work assignments to the necessary persons since elementary school. And, while I hated cliques, pep rallies, and displaying my school spirit in any way, I knew it was better to be a part of the inner circle than stand alone. I had seen what being an individual could do to a person in high school, and I had decided long ago to conform and keep my mouth shut until graduation.

About mid-way through the semester, my friends, who consisted mostly of athletes, cheerleaders, and social butterflies, had all acquired boyfriends. I hadn’t really noticed until my cousin, Ashley, pointed out that I did *not* have a boyfriend. Suddenly, my singleness was the main topic at lunch every day, not to mention every note passed in study hall, and every 3-way phone call after dinner. I knew it was only a matter of time before I was set-up with some sweaty, bulging, football player and forced into a depressing routine of hand-holding in the hallway, wearing an oversized football jacket, and participating in unproductive Saturday night make-out sessions at the Dam. I was getting nervous. I knew I didn’t want a boyfriend, but I also knew I needed to secure my place in the Sophomore 7.

Michael was literally the boy next door. He and I had talked a lot recently, and I was pretty sure he liked me. Since I knew Michael was a nice guy and we had a lot in common, as far as musical tastes and our mutual hatred for anything “unoriginal,” I decided I’d let him be my

boyfriend if he asked. This would take the pressure off me and give me a chance to spend more time at his house—with his drum-set and Nintendo. A month before the semester ended, Michael asked me to be his girlfriend. He also asked if I would be his prom date. I was only a sophomore (he was a junior) and knew it was an honor to go to prom as an underclassman, so I accepted and hoped my friends would envy my status and be happy I found a boyfriend.

At first, Michael was not the type of guy my friends wanted me to date. He was not a jock. He was not preppy. And he didn't care who won the football game or if he had the newest polo from Abercrombie and Fitch. In fact, Michael's hair was longer than mine, falling just above his shoulders. He had beautiful blue eyes, a scruffy chin, and wore mostly concert tees and baggy jeans. He was obsessed with Kurt Cobain, and had dedicated his adolescent life to art, music, and acting in school plays. Other extra-curricular activities included: smoking weed, playing Nintendo, and working on his music. If I *had* to have a boyfriend, Michael was exactly the kind I wanted; he was completely different from any other guy I knew.

After a week, my friends decided they approved of Michael, mainly because I was no longer “unattached” and no longer a potential problem within the circle. So, Michael and I began the actual “dating” ritual. Double-dates at Pizza Hut on Fridays, parties at Lindsey's on Saturdays, and family dinners on Sundays. It was gross. I mean, I actually wanted to kill myself. I had no idea dating was so exhausting. I felt fake and overwhelmed. I didn't even want a boyfriend and somehow I found myself in a “relationship” with a really sweet guy, who was proclaiming his love for me and asking me to wear his high school ring—a surprising request coming from Michael. I felt trapped and I wondered if anyone else felt this way but was afraid to express their feelings out of fear of rejection or condemnation. I began to panic. But when I looked at Michael's sweet, unknowing face, it was impossible for me to end it. He was

so complementary, always telling me how beautiful I was...how smart, funny, and talented. He loved the fact that I wasn't girly like the rest of my friends, and he found it sexy when I wore basketball shorts and sports bras instead of frilly blouses and short skirts. Despite the fact that Michael adored me—which I, of course, enjoyed—I was miserable.

After we dated a while, it became clear that even sweet Michael was unsatisfied with simply hanging out in the garage playing video games or watching professional wrestling. I could tell he was getting antsy and expected me to fulfill some girlfriendly sexual duty. In the past, he had plenty of girlfriends and plenty of sex. I, on the other hand, I had never even made-out with anyone before, and I really had no desire to do so. I had put off kissing him as long as I could, when we found ourselves alone at his house one day. It was inevitable. Fiona Apple played on the stereo—at least he took the time to pick music *I* liked. We sat at the foot of his twin-size bed, staring at posters, pretending to be casual. He leaned in. I laughed. He laughed. He leaned in again and told me to “relax and just let it happen.” This sounded completely ridiculous to me. Like something from an after school special. I couldn't help but laugh again. I suppose, I secretly hoped Michael would get pissed off and dump me on the spot. Then I wouldn't have to worry about kissing, dating, or being the bad guy. But he didn't give up. Eventually, he pulled me in before I had a chance to laugh and....well, I made it about a minute into the kiss before I began to laugh into his mouth. Apparently he was satisfied, as kissing became a standard component of our hang-out time. Most of our “make-out” sessions were similar to the first. He would kiss me. I would feign interest for as long as possible until either laughter or sheer boredom overtook me and he was compelled to stop. Looking back, I believe I laughed to keep from crying.

I can't remember what finally pushed me into dissolving the relationship. I called him one night, after I walked home from a family barbeque at his house. He wanted me to stay longer and "fool-around," so I lied about having to wake-up early to baby-sit the next day. I knew he wanted more than a kiss that night. I knew I couldn't go through with sleeping with him. We had this talk before. He said he respected my wishes to remain a virgin, yet he didn't understand why we couldn't at least fool around. That night, it was just too much. I left his house feeling more empty and alone than ever. All my friends seemed so happy with their boyfriends. They were all taking steps toward adulthood. I just wanted to be left alone.

I picked up the phone and dialed his number at least ten times. I didn't want to hurt him. Michael was the most beautiful person I had ever known. He cried when I told him I didn't want to see him anymore. I said that I still wanted to be friends and hang out. Michael surprised me with his reaction. I never expected anyone to cry over me. He said he was in love with me. That I was the most amazing girl he knew. That I made him want to be a better person, and maybe even go to church again. I felt sick. I cried, too, but I didn't know why. Part of me thought I was making a mistake. I wanted to love him. I wanted to be his inspiration. I wanted to lead him back to God. I wanted to want to have sex with him. But I didn't and I couldn't. I hung up the phone and threw up. I pictured Michael sitting in the garage, smoking a joint and blowing the smoke out the window above the old couch, as he had done so many times. Part of me wanted to walk over and join him. Tell him I changed my mind. Tell him I could be that girl he thought I was. Somehow, I could become her, couldn't I? I was relieved after a week or two, when Michael and I started hanging out again. It wasn't hard for us to be friends. He never tried to kiss me or convince me to take him back. In time, I think he understood.

Looking back, I realize I learned a lot from my relationship with Michael. He definitely boosted my self-esteem and made me feel like it was okay to be different. I found out years later that Michael had confided in our friend Sarah that he suspected I might be a lesbian. It amazes me that he knew at sixteen, when I wasn't sure until I was nearly twenty.

The last boy I dated was nothing like Michael. He was tall, dark, handsome, cocky, condescending, and self-absorbed. My friends thought he was beautiful. They called him the "Gap model." One night, while laying on his couch as he dry-humped me for the thirtieth time that week—both of us thinking about Britney Spears—I remembered Michael. I remembered how tender he was. I remembered how he never made me feel this small and inanimate. And when I finally mustered enough strength to push the guy off me, I left feeling free for the first time. Michael taught me to never compromise myself to please others. And, in a way, he taught me how to let go.

Nocturnal Feeding

she's all loops and Js
in my mouth—

her name melts like snow
like banana popsicles

on my lips. cross-out
the sandbox love letter

with my split tongue. spit out
kicks and scuffs and tree-trunk

declarations. when paperless night
falls inside us you reach

inside your own chest and tear out
chapter one, skip to the end

and kiss the black, black
star-shaped mouth.

Love: 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ Times

Disclaimer: This is not about love. It's about everything that's left. Death. Sex. Silence. What I'm saying is musical and distasteful and self-important. I'm telling you this to tell myself.

- ½: Reckless. Disruptive. The kind that meant so much at the time and means very little now.
- 1: Rebound-turned-seven-plus-months-of-mind-fucking.
- 2: ...
- ½: First time. First love. I know we must have felt so adult. We had a lot of sex but never fucked.
- 1: I knew the ending before it began. I knew, but I couldn't stop going back. When it finally happened, I tried to kill myself, or, at least, the part of me that could not let go. The part that was already dead.
- 2: ...
- ½: Saying "I love you" doesn't really mean all that much when you really think about it. At the time, the words seemed profound and revolutionary.
- 1: In the future, when I'm told repeatedly that who I am is wrong, that what I want is wrong, and that I'm going to Hell, I'll simply say "fuck you," instead of allowing that person to fuck me while she's telling me those things.
- 2: ...
- ½: I'm anorexic and she cuts herself. And we think this is love.
- 1: I've been waiting for three months. When she calls me a week before Christmas to tell me she's moving to her mother's to "find herself and reconnect with God," I do not believe she'll really leave.
- 2: ...
- ½: I know when I drive away. I will miss her innocence.

- 1: I stay for three months after she sets the date.
Every day is imaginary. I forget who I am. She says I
never knew. I hate her, I think. I make vows and
commitments to undo everything. To re-learn emptiness.
- 2: ...
- ½: I see her. I want to hold her. Not because I want her
but because she's so sad looking. I wish she'd just...
become someone else.
- 1: I cannot let myself think of her. I will not cry for
her anymore. Sometimes it's hard to live up to these
expectations.
- 2: ...
- ½: Prediction: Death by numbers. Weight-gain. Cats.
Masturbation. Suicide. Where is her prince(cess)?
- 1: Prediction: Husband. Kids. Depression. Redemption.
Depression. Redemption...
- 2: Prediction: In the absence of sentimentality I find
reason. And by reason I mean consistency. And by
consistency I mean warmth. And by warmth I mean
peace. And by peace I mean truth. And by truth I
mean her. That, of course, is sentimental, but I, of
course, feel entitled.

It's Never Unconditional

Born: Tennessee, 1981.

Sister protects me. Brother protects himself. Mr. Popularity.

Everyone says I'm *different*, but I'm lonely by choice.

On the way home from school, I'm excited to see my imaginary friends—I talk to them until I'm 18 and worry I'm crazy.

Move away because that's the only way my narcissistic mother will leave my narcissistic father—she proves me right.

Fall in love with music and Jessica and Elaine and Jenny—there's no hiding it. Mama says Jesus already told her.

Five years later and Mama still can't say it.

The word is love, I say.

Love.

It's Not in the Clouds

In one sleepy, drunken swoop, Charley knocked the overflowing ashtray onto her white carpet. Her phone, which had been ringing off and on for over an hour, continued to ring somewhere in the disarray of smoky clothes, outdated magazines, and empty water bottles. By the time she realized that the ringing was not part of the beats and thumps left in her head after a night of club hopping, her latest bedmate had already slipped out, leaving Charley alone and disoriented, as she fell onto the floor in search of the still-ringing phone. Charley groped around in the dark until she felt the vibrations in a pile of dirty clothes.

"Hello? Do you realize what time it is?" Charley felt something gritty on her arm. She wiped it with her sweaty palm and discovered the ashes and cigarettes on the carpet. "Shit."

"Hey, sorry to bother you but ..."

"Wait. Who is this?" Charley attempted to scoop the ashy mess into a small waste basket with an old Kleenex but she only smeared it deeper into the carpet.

"This is your sister."

"Lizzie? Is something wrong?" Charley covered the remaining clumpy gray mess with a damp towel that she pulled from underneath her bed as she rolled onto her back, hoping that the room would stop spinning and dipping all around her.

"I don't know how to say this, really." Lizzie breathed heavily. "Mom had an accident, Charley. She's dead."

"What?" Charley sat up so fast her brain froze for a moment and the words "she's dead" flashed in yellow behind her hollow eyes.

"Mom's dead. She had a car wreck around midnight out near the old sawmill. She went right over the edge of the bluff." Lizzie spoke as if her words were made of thick air. "Her car

was lodged between two huge trees. They had to bring in a crane and bulldozer and everything. It was...oh god.”

Charley leaned against the bed. “How? I mean, what the hell happened to make her drive over a cliff? What was she even doing out so late?” She grabbed a shirt from a pile in the floor and covered her bare chest.

“She’s been sitting with Mrs. Turner until midnight a few days a week. They think maybe a deer ran out in the road and...well...the people that live in that old house around the bend heard the crash. The man climbed down the side of the cliff and pulled her out of the car himself, but...” Lizzie’s voice trailed off. She took a deep breath. “I got a call from John around 1:15 telling me to head to County General because there had been an accident. He was on duty so he identified her and...oh, god, Charley, she looked so...”

“No. Don’t.” Charley shook her head, trying to knock the flashing words from her memory.

“I’ve pretty much taken care of everything for now. Can you come home as soon as possible? We’re supposed to meet with the funeral director at noon tomorrow to arrange everything.” Lizzie’s breath was more steady and deep now. “I need you.”

“Ok.” It was hard for Charley to speak, think, breathe. She imagined her mother’s mangled body pulled from her demolished car—bruised and lifeless—her youthful face covered in blood and dirt. And her eyes, Charley’s eyes, empty. She blinked hard. “I’ll be home in the morning.”

The moment felt like hours. Charley pulled the shirt over her head and leaned forward to subside the knotting feeling in her stomach. She picked up the ashtray and placed it on her nightstand, catching a glimpse of herself in the mirror. She saw her mother’s eyes full of

disappointment and love. She threw the ashtray into the mirror. Glass cut through the air and hit the floor, the nightstand, and the bed.

“Shit!” Charley hurled herself onto the floor. Her neighbors stomped on the floor above her head. “Fuck you!” Charley banged her fist into the floor over-and-over.

Colton was one of those small towns that never changed. The high school football game was the most important event every Friday night and the possibility of getting a new Wal-Mart Super Center next May was the current hot topic. During the three-hour drive Charley thought about a lot of things. She thought about her mother. The woman who had sacrificed so much for her to go to college. The woman she had always wanted to make proud, but instead, she continually disappointed. Then, she thought of her sister, Lizzie, a 36-year-old homemaker, always involved in community projects, PTA, and the church choir. Charley wondered how someone could be so good.

She remembered how protective Lizzie was of her growing up. Lizzie would dress the two of them up in high heels and boas and film fashion shows in the backyard. Lizzie was 12 years older than Charley. She was like a second mother to Charley, which often made up for the absence of their father. Lizzie was her protector—her hero. It was Lizzie who taught Charley how to smoke. It was Lizzie who taught Charley how to apply eyeliner so she looked sexy and not slutty. And it was Lizzie who called Charley a selfish brat just last year when Charley told the family she had accepted a job in Rawlings and would remain there after college. Lizzie apologized later, but Charley knew that Lizzie felt alone and betrayed by her sister’s choice to leave Colton for good. Part of Charley wanted to move back home and watch her niece and nephew grow up—to be what her sister called “an active part of the family” and go to cookouts

and Thursday movie nights, but Charley knew, for her, that would never be possible. Not there. Not in that town.

As Charley entered the Colton city limits, she felt a glob in her stomach growing and turning. She pulled over just inside the county line, squatted beside her beat-up VW Bug and threw up. She wiped her mouth on her shirt-sleeve and lit a cigarette. The glob was still there—turning over and over deep inside her. Waiting.

A large man in his thirties, wearing a black suit and red tie with tiny gold bells on it greeted Charley at the funeral home.

“Hello, Miss. How may I assist you today?” His voice was soft and feminine.

“I’m Charley. Charlotte Stone, actually. I’m not sure what I’m supposed to be doing. Is Lizzie Anderson here?”

“Oh, yes. Charlotte. Come with me. Your sister is waiting for you.” He gently took Charley by the elbow to guide her down a wide hallway lined with flower arrangements set atop golden legged tables which complemented the burgundy and dark green carpet.

Charley thought it looked more like a hotel than a funeral home. Maybe that’s the point, she thought. Get them in and out like a Holiday Inn Express.

“I’m so sorry for your tremendous loss. Your mother was a treasured member of this community. She will be greatly missed.” The man opened the door to a large office where Lizzie turned and smiled hopelessly at her younger sister.

“Have a seat, Charlotte,” said the man in the black suit from behind a large mahogany desk. “How are you doing?”

“Fine, thanks.” She turned toward her sister. “I’m sorry, Sis. Traffic was horrible coming through Nashville.”

“It’s okay. I haven’t been here long.” Lizzie folded and unfolded and refolded a pleat on her skirt. Charley reached over and touched her hand. She held it for the duration of the meeting. She couldn’t let go.

After the meeting, Charley excused herself to throw up again, hoping this time the pulsating knot inside her would disappear, but it remained there—churning.

Outside, she found Lizzie sitting in her large SUV. Lizzie leaned across the passenger seat and threw the door open for her sister.

“Get in, kiddo.” Lizzie had pulled her hair back. Her puffy, sleepless eyes stared into the sky. “Shit. I can’t believe this is happening.”

“I can’t believe it either. Or that you just said shit, actually.” Charley smiled affectionately as she slid into the passenger seat.

“That certainly wasn’t the first time and I’m sure it won’t be the last considering the weekend we’re about to have. Jesus. You know Aunt Candice and Uncle Carl are coming up here tonight, right?”

“Where are they going to stay? They usually stay with Mom, right? Have you been there? To Mom’s, I mean.” Charley felt like a child waiting to be told things. Part of her hoped Lizzie would tell her everything was fine, and that their mother was okay. That it was all a misunderstanding. She waited and hoped for this—prayed for it.

“No, I haven’t. Not yet. But we have to pick out something for her to wear. They need it in the morning.” Lizzie’s head fell back into the headrest. “Can I have a drag off that cigarette?”

“Didn’t you quit a million years ago?” Charley passed the cigarette to her sister.

Lizzie inhaled slowly. She extended her head out the window and blew the smoke toward the sky. “Yeah but I think I’m entitled today, don’t you?” Lizzie took another drag and leaned even further out the window to release the smoke. “I don’t want John or the kids to smell it.” She handed the cigarette back to Charley. “Got any gum?”

Charley shook her head and watched her sister search the console, her purse, the glove compartment, even underneath the seats. Lizzie sprayed something that smelled like the beach into the air around her, even on her blouse. She squinted at Charley.

“What did you do to your hair?” She reached over and scattered shreds of hair around Charley’s head. “What’s with the red and purple tips? I thought you’d grow out of this rock and roll phase by now, little sis.” Lizzie took the cigarette back from Charley and took another deep drag.

“I don’t usually get any complaints.” Charley focused on the white lines dividing the parking lot into spaces and designated areas. “Lizzie.” Charley felt the knot in her stomach throb with every heartbeat. “Are we going to be okay?”

“As your big sister, I’m supposed to say ‘yes, of course we will be fine. We will get through this. We will move on and she will live on in our hearts forever’ but...what does any of that even matter right now?” Lizzie looked into her sister’s wounded brown eyes. She reached out and touched Charley’s face with her fingertips. “I love you. I miss talking to you. I’m sorry it took Mom dying for us to have a genuine conversation.” Lizzie took a final drag from the cigarette and passed it to Charley. “I gotta go pick up my kids. Come by for dinner around 5:00. Okay?”

“Okay.” Charley stepped into the cold and stared at the ground. She watched Lizzie drive away. She leaned against her paint-chipped car and looked into the clouds. Nothing.

“Get in the car, Bryce.” Lizzie motioned for her youngest child to hurry. “Why is your brother so slow today?” Her teenaged daughter was oblivious.

“What?” Caroline briefly removed one of her head phones, looking annoyed and preoccupied. “Where’s Gran? It’s Wednesday. She always picks us up on Wednesday?”

“Help your brother, will you?” Lizzie sighed. Her mother picked the children up from school at least three times a week. There would be no one to help her now. She would have no time for herself. The thought of this was almost worse than the actual death of her mother.

“Mommy. I got an A on my math today! Look!” The ten-year-old held up a worksheet and smiled.

“That’s great honey. That’s great.” Lizzie felt the tears. She didn’t know how much longer she could hold it together. It was so late when the accident happened that she hadn’t told the children about their grandmother yet.

“What’s wrong, Mommy?” Bryce asked.

“Nothing, baby,” she assured him. “Mommy’s just got a lot on her mind right now. When Daddy gets home from work we all have to sit down and have an important talk. Okay? Did you hear that Caroline?” Caroline was listening to her IPOD and frantically clicking away on her cell phone.

Lizzie reached over and slapped her daughter’s hand, knocking the phone into the floor board.

“Jesus, mom. What the f?” Caroline unfastened her seat belt to reach for the phone.

“What the f? What the f? What exactly does that mean, Caroline? What the f? What the *fuck*, maybe? Is that it?”

“Mommy, you said the f-word. That’s a very bad word,” Bryce said in a tiny voice.

“Why are you spazzing?” Caroline sighed dramatically.

“Excuse me?” Lizzie grabbed Caroline’s arm.

“Mommy, watch out!” Bryce yelled from the back seat.

Lizzie swerved back into her own lane, barely missing the large truck. She pulled over and cupped her face in her hands.

“Mom?” Caroline cut her eyes toward her little brother, who shrugged in the backseat.

“I can’t. I can’t do this.” Lizzie could feel the tears explode behind her eyes.

“What’s wrong with Mommy?” Bryce asked from the back seat. He began to cry, too.

“Mom, you’re freaking Bryce out. What do you want me to do? Do I need to call Daddy?” Caroline reached over and placed her hand on her mother’s shoulder.

“Caroline, Bryce. I need you both to be strong, okay?”

“Why, what happened?” Caroline looked at her brother and motioned for him to stop crying.

“I don’t know how to say this in a way that doesn’t sound horrible because it is horrible. Your grandmother had a car accident last night and she didn’t make it. Gran passed away.”

Lizzie looked at Caroline and then Bryce. “Do you understand, Bry?”

“Where did it happen?” Caroline’s face was flushed.

“It happened just outside of town. It was quick. She just...”

“That’s enough,” Caroline said quietly, almost a whisper. “I don’t want to hear anymore.”

Lizzie let her head fall back onto the head rest. “I was supposed to wait for your father. It’s just...I don’t know.” Lizzie started the car and drove her family home in silence.

Charley pulled up next to the curb outside her mother’s house. She had a key. She could go inside, but instead she stared at the porch swing and pictured her mother gently rocking, singing, smiling. She saw her mother extend her hand and for a moment, Charley extended her own hand as if to touch her mother’s. She pulled her hand back and looked at it, expecting to see something—evidence that her mother had just been there—that she still existed. Charley blinked hard. Her phone rang.

“Hey.” The voice on the other end was deep and soothing.

“Hey.”

“Want to meet me for a drink?”

“Sure.”

Charley ordered another shot of tequila. She smoked and stared into nothing. She waited for the alcohol to take control of her mind but nothing happened. She wondered if grief cancelled out intoxication.

“I’ll take another shot and a beer. Miller if you’ve got it.”

“Are you sure about that, darling? Don’t you have to drive home?” The bartender, a tall, bald man with a skull tattooed on the back of his head, wiped a glass clean and hung it on a hook above the bar.

“I don’t have a home. My mother died and I don’t fucking live here and I want another drink.” Charley was drunk. She hadn’t realized it until now.

“Are you one of the Stone girls?” The bartender poured Charley a shot and slid it toward her.

“Yeah. Charley.” She threw her head back and downed the shot.

“I’m sorry about your mom. She was a nice woman. A beautiful woman.” He wiped his hand on his jeans and extended it towards Charley. “My name’s James Grubb. I used to play in a band with your dad a long time ago. I knew your parents when they were younger. When we were all younger.”

Charley shook his hand. “You knew my dad?” Charley hadn’t thought about her father in a long time. He had left them when she was 10. For some reason, she had convinced herself that he was dead or else he would have contacted her by now.

“Oh yeah. Me and old Rick used to jam every weekend. The Other Ones. That’s what we called ourselves. We thought we were bad ass.” He began wiping another glass clean.

“Well, I suppose we weren’t half bad, but mostly we just got trashed and partied a lot. Whew, kid, I’m old.” He let out a raspy chuckle. “Anyway, your mother came out on the weekends to watch the band. She was something else. She really was something else.” He stopped and looked down. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to upset you, kid. Maybe you should try and sober up now. Ain’t there somebody you can call to come get you?”

“I got her Grubby.” The voice sounded familiar.

Charley lifted her head from the bar and turned to find Andrew standing behind her. Growing up, they were inseparable. Since Charley moved away to attend college, she lost most of her connections with the people she knew in Colton. Andrew was one of them. They had been best friends since fourth grade and she couldn’t believe that she hadn’t talked to him in nearly three years.

“I got you, babe.” Andrew stood in front of Charley. He wore a black bandanna tied around his head and his dark chin-length curls poked out wildly. Charley fell forward into Andrew’s arms. He walked her to a booth and sat across from her.

“I’m so sorry. I know that doesn’t matter. Nothing anybody says makes a difference.”

Charley pulled a cigarette from her nearly empty pack and Andrew reached across the table to light it.

“Ms. Maggie was incredible. It’s hard to imagine. I’d ask you how you are but...”

“I’ll be fine.” Charley wiped her face with a napkin. “I just wish I could forget for just a little while, you know?”

“Yeah, I know.” Andrew sipped his beer and stared out the window. Charley remembered how his father passed away when they were in high school, and how they’d sat on top of the roof above his back porch to get high the night before the funeral.

Charley and Andrew didn’t speak for a long time. They just sat together in the bar.

“I got some weed outside,” he said, finally.

They sat in Andrew’s van outside Grubby’s and smoked for an hour. They didn’t say much to each other. It was enough that he was there.

“Shit. What time is it?” It was 5:23. She was late for dinner. “I was supposed to be at Lizzie’s at 5:00.”

“I don’t think you should drive. You’re pretty messed up, babe.” Andrew narrowed his eyes at Charley.

“I’m not going. I’ll just tell her I’m having dinner at your house.” Charley started to dial her sister’s number.

“Just tell her you ran into someone from high school and you’re going to hang out with them. Your sister never liked me.”

Lizzie brushed her teeth vigorously and touched up her lip gloss.

“I’m going out for my run,” she called to her husband, John, who was working in his office. “Be back in a while.” On her way out the door, she grabbed her cell phone. She dialed as she jogged in place in the driveway.

“Hey, can we meet?” Lizzie tried not to sound desperate.

“I’m kind of with someone.”

“Are you kidding me? Another woman?” Lizzie tried not to raise her voice. She continued to jog in place.

“I, uh...”

“I don’t care who it is. Get rid of her and meet me. I only have a small window of time here.” Lizzie looked around her neighborhood suspiciously as she crossed the street.

“Okay. I’ll see you in 10 minutes.”

“Hurry. I need you.” Lizzie closed her phone and shoved it into her pocket as she rounded the corner. She stopped running and cut through a backyard. By the time she reached the playground on the other side of town, he was already there.

In the moonlight, he looked even younger, but not innocent. Never innocent. Lizzie watched him push dirt and gravel around with his feet underneath the swing. She remembered how it all began. How they ran into each other while jogging one night and then again the next night. How she had hated him all those years ago. Always hanging around her sister. Her sister who clearly wasn’t interested. Lizzie always thought he was so pathetic. But not anymore.

She had justified the affair at first. Telling herself that her husband wasn't really there for her and that she just needed someone to talk to—someone to make her feel wanted. Andrew made her feel all those things with just a look. He was only 24 years old but he was more mature than any other man Lizzie had known and he was certainly more emotionally available than John. No wonder Charley liked Andrew so much. Loved him, even, Lizzie supposed. But Charley loved him like a brother. Lizzie was beginning to love him like a man. The fact that she was beginning to love him at all was a potential problem. This wasn't supposed to be about love.

She cleared her throat. He stood, fully visible in the light next to the merry-go-round on the playground where her son had probably played tag earlier today. Andrew waited for Lizzie to come to him and when she did, he pulled her close and held her tightly against his chest.

“Don’t.” Lizzie looked around. “Someone might see us.” She led him to the fence, down the alley behind the drug store, and through two backyards to an abandoned warehouse on 3rd street. Their place.

“We don’t have to do anything, Liz. I can just hold you.” But she pushed him to the ground and kissed him hard through the tears.

“We have to tell Charley,” Andrew blurted out. “That’s who I was with when you called.”

“Where is she now?” Lizzie looked around. She half expected Charley to step from a dark corner.

“She passed out at my place. We got pretty high earlier. That’s why she canceled dinner. Anyway, she’s going to sleep over. That’s okay, right?” Andrew brushed the bangs from Lizzie’s eyes.

“Of course. You’ve always taken care of her. You must really love her.” Lizzie sat up and held her knees against her chest. “Is that why you’re doing this? Because you can’t have her?”

“No, babe.” Andrew remembered calling Charley babe just hours earlier. And, yes, he did love Charley. He always had. But he realized when they were much younger that she could never love him in return and he accepted her friendship whole-heartedly. He had never even confessed his love to Charley in all the years they were friends. All he wanted was Charley’s happiness. Now, he found himself wanting Lizzie’s happiness, too. Lizzie was more than a consolation prize. He wasn’t sure where his feelings for Charley stopped and where his new feelings for Lizzie began. He wasn’t sure but he wanted to find out.

Andrew took Lizzie’s hand. “I love you, Liz. I do love you.”

“Oh, god. I’m sorry. You are so wonderful to me. I don’t care if you’re only doing this because my sister would never fuck you. It doesn’t really matter. I just don’t want it to be because you feel sorry for me because I’m old and married and lonely...”

“No. You’re perfect.” Andrew held Lizzie’s face in his hands. “This is about you and me.” He wanted to believe this. It was mostly true.

Charley woke up in a strange bed. She stood up and her brain felt like it was dancing inside her skull.

Andrew knocked lightly and entered the room. “You okay? Mom made breakfast if you want some?”

“Where am I?”

“The basement of my parent’s house. I converted it into an apartment a few years ago.”

"I don't think I can eat anything right now." Charley searched for her cigarettes in her jacket pocket.

"You're out. I got some in the other room." Andrew pushed the door open and Charley followed him into a living area.

"The apartment is nice, Andy." Charley lit her morning cigarette and poured some coffee into a chipped mug. "Where did you sleep last night?"

"I had to go somewhere. I was hoping you wouldn't wake-up and freak out about where you were."

Charley watched Andrew fumble with his lighter. "Are you okay? You seem weird." She waited for Andrew to answer but he was preoccupied. "Hey, I was looking at our old yearbook the other day." She coughed up smoke as she laughed. "There's this big picture of us at prom in it. Remember that? Prom. I forgot about fucking prom. Remember how we made out afterwards and the next day you were all scared I wouldn't want to hang out anymore. Wow, it's weird to think you're the only guy I ever kissed." Charley waited for Andrew to say something but she could feel his distance and his eyes were screaming something at hers, only she didn't know what.

"I'm having an affair with a married woman." Andrew lowered his eyes.

"What?" Charley sat her coffee next to her on the table and scooted to the edge of her chair. "Who is it? Do I know her? Is that where you went last night? This is so cool."

"It's Lizzie." Andrew exhaled. He ran his hands through his long black curls and dropped his head onto the table.

"Lizzie Thomas? She's fat. You could do better, dude." Charley laughed.

"Lizzie, your sister. I think I love her, Charley. I know I do."

“Oh.” She didn’t know what to say. The glob in her stomach seemed to wake up, suddenly growing again. She stared at the table for a moment before she grabbed her keys and left Andrew sitting there.

Lizzie sat in a red wooden lounge chair next to the pool in her mother’s backyard. She stared into the water and thought about the possibility that her life, as she knew it, would soon be over. It was getting too difficult to live this way with all the lies, sneaking around. Too much pressure to be one way part of the time and another way the rest of the time. She didn’t know if she really loved Andrew, but it wasn’t about love or Andrew. It was about freedom. She could love him, she supposed. She wondered if it mattered.

Charley watched her sister from the other side of the fence. She could see Lizzie crying and part of her wanted to run to her and tell her everything would be okay, but the other part wanted to throw her into the pool. Charley waited a few minutes and then finally said, “When were you going to tell me about you and Andrew?”

“I don’t know if I was.” Lizzie said without turning around. She pulled a blanket closer to her face and wiped her eyes with a corner.

“At least you’re honest about *that*.” Charley unlatched the gate and stepped into the backyard.

“Please, Charley, don’t do this. I can’t deal with your disapproval right now.”

“Fine. I’ll go.” Charley turned to leave.

“No,” Lizzie called out to her sister. “Wait.” She thought for a moment. “I need to ask you something.”

Charley stopped just inside the gate but she didn't turn to face her sister. She waited for the question she knew was coming. The question no one had ever asked her.

"Why do you care? You don't want him. You could have had him years ago but you never even entertained the idea of being with Andrew. Why?" Lizzie waited.

"Of course I entertained the idea, Lizzie, but that's all it was. Entertainment. As for why. Do I have to say it?" Charley felt the glob in her stomach begin to liquefy and swirl around.

"Have you ever said it? Out loud, I mean. Maybe you need to say it."

Charley turned to face her sister who was standing a few feet in front of her on the dewy grass. She looked around the backyard. She saw the old tire swing and the ramp she built for her bicycle. "Remember when you used to dress me up in costumes and we'd put on those shows back here?" Charley thought of all the history that she left behind when she left Colton. In a way, she had left part of herself here. The part that never really was her anyway.

"I remember. You were beautiful. You still are." Lizzie moved closer to her sister.

"Did I scar you for life or something when I did that? Is this my fault?"

"It's no one's fault, Liz. It's just the way it is." The liquid blob felt like acid or fire deep inside Charley's stomach, but when she looked into her sister's eyes, it began to shrink. To melt.

"Why didn't you tell me? You know I would have loved you anyway? Instead you kept this dark secret all these years. Mom was so worried about you." Lizzie touched Charley's face.

"All we ever wanted was for you to be happy. You always seemed so miserable, Charley.

That's all Andrew wanted, too. Maybe that's why we started this whole thing. We loved you more than anyone else in the world, but you shut us out." Lizzie stared into Charley's hollow eyes. She saw their mother somewhere inside those eyes.

“I’m sorry. I can’t explain how I’ve felt my whole life. And I know I did it to myself. I don’t want to shut people out but after doing it for so long...it’s hard, sis.” Charley looked away. “Does that make sense?”

Lizzie nodded. She took Charley’s hand and held it against her chest. Charley began to cry and as the hot tears burned her skin, the glob in her stomach melted more and more. It poured out of her. Out of her mother’s eyes onto her sister’s fingertips. It poured and poured and poured until there was none of it left inside her. And Charley felt light and whole. Finally, she did.

Straight and Narrow is a Difficult Path to Swim

Underwater hold my breath
count

to

seventeen

open-close

tap-tap-toe-bounce

muffled Polo-talk, keep one

eye open and feel

for the water-dance

Not cheating! Just *checking*

Just making sure

you're still there—haven't

forgotten about me

down

at

the

bottom

keeping track of your kicks,

squinting at your thighs through the cloudless

blue-white dizzy-does-it,

reaching for your hips,

breaking the rules

underwater.

Thursday: Featuring Porcelain Jesus

When I walk into the den, he's holding a shot gun in one hand and a half-empty bottle of Vodka in the other—the red label, worn and cracked and peeling around the edges. His cigarette slowly burns a hole in the grey carpet at his feet. Smoke rises, waves, and disappears in the darkness. My mother is standing in front of the television, arms folded, completely calm, feigning interest. She turns to me and rolls her eyes.

“What’s going on? What’s with the gun, Daddy?” I ease in slowly.

“Well, I’ve decided...I’m going to fucking kill myself, Jo.” He hangs his head dramatically.

“Oh,” I say softly, “do you realize the carpet’s on fire?” I sit on the edge of the sofa and watch my mother for non-verbal cues.

These drunken episodes occur at least once a week. I’m never surprised but I’m always terrified. I feel numb, mostly. Numb and disillusioned.

“Fuck you, smart-ass.” He points toward me with his near-empty bottle. “You want me to die! You’re just like your mother.” He doesn’t really mean it. I bend down to pick up a porcelain figurine of Jesus Christ that, evidently, fell off a shelf before I arrived. One of His hands is missing.

“Don’t speak to her that way. It’s rude and uncalled for.” My mother is out of patience with my father. She has been for years. His drunken antics, which once incited feelings of concern and tenderness, now fuel her bitterness and apathy towards him.

Daddy pretends to cry. Well, he cries, but it is not sincere. He’s great at masking guilt and rage with insincerity. “Just pull the trigger. Put me out of my misery. I don’t want to be

here with you fucking people anymore.” He takes a large gulp from the bottle and spits it into the air. “That’s how I feel. Like spit. Like nothing. That’s how you people make me feel.”

“Why are you so dramatic, Daddy? Damn.” I wrinkle my nose at him and look around the room for Jesus’ hand.

“Watch your mouth, Joanna Lee.” Mama takes the figurine from me and finds the missing hand on the floor in front of the sofa. She holds it in front of Daddy’s face. “Look what you did, stupid! You broke it. He sees all of this, you know? He knows how you are.”

“That’s mine. Give it to me.” Daddy sits forward in his blue recliner.

“No. I’m going to fix him and put him away.” Mama hides the statue of Jesus behind her back, and I want to laugh for a moment until Daddy jumps up and fires the shotgun through the screen door and into the steep hillside behind our house.

“Give me my goddamn statue!” He drops the bottle and the gun and lunges for Mama, who will not let go of it.

“Just let me have it. I’ll go fix it.” I begin to pull on the figurine. The three of us struggle. We are contorted on the floor of the den. Daddy is cursing at both me and my mother.

“Fuck you bitches. Give me the damn Jesus.”

“Daddy, you can’t say ‘fuck’ and ‘Jesus’ in the same sentence,” I say, still tugging on the figurine.

“Watch your mouth, Joanna Lee.” My mother uses one hand to swat in my direction.

Suddenly, I muster all my strength to jerk it from their hands. I fall backwards into the hallway. My parents stare at me as if I just got hit by a bus. I realize my hand is bleeding as a result of cutting myself on Jesus’ porcelain nub.

“Oh, darlin’ I didn’t mean it.” Daddy seems most concerned and simulates sobriety, as he leans down to help me up.

“Leave her alone. I’ll take care of it. It’s all your fault anyway.” Mama tries to help pull me to my feet, but I push her away. I know she only wants to use me; use my injury against him.

“I don’t need your help.” I back down the hallway towards the kitchen. “You two are ridiculous. You act like nine-year-olds. Shooting guns. Spitting. Fighting over a statue!”

As I bandage my hand in the kitchen, I listen to my parents bicker over who is at fault for the incident. Once my wound is dressed, I wash the blood off Jesus, dry him off, and place him and his detached hand on the kitchen table. I sit and wait for sounds. Wait. Wait. Sometimes they call for me. Sometimes I feel like I help. Sometimes I feel like I have a purpose. But mostly, I don’t feel anything at all.

Sunday or Voluntary Blindness

Keep my eyes closed—shut-up tighter
 than Sister Dorothy's lips, glued together
 with Chapstick and memories on Sundays,
 sitting in the second pew on the second row,
 a maze of stories and once-upon-a-times
 twisted in her coarse, black-gray curls—
 wire-stories of getting married, getting
 the Spirit, getting old. You try to get in—
the same way he's trying to get out— she
 might say if she ever did say anything.

You could pry my eyelids apart, climb into
 one of my pupils, plant the images of everything
 I missed when I pretended to listen in Sunday
 school. Hang them up like portraits all
 around the inside of my eyes. Decorate
 my corneas with Biblical illustrations
 about Cain and Abel or Samson and Delilah.
 Untangle my astigmatic recollections, the false
 ones, deceptions. Or sit there that way you
 do, shaking your wrinkled head at something you
 never bothered to understand to begin with.
 Rock back and forth in my brain, arms around
 your knees, whispering to my inside eyes
 all the things I tried not to hear with them
 closed all these years. Push your agenda
 on me the way you pushed it into my mother,
 my niece, even old Sister Dorothy. All the while
 I pray that you'll get tired—move on—climb back into
 the real world I have imagined for us. Don't forget
 to pick the iris on your way out. Take it to
 Sister Dorothy. It's nothing like a flower.

Underneath

When I was a little girl, I loved to play in the dirt. I enjoyed making tunnels for my action figures and roads for my tiny metal cars. But I especially liked to bury things. I spent hours making small treasure chests out of my sister's old shoe boxes. I colored the boxes with Magic Markers, glued decorative paper, glitter, magazine pictures, and rocks to the lid and sides of the box, and filled it with things I considered valuable. I wrote little poems and letters to hide in my box. Tossed in jewelry made of fake gemstones glued to hard plastic. When I felt like the treasure was truly valuable, I buried the box in some nook or cranny near my house. I even made a color-coded treasure map marking the spot with a big, red X. I also marked the area near the treasure with a distinguishable rock or piece of wood in case my map proved to be less than accurate—which it often did. I have estimated that at least three plastic rings, one G.I. Joe, and several figurines of The Simpsons are still buried somewhere on those eleven acres.

As an adult, I realize that my love for burying things extended beyond toys and playthings. Approximately twelve dogs, three frogs, two snakes, and a very unfortunate lizard also call my childhood yard their home. (Rest assured none was buried alive.) I simply felt it was important to give a proper funeral to my family's pets. More than that, I liked to bury things. Sometimes, I waited for things to die so I could bury them. If I knew one of our dogs was sick, I would patiently wait for it to pass on so we could bury it in the yard. Once, I crushed an animal so I could have a funeral for it and make a grave. The lizard.

I was playing in my tree house with my friend Kristin. I suppose we were ten or eleven, and I noticed something moving on the top of the ladder under the trap door. It was a lizard. We examined it. "Lizards are poisonous," I told her, "we should kill it." And without a second thought I slammed the door on the lizard. Kristin screamed. "Don't do that. It won't bother us."

But I didn't care. I slammed the door over and over and over as the lizard twitched. Kristin cried but I just stared at the lizard. I had never killed anything before, and something about it made me uneasy.

I immediately went into the house to find a shoe box for the burial. Kristin and I decorated the box with stickers, aluminum foil, and flowers. We carefully placed the lizard into the box and began our search for the proper resting place. I decided to make a grave next to a large rock near the front of the house so I wouldn't forget the location. After we dug the hole and placed the box inside, we said prayers on the lizard's behalf. That was my favorite part. The funeral. I wanted to get dressed up and read from the Bible, but Kristin said I was being weird. We didn't talk about what happened with the lizard again.

Over the years, I have buried a lot of things—pets, treasures, memories, emotions. Now, when I want to avoid an issue or block a memory that's trying to resurface, I visualize myself opening a homemade treasure box, placing the incident inside, and dropping the box into a hole in my backyard. And in that box, that hole, it remains for as long as I can keep it there. I don't make maps for these treasures. I just settle on a good resting place for the memory, maybe near a rock or tree in the yard, and put it to rest right there. I have estimated that hundreds of memories, emotions, and feelings have been buried on that hillside in Middle Tennessee. They sleep with the dogs and frogs and that poor lizard. They keep each other company. The frogs and puppies dance in and out of memories of broken glass, bruised arms, a screaming child, the smell of Vodka and cigarettes and regret. And the lizard is the King of the Hill. He's the only thing I ever buried without any emotional attachment. The only one that didn't mean anything to me. I killed him that day to save him. And to save myself.

Shift

-For Kory

Bare trees pattern themselves black against the pale,
blue sky. Mark our path through Southern Tennessee.
You drive as if you know exactly where you're going.
I worry we will run out of things to say. *Aren't you
the one who has a thing about hometowns?* You want
to show me, to justify your strong will and opposition to
mediocrity. I think I understand you: restless, guarded.
Longing, mostly. At the park, I walk to the river and
you swing. Push yourself through the cold wind into
something new. What you've always done. Your
golden curls dance with air and kiss the past with each
bounce, wave. The space between us screams: build!
Build! BUILD! You say *I spidered a girl on this swing,
once.* And I remember church camp, twelve years old.
My dress hiked up around my hips, body facing some
older boy, swinging, my legs wrapped around him, panties
bumping against him with every push, kick. The counselors
scolded us and made us repent. When I convinced Melissa
to spider me, something changed, shifted as I pushed harder
and harder. She giggled in my ear, hid her face against my
chest. I look at you, now, and without saying a word, I
commit myself to your memory. Long after you forget my eyes,
my voice, you will remember the day you brought me to your
park and forced me to admit there was nothing I could have done.
You could have been her. And I would have forgotten you.

Love over Breakfast

You and me feel too much,
I say as you pour the milk
and trip yourself up on sighs
and eye-rolls, all the while
not listening, not listening,
not listening.

Leaving is a Concrete Block

The step was a concrete block—the kind used for constructing and building things like the foundation of a house. My father spent a year building this house and hadn't bothered to make actual steps leading up to the basement door. Just a single, concrete block. It was an awkward step. Not the right size or distance from either the porch or the patio. But that's how *everything* was there. Not quite right. And things always stood for something else. Concrete blocks stood for stairs, couches stood for beds, church for faith, and silence for happiness. You had to take these substitutes as the real thing and forget about options or maybes or the hypocrisy of it all. When you started to figure it all out—that they were all just lying their way through life—that everyone is, really—you became something else. Something more permanent.

I had one of those feelings all day—an aching in my stomach that mimicked nausea. A feeling that something bad was going to happen. People always say things like: "I just had this feeling." or "I felt it right in the pit of my stomach." I wonder what makes that feeling happen to us.

That night I was so bored at work I sat in the salon and alternated reading a celebrity gossip magazine and imagining death for the people I love. That doesn't make sense, I guess, unless you know that I am a morbid person who sits around and imagines what it would be like if various loved ones died in reasonably realistic scenarios. I've always done this. Especially when I'm waiting or traveling or just bored. By 8:00, I had mentally picked-off just about everyone who ever meant anything to me. Car crashes, suicides, murders, combination kidnapping/murder, heart attacks. I had practically worked myself into a teary-eyed frenzy when I got a call from my sister telling me that our father had been in a bad accident and I needed to

come home immediately. He had a four-wheeler wreck and had been rushed to the ER. His body was mangled. His face was crushed. He was probably blind.

Daddy dragged my mother from the passenger seat of the truck. She fell onto her knees into the gravel and dirt. She was crying. He screamed profanities. He was crying too. He grabbed her by the hair and slapped her hard across the face. Her head hit the side of the truck and she didn't try to get up—she stayed there on the ground. Eric and Les rushed from the garage and stopped beside the patio. Daddy grabbed Mama's arm and pulled her through the gravel, away from my brother and sister.

"Why the fuck did you do this to me?" He shook his head as he shook her shoulders.

"Daddy, stop it." Eric ran toward them.

My father turned to face him. "I'll kill you, you little shit. Stay out of it."

My sister slid onto the ground next to my mother. She held my mother's shoulders and wiped her face with her nightgown. "Mama, what happened?"

My mother never said a word. She just stared at the ground. She wouldn't look at my sister or brother or father. Even when Daddy grabbed her by the chin and jerked her face in his direction, she stared at him blankly. She wasn't there. She never was.

From the top of the driveway, I could see them all clearly. My whole family. My brother stood next to a tree, hands on hips, looking toward the sky, maybe praying. My father looked down at my mother. He held a large rock with both hands in the air above her head. He lifted it and brought it down hard, but he stopped just before he hit her. He fell to his knees in front of her and held his face in his hands. She just stared at the ground.

"What am I supposed to do? I want to fucking kill you." Daddy cried.

Then, I must have made some kind of sound. Or, maybe, my sister just felt my presence. She looked up at me from the bottom of the hill. She struggled for breath. My brother looked stunned. Daddy sat on the ground, facing the other direction.

Mama watched my sister rush toward me and push my face into her neck as she ran toward the house with me in her arms. She just sat there and watched my sister carry me away from something we could never leave behind.

This is my first memory. I was four years old.

My parents were married for 36 years before my mother left my father. She moved out one weekend when he was out of town. He came back Sunday night, as usual, and the house was deserted. She didn't take everything. In fact, she hardly took anything. She had already bought another house in town and furnished it months earlier. Part of me thought it was shitty of her to leave without saying anything. To leave him with nothing but a house and a restraining order. But mostly I was happy she left. Finally. They didn't speak until two years after the divorce. Their divorce was one of those things that nobody saw coming, not because it seemed like everything was going so great in their marriage—for it was known that my parents had a horrible relationship—but because my mother had stayed so long that leaving him seemed pointless. Too little, too late. But, I guess, it's never too late to start over. It's been over five years since she left and I'm still waiting for either one of them to do something to make up for their wasted lives.

My mother was standing outside the emergency room with my nieces and nephew when I arrived. My youngest niece, Danielle, ran and wrapped her arms around me. My mother struggled to find words.

“Oh, honey, don’t look so upset. He’s going to be okay. Les and Gracie are with him now. They’ll let you see him.”

“Did *you* see him?” I searched her face for an indication of how bad it really was.

She took a deep breath. “He looks awful. But when you go in there, don’t let him see you all upset. He doesn’t realize how bad his face is messed up.”

She found a nurse to show me to the cubicle where my sister and oldest niece were waiting with my father. When my sister saw me, she told me to act normal and not to say anything about his face. She had thrown up when she saw him. My niece, Gracie, looked into my eyes and immediately started to cry. I braced myself.

My father was shirtless, stretched out on the bed. Bruises, bloody scratches, and cuts marked his aging body. The flesh around his eyes was cut open, and although his eyes were swollen shut, blood poured from them. His eye sockets were crushed. His face was caved in on one side. A deep gash split his eyebrows. His nose was broken. I almost didn’t recognize him.

I took his hand. “Daddy, how are you feeling?”

He recognized my voice. “Hey, Jo.” He squeezed my hand. “Well, I feel like absolute shit, to be honest.” When he laughed, a tiny cut on his cheek broke open and more blood trickled out onto the white sheet.

I didn’t know what to say. I was completely dazed. I looked at my sister. She started to cry. I didn’t want him to see me cry but I couldn’t help it.

“Your mother’s here. I can’t believe she came.” He wiped the blood from his eyes with a towel. “Do I look like a freak, kid? I don’t want to look like a freak.” His voice was almost childlike. “I don’t want your mother to see me like this.”

"You look fine, Daddy. Just a little swollen, that's all." I looked away. I've never been a good liar.

The doctor came in and told us that he would have to go home for the night. They wouldn't admit him because he wasn't dying and even though he was in a tremendous amount of pain, he didn't have insurance, so he couldn't stay in the hospital. The doctor said he would probably need surgery. Possibly facial reconstruction. He was very uncertain about the extent of my father's loss of vision.

We were told that someone would have to stay with him overnight because of his severe concussion. I volunteered. At the time, I didn't realize that it would mean staying at the house where I grew up. A house I hadn't slept in for over five years. The house I had left behind on that wooded hillside when I moved away and vowed to never look back.

When I was in high school, my mother went on strike. She stopped cooking and carrying my father's meals to him on a tray. She stopped cleaning. She stopped doing my father's laundry. I was very supportive of the strike at first. I was always disgusted that she catered to a man who treated her like shit every day for decades. Eventually, she and my father stopped sleeping in the same bed. She slept on the couch in the living room and he slept on the couch in the den. Again, I was excited because they let me have the master bedroom. Then, she started working later and later. It never occurred to me that she was having an affair—that she had always been having an affair with someone my entire life. Even now, she has no idea that I know. At the time, I would never have believed that my mother—a self-proclaimed woman of God, who never misses church, listens to Southern gospel music, and has never so much as

smoked a cigarette—was cheating on my father. I honestly thought she was perfect—everything I aspired to be but knew, deep down, I could never become.

While she was working late at the office, my father spent hour after drunken hour calling her a slut and a whore, trying to convince me that she was a horrible person. I would get so angry with him. Now, I think I got so mad because deep down, I knew he was right. Not that my mom was a slut, but that she wasn't perfect. It was hard to admit that *he* wasn't the sole reason our family fell apart when I had been trained to think he was for so long.

One afternoon, my father had gotten drunk particularly early. It was only five or six o'clock and he was completely smashed. I had learned at an early age to stay out of his way. Not just when he was drunk, but all the time. We never talked. We lived in the same house but we were invisible to each other. He was a ghost and I never existed. When I got home from school every day, I would immediately go upstairs to my bedroom, close and lock the door, and wait for my mother to get home.

On this afternoon, I went downstairs to the kitchen to get a snack and I thought it seemed pretty peaceful, so I decided to do my homework at the kitchen table. After a few minutes, I heard my father slam the basement door. I walked to the window, where I saw him down below, on the patio, Vodka bottle in hand, petting the dogs. He fell off the chair onto the concrete. I knew he was wasted. I tried to hurry and finish my homework so I could walk to my sister's house and wait for my mom there.

An hour or so later, I heard my father call my mother's name. "Deb. DEB!" I listened at the door that leads to the basement. He was having a conversation with an imaginary version of my mom. Most of it was drunken gibberish, but I could clearly make out that he was talking to my mother, or, at least he thought he was.

“Are you okay?” I called down the stairs.

“Shut up. Fuck you.”

“Daddy, it’s me, Joey, who are you talking to?”

“I’m talking to you, Deb. You piece of shit slut.”

“I’m not Mom, dumbass. She’s at work. Quit talking to yourself, you sound nuts.” I slammed the door and returned to my studies. I heard him charge up the steps and my heart stopped for a moment. *Why did you say anything to him? Now you’re going to get it.* Then, I heard a loud crashing sound, a terrible slam, and my father’s sounds of distress. *Shit, I thought, what now?*

When I opened the door and started downstairs to the basement, I saw blood on the wall at the bottom of the steps. Then, I saw my father lying on the cold, cement floor, blood pouring from his head. A bookshelf and some boxes were on top of him.

I jumped over the mess and knelt beside him. “Are you okay? Did you fall down the steps?”

“I’m sorry, Deb. DEB! I don’t know why you’re doing this.” He was still talking to Imaginary Mom.

“Daddy, it’s me, Joey. Do I need to call 911?” All the blood was causing me to freak out. I managed to get the bookshelf and other boxes off him. “Should I help you up or do you think that’s a bad idea? I saw on TV that you’re not supposed to move people if you think they hurt their neck. Is your neck hurt?” I was talking fast and fighting tears.

He seemed to suddenly realize what was going on. He told me to call my mother. He said he just needed *her*, that’s all. So, I called her.

“I don’t know if I can leave work. I’m really busy.”

“Mama, I think he might have a concussion. His arm looks broken, too. He’s hammered and he’s been having an imaginary conversation with you for an hour.” I concentrated on breathing. My mother said she’d be home in a half hour.

“Is Deb coming? I need her.”

“Yeah, she’s coming.” I still wasn’t sure if he knew who I was. I held my knees against my chest and leaned against the wall.

“Can you do me a favor?”

“Sure.” I rolled my eyes. I wanted to feel compassion for this bleeding man in front of me.

“Go out there on the patio and get my drink and then light me a cigarette.”

“I don’t know how to light a cigarette. I’m not so sure you need to smoke right now, anyway. And I know you don’t need anything else to drink.”

“Damn it. Just put it in your mouth, hold the lighter up to it, and breathe in, kid.”

It took me five minutes to light it I was shaking so badly. He dozed off and I hoped he would die. I hoped that one of us would.

The first thing I noticed when we got to my dad’s house was the nice set of rock steps leading up to the basement. *I’ll be damned*, I thought. *He finally made steps.*

Inside, my sister and I helped him into bed. Since my mother moved out, he moved a twin bed into the den. He pretty much lives in one room in that big house. It’s kind of a waste of space, if you ask me, but then again, I couldn’t imagine him living anywhere else. That house—that land—is his favorite possession.

In the other room, my sister explained to me what happened. Earlier, my father had taken his four-wheeler for a ride. The tire grabbed on some loose dirt and flipped upside down. He fell off backwards and the handle bars came down on his face, crushing it with the weight of the vehicle. His dog found him, licked his wounds clean, and led him back to the house. Daddy crawled for hours before he made it home. He told the dog to go inside to get the phone and, no shit, the dog opened the back door—a trick my dad taught him so that he wouldn't have to let him in and out so much—and brought the phone to my dad who was coming in and out of consciousness. When the paramedics arrived, the small 25 lb. dog sat on my father's chest and wouldn't let them near him. He was protecting him. It took three grown men with a rifle and a rope to get the little terrier into the basement. I wonder if anyone else had ever believed in my father as much as that dog.

My sister asked if I would be okay to stay there alone. Gracie offered to stay with me.

"I'll be fine." I wasn't so sure, though.

When she left, I went into the den to check on my dad.

"Hey, Jo." He started to cry.

"Daddy, please don't cry." I sat on the edge of the bed and took his hand.

"I'm going to look like a freak. I'd rather die than look like a freak."

"No you're not. It's just a lot of swelling. Can you see anything yet?"

"Not really. Do you promise I won't look fucked up?"

"I'm not a doctor, Daddy. Les said it's too soon to tell. If you need to have surgery, we'll figure out a way to pay for it."

"Thank you so much for being here, kid." He squeezed my hand.

"I'm glad to be here with you, Daddy." And I was.

That night, I slept maybe two hours. I sat in the dark in the other room. The dog licked at my fingertips. I looked around the house where I grew up. I thought of everything that ever happened in that house. None of it good. I tried hard to remember something good. I thought of one day when I was seven or eight years old. Daddy woke me up early and asked if I wanted to go on a hike with him in the woods. We had eleven acres, most of them covered in woods. I was thrilled that he wanted to hang out with me. We spent the day exploring the land. We didn't talk. We didn't need to. At the very top of the hill behind our house, we stood on rocks and looked down, way down, onto the river that runs through the town.

"Isn't it beautiful, kid?"

Then we found an abandoned house with a waterfall—the only waterfall I've ever seen in real life. There were a lot of old antique bottles in a tub beside the house and Daddy said we should take a few. I chose a coppery-brown beer bottle. I still have it. He probably doesn't even remember that day. That was the only day I've ever spent with my dad. Until the night of the accident, it was the only time I'd ever been alone with him on purpose—because I wanted to be.

Sitting in the dark, 18 years later, it was hard not to cry as I remembered that day with my father. I realized what a gift it was that he took me out to see his land. *His* land. He had chosen to share it with me. I tried to fall asleep thinking about that day, but I didn't sleep at all. Every 20 minutes or so Daddy would call for me. He needed his pain pills or some water or a sip of Vodka—just a sip. Sometimes he just wanted to make sure I was still there, that I hadn't left him. But I never left him. I never really left that house at all.