

# Crazy Kids Call Me in the Afternoon

DC Honors Thesis

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## Introduction

The overall question of my project is: how do separation and visibility affect human beings? I address in this manuscript some of the ways in which humans are affected by separation and how modern technology has changed interactions. Most people think that the dramatic changes will be in the future when it will be easy for people to only communicate through technology. I think that we are already affected.

In this manuscript, I look at the types of separation that people experience and the objects which separate them. I was inspired by how separation influences people in different ways. I see some strangers every day, yet don't know their names. I talk to my pen pals every day, yet I've never met them in person. How do these situations function at the same time? I decided in answer to this question that separation must not affect each person in the same way, which is why I decided to use different writing genres in my project. Each genre would address in detail a certain kind of separation. As Marshall McLuhan said, "the medium is the message."

My original proposal was to have a final manuscript with three different sections: poetry, short stories, and essays. Currently, there are no existing works which place different types of writing within one manuscript and discuss one idea. My project begins a consideration of a new genre. The first part of the manuscript was to be poetry. The poetry would focus on specific instances of visibility and obscurity. An instance of visibility might be a poem about how thin the walls of a tent in comparison to the walls of a house. The second part was to be short stories. These short stories would center on being away from home. One of the stories may have focused on a group of girls at a boarding school and how being away from home impacted them. The third part was to be essays. For these essays, I would have interviewed people that I talked to often but didn't see in person. One of these people was to be a friend who lives in the Philippines and who was considering joining the French Foreign Legion.

In my actual project, I've created four sections: poetry, a novella, letters, and essays. The poetry section has remained the same. Each poem focuses on a moment in which someone is affected by separation. The second section has changed into a novella about Penelope Holyoake. Pen has a strange home life. She and her sister vie for their mother's attention, their mother held a fake funeral for their father when they were children, and their neighbor's daughter thinks that she has leukemia. The third section is a series of fictional letters from "Singer" to "Fern." I decided to make these individuals fictional because with the act of writing a letter, you become a figment of the other person's imagination. The last section is essays. In this section, I discuss topics ranging from death, being a girl, to what high school was like. I wanted to convey some of my own experiences with separation using these essays. I felt that my previous idea for essays, while it might have been interesting, didn't communicate how separation affects individuals.

Cold Sheets Beside You:  
Poetry

## Summer Nights

When we sit on the patio, we can see  
the people arguing in the next house.  
We were laughing a second ago. Now  
we're quiet, scrunched up in our lawn chairs.

We feel like little kids peeking  
from the next room. Mommy drops  
her bottle. There's glass everywhere  
reflecting light up onto the walls.

Daddy is yelling, raising his meat-  
slab hand, he's going to smack her  
flatter than the cheese  
we put on our bread this morning.

All of us are crying, squealing,  
like little pigs too scared  
to move because we can see  
the stained red butcher's block.

One of us says *mommy?* She lifts  
us up. We're as fragile  
as her bottle. When she squeezes  
little fractures go up our sides.

She carries us out to the car.  
We drive around for hours  
streetlights burning our eyes  
then casting them back to darkness.

A woman on the radio sings  
that her heart is in a bottle.  
She sounds like she's crying  
or maybe that's mommy.

There's a fist pressed  
against her mouth. She takes it out  
to shush us and reach her hand back  
to rub our legs thick with baby fat.

## That Boy

I.

I answer the door  
but he doesn't enter.

His buttons are undone,  
striped shirt hanging  
off his shoulders.

*Hey, can I smoke here?*

At first I think he's asking  
about pot, but he takes  
out a pack of cigs. I didn't  
know that he smoked.

I ask how long it's been.

*On and off since sixteen.*

I can imagine him outside  
as an angry teen, his mom  
inside with the baby.

Her parents scream  
at her because her face  
is unlined but she has  
borne another child.

*It calms me down.*

He breathes out smoke,  
for a moment he's still,  
face smoothed flat  
as if he's asleep,  
then he's pacing  
and flipping his lighter.

II.

He bounces to quick, dirty  
electronic music, drops  
his lighter. I've never seen  
anyone pace besides him.  
In books people pace  
when they're trapped  
and thinking. He paces  
like it's the only way  
he can release his bright  
as a star energy. I crouch  
on the ground, wrists  
on knees. *I'm going to a rave  
in two weeks. Even if I contract  
Ebola I'll still be dancing.*  
He relights his cigarette,  
drags it in and out  
of his mouth.

III.

*I'm going crazy.*

*Splitting in two.* One part  
darkness under the eyes  
student, one part hopped  
up music screamer. He's difficult  
to talk to because he moves  
through conversation like  
he's a kid jumping  
from rock to rock in a river.  
Maybe he is crazy.

IV.

Once he answered a call  
from a man who's writing  
about him and his mother.

*That's not what she's like.*

He insults and cusses out  
Everyone, even his mother,  
while smiling like he's saying  
I love you.

## Clinger

We walk down the stairs.  
Her heels don't clack,  
just tip tap against the brick.  
Her hand flourishes out

from her heart into the open  
air swirling with dust.  
She turns to the light  
lined doors. She reaches

across her body into the grey  
purse printed on with cat heads  
and dog feet. She pulls out a pack  
of cigarettes. I could go

to the classroom, wait for her  
there while trying not to stare  
at the eyeless boys and girls gasping  
for breath. I don't want to look

into their empty dark eye sockets.  
I move with her to the light, hoping  
that afterwards I won't smell  
like burnt nicotine.

## Hunter

It had been years  
since his wife's tight eyed  
look that meant *no more*  
and *I don't want to look*  
*at you ever again*. As she left,  
his wife had stabbed him  
with the words that his forest-  
eyed daughter wasn't his.  
He watched her go, knowing  
that soon it would just be  
him and the trees. Once,  
he had been a hunter. Now,  
he was scared of the bird-calls,  
the hoof prints, the hidden  
creatures who watched him.  
The only animal he wasn't scared of  
was the bear. When he first saw  
the bear, he was lost in thoughts  
of water gushing out of his eyes,  
out the pipes of his house. Sometimes  
he forgot that she had left him.  
Those times, he woke teeth splitting  
his face. He kissed the dimple  
in her old pillow, face falling  
into the faint scent of lavender  
like she had grown in the garden.  
On those days the pain bit deep  
like a dog with metal fangs, tearing  
a cavern in his chest. It was those days  
when he dared the dangerous  
that he saw the bear. It was massive,  
but he wanted to hug it, press  
his face into its fur, listen  
to its heart beat. He wished  
that he could change into a bear  
as he watched it tear chunks  
of bark off a tree but no fur pushed  
from the pores of his skin  
and he went back to his empty home.

## And the Rain Fell

My military company was sent to a planet  
with forests more brown and blue  
than green. We search and recover broken

shuttles. Sometimes there are bodies  
burnt so bad we can't tell if they're alien  
or human. I've dug more graves here

than I ever wanted. The natives cringe  
when we walk past their towns.  
To them we smell like mud and death.

We have competitions to keep morale up.  
Tug of rope, wall climbing, and capture the flag.  
Whoever wins gets booze to drink off duty.

But we're running out of alcohol and games.  
I've tried approaching the natives for more.  
They ignore me. I feel a dull ache in my chest

when I watch the fathers ladling out soup  
and the children pinching each other. Families  
everywhere just want to protect themselves  
from outsiders who bring a rain of destruction.

## Teenager

She describes the way she eats  
with her parents as bolting  
down food. She leaves the table  
before they have finished slicing  
up their dripping beef.

Her parents sit, eyes locked  
on her empty chair. They feel  
that she stabs them in their hearts  
with her fork, rinses off the blood,  
and places it in the dishwasher.

They pretend that their love  
isn't hardening into lumps of ice  
as they shovel broccoli  
into the maws of their mouths,  
but they wonder if raising  
a child is worth this pain.

## She Lost Us and Herself

A glittering world of tranquil seas  
and upside down dirt pathways.  
A world where she runs up metal  
pipes, muscles straining out of skin.  
A world where she sees a child  
when she looks in the flat glass of water.  
A world where a man with a butter  
knife cut out her heart and ate it.  
A world where she coughs up  
ruby flowers and emerald leaves.  
A world where the people are empty  
corn husks spinning in the wind.  
A world that we see in her eyes  
when we change the pansies  
on her bedside table.

## Movement

In an old pink house covered  
in vines, there is a wooden landing  
with five doors. Once the doors opened  
and closed often, children abandoned  
plastic trains and horses on the floor,  
teenagers tucked their awkward  
bodies in the brown chair while writing  
about slamming doors and finding love,  
parents hung wet clothes on the railings  
while humming their wedding song.  
The mother had dark circles  
under her eyes, but she still laughed  
when the little boy got his head stuck  
between two bars of the railing.

Now the doors are closed, shut up  
tight as if they've been taped  
and boarded. Sometimes you hear  
movement from behind a door  
like a shadow on a window curtain.  
Floorboards creak and there's the sound  
of something heavy being shifted away.

## Reimagined Shapes

The knock on the door stirred  
her from the hunched  
position over her book. She reared

up, straightening her back. It cracked  
at the same time that the fist again struck  
the wooden door. She lumbered

while the floor squeaked. She prepared  
apologies to reject the magazine  
salesman. Her paw wrenched

the door away from its frame.  
She jerked back as she smelled  
home on the woman who stood

knee deep in snow and plastic bagged  
newspapers. It was her sister  
who had been a brown bobbed cub

when she left. Anger was tucked  
in the lines of her sister's face. Her excuses  
for leaving died before they were born  
like unfertilized eggs.

## Squared Away

I.

She hated being at home –  
she hated how she couldn't  
stop loving her parents  
even though they said  
*we don't understand,*  
*you were born a boy.*

She had wanted to shop  
with her mother, hold up  
a maroon dress and ask  
*do you think this color*  
*would look good on me?*

But a white envelope  
of job acceptance  
had arrived in the mail.  
After opening it, she froze  
as still as a deer hearing  
a twig break, then two  
tears fell from her eyes.

II.

She's back in Pittsburgh.  
I talk fast when I see her  
darkness around her body  
an orange glow on her hair  
and glasses. I look away  
from her smooth round face,  
to contain my excitement.

I want to take her tall body  
in my arms, put her ear  
against my heart, and stroke  
her fluffy brown hair.

I want to tell her  
that her thin pointed  
limbs and open mouthed  
sarcastic smile are adorable.  
I worry that she hears  
no compliments.

I want to have sleepovers  
with chocolate, popcorn,  
animal crackers, and our  
favorite TV shows like we're  
still middle school girls.

I want to spend time with her  
until she loses that tone  
which turns her voice  
into a long flat plain.

## Our Mother Leaves Us

I step, jump from one wooden plank  
to the next. On my tongue is the song  
my mother hummed when I was a baby.

The bridge sways under my weight.  
The rope hops in my hand, chafes skin.  
My bare feet are soft on the rough

wooden grooves. On the other side  
of the ravine, her paintings lean  
against a spruce tree. I step, jump

until I'm there, stroking her blue oil  
painted cheeks. Rain drips down  
my cheeks like tears. I'm as cold

inside as any glacier. My sisters scream  
from the other side of the ravine.  
They cross their fingers at me. Demon,

monster, they yell. They're tyrants.  
They should be the ones with antlers  
sprouting from the sides of their heads.

But it's me being cast out before  
the streams of blood have dried  
around my antlers. One of them pulls

out a knife. She smiles as she cuts  
up the bridge. The other sister  
is saying, bye bye. Her eyes are averted.

I don't make a run for the other side  
as the twine parts under the knife.  
There's nothing for me over there.

They don't notice when the mud gives  
and the paintings slide down the slope.  
I grab at them. My fingers stab through

the canvas of one. The rest keep going

out of my reach, to the river far below.  
My sister finishes with the bridge.

It rattles as gravity takes it to this side  
of the ravine. The leave without looking  
at me. I feel pain in my head as the antlers

grow another inch. I look at my fingers  
pushed through the painting. They look  
like worms pushing up through the ground  
during a storm. I know they'll drown anyway.

## A Description of the Night

The thin walls shake with the wind  
like a wolf is huffing and puffing,  
blowing our tent down.

I wake every couple hours  
to laughter and the rattle  
of aluminum poles.

My mind is as taut as the strings  
on her cello. She sleeps  
next to me, eyes like box flaps.

My thoughts bash around, stuck  
in a loop of dream then the sight  
of green and tan overhead.

When my alarm finally blares  
at me I see flecks of snow,  
but I'm warm with her beside me.

The Life of Penelope Holyoake:  
A Novella

I.

Pen (*noun*)

1. A basic tool for writing or drawing with liquid.
2. A small prison for sheep, pigs, cattle, and other broken animals.
3. Short for penitentiary.
4. A female swan.
5. Short for peninsula.

Newly born, Pen looked at the bright green world. It was murky as if she gazed up from the depths of a pond. She was afraid of the light and the openness of the space. The air was cold on her bare skin. Her body ached for the tight warmth of the womb. She felt empty, unconnected to food and safety. She began to cry, scared of the reality she had entered.

Doctors took her away, cupping her body in the green of their surgical gloves. When she was brought back, her mother cradled her. She spoke each syllable of Penelope slowly. Her breath puffed against Pen's forehead and pushed back her cloud of hair.

## II.

Acrid (*adjective*)

1. Sharp and harsh or unpleasantly pungent in taste or odor.
2. Deeply or violently bitter.

Five years old, Pen and her family went out to one of those Japanese restaurants where they cook right in front of you. Pen remembered that she had done something to make her parents proud enough to reward her, but she couldn't remember what it was. Her mother let her order a Coke. She had taken just one sip of it when her stomach rebelled. She'd been feeling queasy all day, but her stomach finally said, "enough is enough."

She threw up on the stove. The puke made a *tsss* noise as it hit. It smelled horrible as it started cooking. Darla shrieked and pinched her nose. Her father moved to grab Pen, but her mother blocked him and carried her out of the restaurant. The whole way, she smiled and said how sorry she was. Her father trailed behind.

Pen remembered this moment as one of her most embarrassing. She forgot how after her mom set her on the sidewalk, her mom laughed, then said, "Did you see the looks on their faces? I'll never forget those looks." Her father forced a laugh.

After they were done laughing, her dad said, "Well, my girls, McDonald's it is." And her mother gave him a tight nod.

### III.

#### Falsify (*verb*)

1. To make false or incorrect, especially so as to deceive.
2. To alter fraudulently.
3. To represent falsely.
4. To show or prove to be false; disprove.

Six years old, Pen sat on the edge of the green sofa in their living room. Her grandmother handed her a dictionary. “I hope that you’ll find light in these dark times.”

Pen took the heavy book. Her fingers traced the gold title. She opened to a random page, ran her finger down a line of text. *Contrite: adj. 1. Arising from sense of guilt: done or said out of a sense of guilt or remorse. 2. Very sorry: genuinely and deeply sorry about something.* She could read basic words and knew how to spell her family members’ names, she didn’t know the words that she traced.

There was something steady in the fact that she held the entire English language in her hands. The world that had been spiraling out of control steadied. Pen would from then on believe that her grandmother had known what a treasure the dictionary would become. She would never know that as her grandmother hurried out the door, she accidentally grabbed a dictionary instead of the bible for which she had been aiming.

Her grandmother dressed Pen like a sheep in a huge puffy black jacket. It smelled of the bags of lavender that her grandmother hung around her home. Pen’s mother paced while biting a thumbnail. Her other nails were jagged daggers. “Is this right? Is what I’m doing right?” When

Pen was older, she wouldn't think her mother's choice was the right one, but she also couldn't disagree that it was the wrong one.

"It's too late to change your mind." There were dark circles under her grandmother's eyes. When she sat on the couch, she slumped back into the pillows. She was a wind-up doll that had run out of energy.

Pen wanted to ask what was too late, but she was scared of the answer. When her father hadn't come home from work a week ago, her mother had screamed that he was dead, dead to them all. She had thrown her phone against the wall. It left a dent that Pen could just see beyond her pacing mother. Yesterday, Pen had stood on her tip-toes to feel the dent. Other than curving in, it hadn't felt any different from the rest of the wall. Pen had expected there to be lingering anger and sadness.

Darla came out of her room in the black slacks and shirt that she wore to her orchestra concerts. Her brown hair looked as pressed flat as her clothes. Their grandmother eyed her. "Back in my day, a woman would wear a dress to a funeral, or whatever this is." At the time, the words hadn't made sense to Pen and she forgot them with the ease of childhood.

Darla shrugged then sat next to Pen without touching her. Pen wanted to touch Darla, she wanted the comfort that would come from another human being. Instead, she fisted her coat. She looked down at her feet. They were so far away and small as if she was looking at them from the top of a skyscraper.

Their mother's eyes flickered between the grandmother and the two girls. "Don't you dare say any more." Her hair was a snarled mess around her shoulders. Pen was reminded of the monster who had snakes for hair.

“Alright.” Her grandmother sat up, face tight with fatigue. “Now that Darla is ready, we can go.”

They left the house. Pen’s grandmother had to remind Pen’s mother to lock the house. Darla slid open the door to the minivan. Pen scrambled in so that she could sit on the right side. Darla said, “It’s not any more dangerous on the left side.”

“I like this side.”

Darla sighed. “Fine.” She climbed over Pen to get to the left side. After she buckled her own seatbelt, she reached over and did Pen’s.

Pen pushed away her sister’s hands. “I coulda done it myself.” She didn’t want Darla to know how confused and empty she felt. Her mother pulled the car out of the driveway. Her hands were white on the steering wheel. Pen heard a soft thud as her grandmother rested her head against the cold glass of the window.

The grey of the frozen lake flitted in and out of the bare trees as they drove around it. Pen put a hand on the window. It was constant as the world became a blur past it.

The car pulled up next to a black metal fence. They got out of the car to walk down a cracked path. Groups of mourners walked in the same direction, leaving a trail of tissues. Pen’s mother talked to some of them. Pen overheard them saying that her mother was doing the right thing with a father like that. Way down at the end of the path was an angel sitting on an above ground tomb. Her face was buried in her hands. Concrete wings curled down to sweep the snow on the ground. Pen felt as if the angel might look up at any moment with righteousness in her eyes.

As they turned off the path, Pen was happy to go away from the angel. They stopped at a grave with fresh flowers. The other mourners clustered around them. Darla put an arm around

Pen, then pulled her even closer so that she was tucked under her chin. Her breath was visible in front of Pen's face. Pen felt warm inside as if there was a radiator releasing heat into her soul.

They stood there silent as snow landed on Pen in cold pinpricks until her mother spoke, "Your father wasn't a good or a bad man. He was a big man with a big laugh." Her mother didn't cry after that. She bit her lip until they left. Some of their neighbors spoke about Pen's father. She didn't like the expressions on their faces, like they were trying to say nice things, but it was difficult for them.

As they walked away their feet left marks in the white powder. Pen looked back. She didn't want to leave, not when her father would feel as singular and lonely as Pen had felt in the living room when her mother ignored her. She noticed that another man's name was on her father's gravestone. "Mommy, why isn't daddy's name on that rock?" Her mother looked away. "Mommy?"

"Hush, Pen." Her grandmother grabbed Pen's hand and pulled her away. They were almost to the gates of the cemetery when she looked back again. The angel's face was raised from her hands, but Pen couldn't see the expression on her face from that distance.

It was a couple years before her mother started talking about how Pen's father died. When she told the story, it was different for every audience. She told Pen, "Your father died from a heart condition. It might be genetic. You might end up just like him. You need to be careful." When Pen was older, she suspected that her mother didn't want her to be like her father for other reasons.

She told her friends, “He died on the job. His customer came back home to find a dead fat electrician. They probably do all their electrical work themselves now.” Then she raised her wine glass and knocked back all of the liquid while they stared at her. A couple of them forced out laughs.

She told strangers, “He lost control of the car on a snowy day. He almost hit a little girl, but he swerved to miss her, hit the guardrail too fast and died as a result. He was my beautiful tragic hero.”

She told her new men, “He was a heartless man who abused my love until I finally worked up the courage to tell him to leave. After that he got really drunk and shot himself. He left a note saying that it was all my fault. He wanted to make sure that I’d never be able to move on. And I didn’t think that I’d be able to until I met you.” She put her hand on this or that man’s knee, then looked at him as if he was the sun and she needed him to survive. Her mother didn’t laugh when she was with these men. She was never with any of them for very long. At the end, she smiled politely, then shut the door in their faces.

Pen didn’t hear all these different stories about her father, but she heard enough of them to know that her mother had never told her the truth. At the back of her mind there was always doubt about what happened to her father.

#### IV.

##### Loss (*noun*)

1. Detriment, disadvantage, or deprivation from failure to keep, have, or get.
2. Something that is lost.
3. The state of being deprived of or of being without something that one has had.
4. Death, or the fact of being dead.
5. The accidental or inadvertent losing of something dropped, misplaced, stolen, etc.
6. A losing by defeat; failure to win.

Thirteen years old, Pen and Lexi sat on the playground swings. They could see the parking lot of the elementary school across the street. They watched the parents sitting in idling cars, poisoning their own sons and daughters with their cars' emissions. Children darted out of the doors ready to unleash the stories of their days to their families. Watchful teachers escorted children onto buses. Pen imagined the children were acting as docile as pigs being sent to the butcher. Willingly lined up and shipped out.

Pen pumped her legs to get speed. Lexi sat on the swing next to her. Lexi looked like one of those girls from TV. She had skin like a shiny dark rock and hair that looked like it hadn't been brushed in days. There was always night under her eyes.

"Hey, do you ever wonder why your parents had you?" Lexi asked.

Pen's throat felt tight. She couldn't think of how to put words together. She wanted to say no. She didn't want to think of those moments when she sat in the middle of the room, water filling the cistern of her rib cage as her mother's fingers knitted Darla's hair. But this was Lexi,

so she forced the words into a line and out of her mouth. “Sometimes. I don’t like thinking about that stuff.”

“Yeah, well, I think about it a lot. They haven’t said anything specifically, but I’ve got a feeling that I exist just in case Em doesn’t get better and just dies.”

“That can’t be true. She hasn’t always been sick.”

Lexi shrugged. Pen imagined that like the girls in gritty shows that her mother didn’t want her watching, Lexi would one day be leaning against chipped tile walls in a club. Music would pulse through the walls and into her skin. She would look into the bathroom mirror and tell Pen that they were fierce warriors. Then they would go back out to the dance floor, hands joined, eyes meeting, thinking of their little words. They would let go of each other, push into the dark and heat of the people, hands tugging like a new gentle weapon.

Lexi pumped her legs a final time, then jumped off the swing. “I just feel like an extra, like how there are those people who buy two of the same comic book. One to use and one to keep all nice and shiny for later. I’m the one they’re keeping for later. And like when I come home with cuts and scrapes, my parents are all on me, acting like it’s such a big deal.”

“Isn’t that because they love you?” Pen wished that her mother would care enough to notice any scrapes that she received.

“Love is just a chemical.” Pen wondered where Lexi had learned that fact. Probably from one of her books on crime and the human body. “You think your mom is a good person?”

“She’s my *parent*.” Pen didn’t have a choice in who raised her. If she had a choice, she would live with her grandmother. Her mother might not hurt her physically, but she made Pen feel like air – invisible and so thin, people could breathe it in.

“That doesn’t mean anything.” Pen agreed, but she didn’t say so aloud.

Pen and Lexi walked home together. They waved goodbye at Pen's house, then Pen unlocked the door. Her footfalls were the only noises. Sunset came through the windows and reflected off the glass of the kitchen table. Her mind returned to the word extra. Her mouth filled with spit. She needed to confirm the truth. She went to her dictionary. The cover was worn. Some of the page corners were folded over. Pen opened to 'e,' then flipped until she found extra: n. an item in addition to what is usual or strictly necessary.

The words became distant as they spun into a dark hole. She wanted to throw her dictionary against the wall. Instead, she closed it to keep the pages flat and held it to her chest.

She said to the empty room, "I'm not necessary." Pen sat there until the sun was gone, then got up and went into the kitchen because she knew that was what she was supposed to do.

She noticed a note in her mother's handwriting stuck to the fridge with a magnet. The magnet had a picture of Darla and Pen glued to it. The edges were curled and water stained. Pen's bob stuck out from her head like the needles on a porcupine. She gazed at something beyond the photographer, mouth pursed. Darla's mouth was curved open just enough to see six of her pretty little teeth. The two girls stood at the end of a dock in their bathing suits.

Her mom's note said that she and Darla would be gone until late because of a concert and that Pen should cook some of the frozen lasagna. At the end it said, "And remember to turn the oven off once it's done. Love, mom."

Pen started crying and didn't stop as she put the lasagna in the oven.

That weekend, Pen rang the doorbell to Lexi's house. Emily answered the door. She looked worn out from the short walk to the door. Pen said, "Is Lexi home?"

“No, but she should be back in a half an hour or so. You can wait inside.” Emily walked away from the door, then looked back at Pen expectantly. Pen closed the door and followed the other girl to the couch. Emily settled back into her nest of blankets. On the coffee table in front of her was a plate with a sandwich cut into four bite-sized cubes and a salad. Next to the plate was a bowl of soup and a glass with a green liquid. Water dripped down the sides of the glass to dampen the magazine underneath. All of the food seemed to be untouched.

“You’re not going to eat any of that?” Pen asked. Emily seemed to get smaller every time that Pen saw her. She could imagine Emily wasting away over time while Lexi’s mother continued to make perfectly cut sandwiches and promised that everything would be a-okay. Pen wondered if Emily had any friends of her own. The girl was always watching TV.

Emily looked at the food as if it had just been placed there. “I guess I should.” She picked up the bowl of soup and drank from the side. “I don’t really get hungry,” she said as if Pen had asked why she wasn’t eating.

“Because you have a disease or something, right?”

“Yeah.”

Pen looked at the TV, wondering when Lexi would get back home.

Emily sank lower in her blankets. “Most people ask lots of questions.”

Pen shrugged. “You watch a lot of TV?”

“Most people ask me questions about my disease.” Emily clarified. “Like if I’m scared to die or if it’s great to not have to go school all the time.”

Pen usually tricked herself into believing that the darkness after life would be gentle.

“Are you? Afraid to die?” Emily’s eyes were barely visible above the blankets. They glistened.

“Sometimes I think that I’m not, but other times I realize that I haven’t done anything at all.” It was strange. Emily already looked like a little old woman with her weary face. “The doctors tell me that I’m going to live, but look at me. I’m just skin.” She paused and sat up, pulling her arm out of her blankets. She tugged on the skin tight to her bones. “Recovering is going to be the most difficult part of this illness.” She sunk down again, leaving one of her hands out to stroke a blanket.

They sat like that, Pen trying not to think about the dying girl next to her. Occasionally one of them would remark on the unrealistic reactions of the women in *Bewitched*. When Lexi returned, Pen waited until the other girl had put on her bathing suit. Then the two girls left the house to walk down to the edge of the lake.

“What did you do with Emily?” Lexi asked. She squinted her eyes at Pen as if she thought that Pen would become Emily’s friend and leave her behind.

Pen looked away. “We just sat there and watched TV.”

“Hmm,” Lexi said as she shucked her clothes, then ran into the water. Pen followed slower, easing each foot in until she was comfortable with the temperature. She swam over to Lexi.

The two of them dove under the water then hooked their feet on a length of rope which stretched from one dock to another. The rope was covered in a layer of algae, but they were used to the feeling. With their feet hooked, they raised their arms up, blew bubbles into the light, and felt the air slipping between their fingers.

Lexi went up for more air. Her kicks stirred the water around Pen’s face. Pen squinted at the area where the other girl had been. Beyond, there was a smudge, darker than everything around it. While Pen kicked up, she tapped Lexi as she descended. They breached the surface.

The sun warmed while the wind cooled Pen's cheeks. "I see something over there." She pointed. "Let's take a look."

They swam in the direction Pen had pointed, then ducked underwater again. The rope was deeper there. When they got to the shape, Pen felt almost out of air. The thing was tangled in the rope. Pen reached out and touched. Her hand glided along as it did when she touched human skin underwater. The shape resolved into a leg stuck in a loop of rope, a leg dangling free, arms and hair waving in the water like seaweed.

Pen kicked away as fast as she could. She came to the surface gasping and coughing up water. Lexi bobbed up beside her. "That's –" She couldn't finish the sentence. She hadn't seen a dead person before. Her mind could barely grasp what she had seen.

"He must not have died that long ago," Lexi said.

"What?" Pen felt stupid, slow, land locked by ice. How could Lexi be thinking about time of death? Pen could barely grasp the fact that someone had been doing what they did and died.

"His body isn't bloated or anything." Lexi started swimming to the shore. "C'mon, we better tell someone." Pen followed while trying not to think about how she had just touched a dead person. Lexi got to the shallows and started walking out while squeezing water out of her hair. She grabbed her towel off a tree branch and blotted herself dry.

Pen knelt in the shallows, then realizing that she was sharing water with a corpse, ran out, flinging water. For the rest of the day, her mind continued to run away while men and women around her muttered, *she's in shock*. Lexi sat next to Pen and told her all the gory details of the body. She acted as though she was the prime investigator in a crime show.

That night in a claw-footed porcelain bathtub, Pen blew on bubbles. She thought about her favorite story, “The Little Mermaid.” She didn’t care for the prince, sea shells, or the Disney version with all the singing. She liked how the mermaid became sea foam at the end, but in that moment, she was troubled by the concept.

“Bubbles,” Pen said because she believed that water had little eyes to watch everyone and that the mermaid was looking through the water while she was in the bathtub, hearing secrets that Pen had told no one else. “Today I saw a dead boy. I touched him too.” The bubbles didn’t say anything back to Pen as always. There was a small part of her that thought that one day the water would bubble into words saying that she too could become water. That part of her had become smaller every day. On that night, it would disappear.

“You know, when I die I want to become bubbles too. I’ll float around in oceans and rivers and bathtubs and I’ll be able to see everyone and everything.” She cupped bubbles in her hand then smashed them with her other hand. Foam flew into the air. “When I die...” She repeated, her mind stuck on those words. What if she couldn’t become sea foam, what if she just died? Death happened to everything so why wouldn’t it happen to her too? Everything that she knew was part of her body and without it she was nothing. Did that mean that her father who had so much noise in his soul that you could hear him on the other side of the house was absolutely gone?

“Mom!” She yelled. Her mother would tell her the truth. She heard footfalls from the hallway, then her mother was opening the bathroom door. She asked all quiet, “Where’s dad?”

Her mom looked at her as if she was asking if her father was upstairs. “Your father’s dead, sweet pea. Don’t you remember going to the funeral?”

“I know he’s dead. I mean, what happens after you die?”

Her mother pulled Pen's towel off the toilet lid. She shook it out and extended it the length of her arms. "Come out and we'll talk about this."

While Pen dried off, her mother left then returned with pajamas. Pen dressed while her mother fidgeted with the bottles on the bathroom counter. At times, her mother seemed to not know what to do with herself now that her children could mostly take care of themselves.

When Pen was finished, her mother led her to the living room where Darla lay on the floor, a textbook and notebook opened in front of her. Her mother threw another log on the fire, then sat on the hearth rug with Pen.

She held up a hairbrush. "Turn around." Pen turned, leaning against her mother's leg. The motion of the brush through her hair calmed the emotions swirling in Pen's stomach. "Your father..." Her mother began. The fire cracked. Sparks flew into the air, singing the rug. "He left us to go to a different place. It's not a place that we can easily follow him to. It's a warm, dark place. He's waiting there for the rest of the family to join him."

"Am I gonna die too?" Her heart throbbed, her mouth went dry. She already knew she would confront the abyss of death one day, but she wanted her mother to confirm or deny it.

"Of course you are. You're going to die just like the rest of us, Pen," Darla said these words the same way that she said, "You little shit, where's my Gameboy?"

"Darla, go to your room."

"What! I was just telling the truth."

"Darla. Go."

Darla left, giving Pen a look that meant she was going to be in for it later. Pen wrapped her arms around her legs and set her chin on a knee. Her mother pulled Pen into the curve of her

side. “When you die, your father and I will be waiting for you. I’ll take you into my arms just like this and I’ll never let go.”

Pen was forced to let go of Lexi two months later when her family moved. Their new house was close enough to drive to, but Pen’s mother claimed to not have the time to take Pen.

On the day of the move, Lexi looked at a point beyond Pen’s shoulder. “We’ll stay in touch.” Her voice was cold and when Pen hugged her, her body was stiff. She whispered in Pen’s ear, “They didn’t even ask me about it. I’m just another box to be moved.”

They let go of each other. “Bye, Lexi.” Lexi got in the car, turning away from Pen for the first time. Pen wanted to tell Lexi how much she loved her and how an image of her would always be tucked at the front of her brain. But she said nothing as her mind started making up lies: it was a relief that Lexi was gone, conversations with Lexi had been difficult to understand. She pretended that the two of them had been too different. She told herself that Lexi would be one of those girls who does things on her own and always breaks her lovers into shards. She would have no friends and a granite heart.

V.

Confusion (*noun*)

1. The act of confusing.
2. The state of being confused.
3. Disorder; upheaval; tumult; chaos.
4. Lack of clearness or distinctness.
5. Perplexity; bewilderment.
6. Embarrassment or abashment.
7. A disturbed mental state; disorientation.

Pen, fourteen years old, lost without Lexi, walked from her house to the cemetery. It was snowing just like when they had buried her father. The cemetery wasn't far, but by the time she arrived at the black gates both her heart and body felt numb. She walked through the rows of gravestones, occasionally wiping snow from the names as she looked for her father.

She came to a path with a familiar angel at the end. Its wings were eroded and someone had spray-painted a smiley face on its head, but she recognized the devastation in her slumped shoulders. Right then, Pen wanted to sit next to the angel and never leave. Instead she kept searching until she noticed that the horizon was kissing the sun. She left, not sure what she wanted, but aching for something.

She walked back home through the trees. Leaves crunched under her feet. Ten feet away cars drove past, but she was hidden in shadows. When she got to her house, she lurked in the shadows, looking at the windows. Her mother moved through the kitchen. Pen went around to the back of the house. Darla sat at her desk, doing work. How cold and lonely it was to be an

outsider. Pen wondered what would happen if she never walked back through the front door. Would her mother mourn? Unwillingly to discover her mother's reaction to her leaving forever, Pen went through the front door. She walked to Darla's room without taking off her shoes or coat. Snow slid off her shoulders, leaving wet spots on the carpet. "I couldn't find dad's grave."

Darla jumped, then turned around in her seat. "What the hell, Pen? Don't sneak up on me like that." She looked at Pen's pale face. "You went to the cemetery? Jesus, it's freezing out. Did you –"

"Where's dad buried?"

"I... What are you talking about?"

"He's not there."

"I'm sure you just couldn't find the grave. Why did you go in the first place? God, you're so dumb."

"He's not there," Pen repeated, ignoring Darla. "Don't you dare lie to me like mom. Tell me where he is."

"What's wrong with you, Pen? I don't know what you're talking about." Pen had expected Darla to know the truth.

"Don't you get what that means? If dad's not there, he might be alive!" They had grown up with a woman who had changed the story of their father's death every year. Darla should understand what it meant.

Darla's eyes shifted from Pen to the doorway. Her mouth parted. "But... we had a funeral for him."

Pen shrugged. "An elaborate lie. Do you remember anything odd about the funeral?"

“The adults acted like mom made dad die and they were happy that he was gone. I thought they were just blaming her because they liked him more.”

“So what are we going to do about it?”

“What does it matter? It’s all in the past.” Darla picked up her pen.

“We can’t just do nothing. Mom kept this from us.”

“Are we really going to do this right now? I have work to do.”

“Do you even care about how I’m feeling right now? You might be able to sweep this surprise into your locked box of emotions, but I feel so alone!”

“Boohoo, Pen. You think that you’re the only one who gets lonely?”

“Don’t tell me that you long for mom’s attention. Because you have it, you’ve always had it.”

“Oh my gosh, get out of my room, you can go find dad and cry to him about how terrible we all are to you.”

Pen clenched her fists, then drifted out on a breeze of shock. She had expected Darla to deny the truth, but she hadn’t expected her to not care. She went to her room and changed into her pajamas, fingers dead to sensations of softness. She lay in bed for a long time, pushing her thoughts into a locked box every time they tried to overwhelm her. She remembered her father’s funeral. Was it really true? Just because she hadn’t been able to find her father’s grave didn’t mean that it hadn’t been in that cemetery somewhere.

When she finally fell asleep, she dreamed of walking into the lake. She remained with her feet in the silt as she went deeper as if she was made of metal. She looked up to see the rope that Lexi and her had always played with before they’d found that dead body. Then she was rising up

and tangled in the rope. She thrashed, trying to free herself. With a gasp she came awake. Her legs were caught up in her blankets.

She left her room, eyes hurting from lack of sleep. Her skin was hot. Someone had turned the heating up to roasting in the middle of the night.

In the kitchen, her mother was making pancakes. She hummed a little tune, swayed her body. Sunlight fell on her hair, making it glow. Something in Pen cracked as she watched her mother spatula in one hand, glass of orange juice in the other. Pen couldn't understand how she had come to this point.

“Mom?”

Her mother turned. “Pen, you're awake.” Her lips lifted slowly. “Sit down. I'm making your favorite.”

Pen's body jerked like a puppet as she sat. She didn't know how to ask. How does one confront her mother about lies? Her mother put a plate in front of Pen.

Pen didn't move to touch the food.

“What's wrong? You don't look well, are you sick?” She lifted a hand to Pen's brow. It was cold and comforting.

Pen opened her mouth, heaved in a breath. “Where's dad?” Her voice cracked. “He's not dead, is he?” Her mother's hand fell. “I went to the graveyard.”

“I just wanted to protect you two. Good men can do bad things, but I couldn't think of him as a good man after that.” Her mother's face crumpled. “I still don't know why he did it. He had all of us.”

Pen didn't ask what he had done. It didn't matter. What mattered was that she hadn't been given the choice to live with her father, or even to just know him.

Later that day at school, she excused herself to the bathroom, needing the chance to compose herself. When she walked in there were two girls stuffing toilet paper and cigarette butts into a toilet. They looked up startled. The one girl said, "If you tell anyone..."

Pen walked over, slammed her hand against the stall by the girl. "Shut up, I'm not going to tattle on you." She pulled off her scarf. It was one that her mother had bought her. She threw it in, then flushed the toilet. The girls were reverent as they watched all the colors swirl quickly, then slow down as the scarf caught and clogged the pipe.

One of the girls looked up from the toilet. She had jagged black bangs and wore all black. Her cheeks looked soft against her angular hair. "Dude, you're cool. What's your name? I can't believe we've never met before."

"I'm Pen."

The other girl had hair that looked like some furry animal on her head. "Nice meeting you, Pen. Ready to mess some more toilets up?"

A half an hour later the bathroom was flooded. Pen stood with the other two girls in the water. Their feet were wet. They couldn't stop laughing. Pen felt happy and alive until a teacher walked in. The other girls ran, pushing past the teacher. "C'mon, Pen," they yelled back at her. Pen was frozen by the sudden return of reality as the harsh light from the hallway spilled into the bathroom.

The school suspended Pen. They asked her the names of her accomplices. Pen answered, "Do I look like the kind of girl with friends?" They looked at each other uncertain, then released Pen to her mother.

They were shut up in the car before her mother turned to her.

“Penelope Holyoake, you better tell me the truth right now.”

“I didn’t flood the bathroom. It was some other girls.”

“The principal showed me the bathroom. I saw your scarf.”

Pen focused straight ahead of herself. There was a cold weight in her chest. A frost was settling there and she didn’t think it would budge for a long time.

Two weeks later, not long enough to calm the pool of rage in Pen’s stomach, Pen walked into her room to find crate upon crate of condoms. They were nicely stacked and as tucked out of the way as massive crates could be, but they were still massive and full of condoms. Her mind stuttered then she remembered that Darla had joined the safe sex committee at her community college. Her rage began swirling.

“Darla! Darla!” Her voice rose to a screech.

Her sister strolled into the room. The ends of her scarf swayed, but the rest of her was pressed down with no stray hairs. “Do you mind, Pen?” She said it in the sickly sweet tone that made her always get her way. Her brows pressed together above wide eyes. Her expression said: *I’m sorry, I’m just trying my best here.*

“Of course I mind. How would you feel if you came home to all this in your room?”

“I’d be surprised because that would mean you had joined an organization and made friends.”

“I have friends.” Her hands clenched into fists.

“Since Lexi left, I’ve seen none. I don’t think they’re real.”

Pen reeled back as if Darla had hit her.

“And what about you, Mrs. Goody Two Shoes? You make everyone think you’re in this club because you’re concerned about early pregnancy, but really you want to control them. You like it when people do exactly as you say. You don’t have friends. You have minions.”

Darla sucked in a breath, then glared at Pen. “Well at least I have my minions. You don’t even have that.”

While Darla and Pen faced each other like boxers on opposite sides of a ring, Pen’s mother walked into the room. “Penelope, it won’t be for long.”

“You think I care that much about those crates? It’s everything! You lying to us, us growing up fighting for your attention, you trying to replace our father with another man.”

She shoved her feet back into her shoes and grabbed her coat.

Her mother’s face looked cracked as if it was about to break into a thousand shards. “Where are you going?”

Pen stormed outside, grabbing the keys off the hook as she went. She got in the car and locked the doors. Her mother ran over and jerked on the handle. Her voice was muffled as if underwater. “Get out here. We need to talk about this!”

“I’m not talking to you about anything anymore!”

Her mother smacked the window. “Penelope, please!” She ran after the car as Pen drove away. In the rearview mirror she could see her mother’s bare feet slapping the pavement, the rise and the fall of her chest. Her mother’s feet would probably hurt when she stopped running. And her chest would ache from pulling in air quickly. Pen didn’t turn back. She drove through forests, wishing that she was just a leaf falling from a branch.

Lexi's mother answered the door. She had always looked tired from taking care of one sick girl and one too healthy girl, but now she looked a little wild. Her hair was puffed up and a leaf caught in it behind an ear. Her face was blank and Pen wasn't sure that she recognized her. "You're here for Lexi?" Pen nodded. "They're in the basement. If you're going to drink with them, could you at least give me your keys?" She swayed backward as she asked, then put out her hand. Pen smacked the keys into it, irritated by this new passive woman who had once always made sure she and Lexi had snacks when they were hungry.

"Where is it?" She led Pen to the stairs and walked away with a sigh. Pen wondered where Emily was, decided she didn't care, then clomped down the stairs. She arrived at the bottom with a puff of breath.

Lexi had her head on another girl's stomach. There was something intimate about how the two were looking at each other. Pen froze. If it had been a boy instead, Pen would have felt... how would she have felt?

Lexi raised her head. "Pen, you didn't tell me you were coming."

"I-I just had to get out of my house." She stood in the room, unsure of whether to sit or not. A tangle of emotion was heavy in her stomach.

"This is Meredith. Meredith, this is Pen. Pen and I have been friends for as long as I've been finding dead things." Pen shivered, put an arm around her midsection.

Beyond Lexi and Meredith were two boys playing ping pong. Pen watched the bounce of the ball back and forth, so she wouldn't have to look at the two girls together.

"Nice to meet you, Pen." Meredith's red hair was spread around her head. She looked like the old woman reborn as a young woman in *Tale of Tales*. A fallen goddess bringing a

teenager close to her bosom. Her smile was jagged. One side of her mouth tilted up while the edges of her eyes tightened.

Pen looked at the curves of Meredith's nose.

"Maybe we can talk later. I'll go play ping pong with the boys." Meredith extracted herself from Lexi.

Pen sat down in the middle of a sagging brown couch. There were beer cans tucked between the cushions and stains, but she didn't care. Lexi sat down next to her. "What the fuck is wrong with you? Meredith is the girl that I was telling you about. She was being nice and you just stood there like a rock."

Pen didn't know why she had come to Lexi's anymore. She clutched one of the beer cans until the insides pressed against each other. What did she see in Lexi? Why were they friends? What was a friend?

"I'm doing pretty shitty right now."

"Well, you don't have to take it out on my friend."

Pen dropped the beer can on the floor.

"Alright, what's wrong?" Lexi turned to her, body becoming an ear.

Pen sagged back into the couch, tension releasing from her body. "God, Lexi, why'd you have to leave? Everything is different now." She looked at the cracks in the ceiling. Her voice went up an octave and flattened. "My whole life is bullshit. The big guy up said, 'let's just fuck this girl royally, why don't we?' And the white-winged ones said, 'oh, yes, sir, what a marvelous idea!'" Her eyes sparkled. She squeezed them shut.

Lexi's eyebrows drew together. "Did your mom do something? She's always been so weird with you and Darla." Pen thought of her mother standing in the road, staring after her. She pulled on a loose thread from the couch.

"What do you want to be after you die, Lexi?"

"A knife."

"A knife can hurt anyone though. What if someone used you to hurt your kids?"

"I wouldn't care. I'd be a knife. I wouldn't think about anything. I'd just cut." She paused, eyes skimming over Pen's face. "You think your mother is a bad person, don't you?" Somehow in the time when she had moved away from Pen and made new friends, Lexi had learned to combine her wit with observations into the interiorities of others.

It made Pen slightly angry. She didn't want to think of her mother as a bad person. Her mother had made mistakes which had hurt Pen, but they had been chosen in an effort to protect her children. Her mother had still raised her, mostly single-handedly. Her mother had put Band-Aids on her legs when she fell on Halloween. Pen wouldn't stop crying about her torn dinosaur costume, so her mother had stitched the holes closed and put pink bows over the stitches.

"She kept a big fucking secret from me, but I can't think of her as a bad mother." Pen resolved in that moment to talk to her mother more.

"C'mon, let's go. I know what'll cheer you up and invigorate you." Lexi got up off the couch. She turned to the group around the ping pong table. "We'll be back later." Meredith frowned at Pen, but simply waved goodbye. Lexi and Pen left the house. Pen understood why Lexi's mother had become worn into a wisp of herself if that group of teenagers had been living in her basement.

Pen expected Lexi to drive her to a diner. Pancakes were one of her comfort foods. They went to a mall instead, then on into a cosmetics store. It was in that black and white checked store that Lexi dropped a tube of lipstick down Pen's shirt. "What the heck are you doing?" Pen twisted to get the lipstick out.

Lexi grabbed her hand, looked her right in the eyes. "We're taking what we want. Because fuck society for giving you a shitty mom. Fuck everyone for not caring about us, Pen." Lexi emphasized Pen's name making her think of all her name's different meanings.

Pen felt uncomfortable but she trailed after, not wanting to be left behind by Lexi.

As they walked out of the store, Pen's heart started up double time. None of the detectors beeped, but Pen still shuddered. They went to a music store. Lexi slipped headphones over Pen's head. She put an ear to the outside of the headphones. Pen was tense at first, then loosened up as the voice in the song rose up through octaves. Lexi bobbed her head and Pen synced her head to Lexi's. They looked at each other out of the corners of their eyes.

Lexi was slipping a CD into her bag when a cop walked past. Pen made eye contact with him as her face twisted with guilt. Lexi looked in the same direction as Pen. "Shit." She dropped the CD and ran. Pen felt the weight of all the cosmetics tucked into her clothes. She froze, just like she had in the bathroom those weeks ago. As Lexi ran away, Pen felt her friendship with the other girl crack open. Twisted creatures crawled out of the cracks.

The cop let Pen off with a warning, then called her mother. He didn't know about all the makeup hidden in Pen's clothes. He thought that he had stopped the girls before they had the chance to steal anything. He led Pen out to the curb and watched her until Pen's mother arrived. She drove up in the neighbor's car. Pen recognized the dent from when she'd backed up into it in

her mother's car. Pen got in. They drove for a couple minutes in silence. Then Pen's mother broke it with a gasp. "I'm sorry, Pen. This is all my fault."

"No, mom. It's mine." She shut her eyes and reached over. Her mother clenched her hand. Pen felt her mother's shaking slow, then stop.

## VI.

Aware (*adjective*)

1. Having knowledge; conscious; cognizant.
2. Informed; alert; knowledgeable; sophisticated.

Five years later, Pen walked out of the office building carrying only her wallet, phone, and keys. Her guts were tight coils but her body felt as if it might float away. She thought about her mother as she walked home. They weren't friends like other mothers and children, but they made the effort to call each other each week. Pen barely remembered her father, so she didn't know if she could have been friends with him.

In the chapter of *Abide in the Wind* that she read the prior night, the mother and father divorced. They asked the children which parent they wanted to go with. "Do you choose Mommy or Daddy?" The boy chose to go with his mother, so the girl chose to go with her father. She didn't want him to be lonely. Pen wasn't given a choice about her father, maybe that was why now when she had choices, she chose "no" more than she chose "yes."

Pen's mother chastised Pen over the about this habit. Pen was going to have to call her mother and tell her that she had lost her job.

She tripped on the edge of a piece of concrete then caught herself with the other foot. She told herself that sometimes you slide, feet skidding on ice as you lose control of the events around you. Other times you slip, fingers slowly releasing one by one their grip from the ledge. Down below your mother yells, "Put yourself back together. You're a fucking disgrace." Your sister smiles. She knew that you would never make it. Even with all that, you have to do as your mother says and get your shit together.

She unlocked the door to the apartment, then closed it behind herself quickly. The sound of cars driving past was muted. Sunlight lay thick and tangled with the furniture. Her shoulders fell. She leaned against the door for a moment before pulling her phone out of her back pocket. The number came easily to her fingers, long memorized in case she became lost. There were so many times as a child that she wished it could be so easy to bring her family closer to her.

She imagined her mother standing at the sink. She obsessively washed her dishes, circling them with the sponge over and over until the porcelain was unbroken white. Outside, the sky would be merging into the trees as night fell. As the phone rang, her mother took it from the cradle then tucked it between her ear and a shoulder left bare by her loose sweater. “Pen, is that you?” One of hands pushed stray hairs behind her ears before she picked the sponge up again.

“Hey, mom.”

“It’s good that you called. One of the Tucker girls called me asking for your number.”

“Lexi? Lexi called you?” Why would Lexi have called Pen’s mother? She had Pen’s number even if the two of them were reluctant for her to use it.

“No, it was Emily. Anyway, she lives in California now. Once she learned that she was only an hour away from you, she said that she was going to visit.” Pen hadn’t been friends with Lexi’s sister. The two of them had barely even talked. She didn’t know why Emily would want to visit. “Now tell me what happened with the company.”

“We weren’t able to make the money back so it’s going bankrupt.” There hadn’t been anything that Pen could do about it. She wished for more ways to put her life under her control.

“Oh no! Do need any money? Do you want to come live with me for a while?” Pen could see her mother fisting the sponge, soapy water sliding down her wrist. Her mother knew that Pen wouldn’t accept the offer, but had asked anyway.

“I should be alright for right now. If worse comes to worse, I’ll just go work at McDonald’s.” She walked away from the door to collapse on her sofa. She looked down at the wood floor, traced the edges with her eyes.

They chatted for a while. Her mother told her about how the new neighbors were sunbathing on their roof as if they lived in Florida. She told her mother about a date that she’d gone on, then wondered if she should take her mother up on the offer to stay in her childhood home. They hung up on a mostly pleasant note as usual.

Pen and Emily sat in a diner. Plates of syrup soaked waffles, pancakes, and French toast were laid out in a banquet before them.

“I think that most people don’t take advantage of the opportunities that are in front of them. We all have to start somewhere. I took a risk with an experimental treatment program and look at me now! I’m healthier than my sister.” Emily had the same stone look to her face as Lexi, but unlike Lexi, her hair was done in tiny braids. “I knew that you were close friends with my sister so I thought that I should tell you in person. And... it probably wasn’t a big deal to you at the time, but I didn’t have any friends when I was sick. I appreciated it whenever you talked to me.”

“What’s wrong with Lexi?”

“She’s missing. I suspect that it’s her boyfriend. He lit their apartment building on fire. You know how Lexi was interested in blood and guts. She and her boyfriend listened to the police in their free time. Really disturbing stuff. Lexi’s an adult, so the police aren’t worried.” She stabbed her fork into a pancake. “Anything could have happened.” Emily’s face was composed into a painting titled, *close to grieving sister*. Pen wondered when Emily had become

so good at lying. How much of what Pen knew about Emily was true? What would a parent do if a child faked a disease so closely that she started injuring herself? Would that parent tell others that the child with psychological problems had the disease she pretended to have?

“Why are you telling me all of this?”

“I want you to help me look for her.”

“What do you think I’ll be able to do that the police weren’t?”

“You’ll be with me. I’ve been tracking her purchases. Maybe it’s her boyfriend running from the cops or maybe it’s her running from him.” Emily stroked the handle of the knife in her hand. “Lexi and I weren’t close. She was jealous of our parents being so focused on me and I was jealous of her friends, her attitude... I want to make it up.”

Pen laughed. She felt as if something sharp was stabbing her in the side. “You know I can just pack up and go? I lost my job, there’s nothing holding me back.”

Pen called Darla while she waited for Emily to pick her up. She kept thinking about Emily’s words, how concerned she seemed to be about Lexi. Pen wanted to feel real hurt and love for her sister.

A recording of Darla’s voice answered the call, “I don’t answer calls from numbers I don’t recognize. Email me with a bulleted list of relevant information if you don’t need to get in touch urgently. Leave a message if it’s urgent.” Pen sighed and looked up at the sky. It was empty of clouds, like Darla in a way. The beep sounded.

“Hey, I know this is coming out of nowhere, but we never talk, which is probably my fault. Anyway, I’m going on a trip to look for Lexi with her sister. I wanted to invite you to go

with us. This is last minute so I understand if you can't go and I'll understand if you just don't want to go because we've never been close, but please call me back."

Emily pulled up to the curb. Pen put her bags in the back of the van, then got into the front passenger seat. After she and Emily exchanged niceties, the van was silent. It took them days to ease up around each other. By then, Pen knew when to change the radio so Emily didn't have to hear the songs she hated. By then, Emily knew to order Pen cheese quesadillas. By then, they knew how to ask about a girl who wasn't missing so they wouldn't cause alarm.

Emily refilled the gas tank while Pen went to the bathroom inside. She looked in the mirror. There were dark circles under her eyes like always, but she felt more awake than ever before in her life. Maybe she would go outside, call her mother, and tell her that she wished she could take it back all those years ago.

She bought some snacks for Emily and herself. While she pulled money out of her wallet, she saw flashes of people in between the aisles of chips and donuts. An arm reaching out. Hair tossed back. A hand around a wrist. Pen finished paying and walked to the door.

The scene had ended. Pen came out for the aftermath. The woman cradled her hand, back to the man. His face was red. He was starting up the car. "Get in," he yelled at the woman. She turned and her eyes met Pen's for a second. There was a bruise on her cheek. She got in the car. Pen looked down, realizing that she had dropped the drinks she bought. One of the cans had dented, but wasn't leaking.

As they drove through a dark city, Pen saw a playground. Several of the streetlights surrounding it were out, but Pen could still see the bright colors. It was as if playgrounds were telling children that the world would always be full of rainbows. “Can we pull over there?”

This playground’s colors were washed out. Trash was caught in the pieces of metal. It didn’t seem as if any children played here. If some did, they were likely part child, part phantom, slivers of something hanging onto this world.

Emily parked and they got out. Pen grabbed her hand. “You and me,” she said, not quite sure what she meant, but she knew that she meant it and didn’t want to go back to a time before she had become close to Emily. She let go of Emily’s hand and ran to the slide.

She went up the yellow ladder, motioned Emily up beside her. Emily squeezed in. Their arms touched. Pen yelled, “I’m something!” She looked at Emily.

Emily screamed, “I’m everything!”

They yelled until their throats were hoarse and cheeks pushed up into curled eyes.

Then Pen slid down and Emily chased her. They played there like they were kids again until they fell to the ground, panting. Then they leaned on each other back to back. “That reminds me,” said Pen. “Have you heard this before? Early one morning, in the middle of the night, two dead brothers rose up to fight, back to back, they faced each other, drew their swords and shot the other. A deaf policeman hearing the noise ran to save the two dead boys.”

They were quiet for a couple moments, then Emily said, “There’s something I have to tell you, Pen.”

“It’s okay, I know, Emily. Lexi is safe and sound. She has a boyfriend who cooks from scratch from her. And she’s happy. She’s so happy.” Lexi and Pen talked sometimes, but she had

run away. It still made her angry to this day. Lexi had always been there beside her, then she was gone in the moment when Pen needed her most. She had left Pen stuffed up with cosmetics.

“I’m not happy. I mean, right now, I am. I feel as if I could just grab those stars out of the sky, but a week ago all my smiles were strained.”

Pen laughed. “I can’t believe we never talked. I let you sit there on that couch day after day.” Then there was Lexi who cut people like the knife which she wanted to be in her next life.

They sat there for a long time hidden in the darkness, whispering to each other.

A car pulled up near the playground. A man got out of it, slamming his door. He heaved open one of the doors and yelled, “Get out. Get out of the car right now.” He pointed to the ground. Something flew from the car, hitting him in the chest. “I’m not going to have any of that. Get out here!” He reached into the car.

Pen could hear a high-pitched scream from all the way on the other side of the playground. He pulled a little girl out of the car, then just dropped her on the ground. She touched the toy that she had fallen beside, tangling her hand in its fur. Her face was crushed up like a discarded tissue. The man stalked to the back of the car. While he did so, another child crawled out of the car. She laid down next to the first child, wrapping her body around the other girl. The man returned, holding a belt.

Pen stood, unthinking and walked toward the man. His face twisted with surprise as she came out of the darkness and into the streetlight. She stopped between him and the children. She blinked while she looked at him. With each blink, he looked like Pen’s mother, then Darla, then Lexi, then he was just a man again.

“I won’t let you hurt them.” She trembled, but looked him in the eye. He was all the monsters she had wanted to stand across from in her life.

“What are you going to do to stop me?”

Pen didn't know how to fight back, but she knew that she would stand between him and the girls for as long as she could. Emily came up beside Pen. She held her phone like a weapon.

“I have 911 on the line.”

The man took a step toward Pen and Emily. Pen reached for Emily. The two held hands, forming a wall. They continued to hold hands as sirens rose louder and cars screeched around them.

Bats About You:  
Letters

Dear Fern,

Hops is having me write to you. She thinks if I write out my feelings, something will change. I'm doing it to please her. She's working a job in another city this summer. When she calls me on the phone, I don't want to feel like she should drive back and check up on me. Here I go. Don't complain (I chuckled darkly to myself there) if it's boring.

I'm still here where we met. I have a desk job just like I told you I always wanted. I went home before starting work. I missed my flight by four minutes. I had to spend the day in the airport, but as my mother says, "Any place is the same for you as long as you have a book to read."

I missed my flight because I missed the bus to the airport. I forgot that Forbes Ave. was closed so the bus stops were temporarily different. Forbes Ave. has been on and off closed since February when a water main burst. Oddly enough, I was walking by when it happened. There was a whole lake of water. It kept gushing up as though some water monster was bursting forth from captivity.

It was a beautiful sunny day in Pittsburgh when I missed my flight. When I got home it was raining. It seems that it's always raining and nighttime when I get into that airport. The air is crisp and strikes the grime of travel from my face.

I did all the activities that I usually do when I go home: go to the tea tavern with my grandma, eat brunch with the whole of my extended family, go shopping with my mother, have a playdate with my cousin's baby (who will be a year older in August), talk to my grandpa about the ducks that he's carving, make dinner for my parents at least once, and have my hair cut. My family was gentler around me than usual and I pretended that I didn't know why.

I had a whole foot of hair chopped off. My mom freaked out because she's never really been able to have long hair. She had been living vicariously through me. She told me that my short hair looked terrible and something needed to be done to fix it. My father thought that the whole thing was hilarious. He teased my mother for picking on me. When he thought I wasn't watching, I saw his face become serious while he scolded her. They don't want me to go back to the way I was a couple months ago.

I don't regret my hair though because it's now ridiculously hot in Pittsburgh. When I'm at work, my legs stick to the chair with sweat. If I walk around, then I become covered in sweat. We've set up a whirlwind of fans in the living room where we've taken to lying about. By we, I mean my housemates and I. Hop's boyfriend, Headphones, and I signed a lease early this year for a pink house covered in half-dead vines. The inside has been kept in the same state for decades: wood floor, creaking stairs, and crumbling brick fireplaces. The rooms have accessible crawlspaces. When the landlady showed us the house, I didn't think about how the crawlspaces would be dark and full of imagined creatures. I thought about how they would make for good storage space. The first night after I moved in, I stared at the crawlspace and imagined that a long-limbed creature was going to creep out, climb up the wall, and watch me sleep. I wondered if it would have your face.

Yesterday, I felt the inside of a tomato. It was bumpy and squishy. I wondered how it would compare to stroking a finger along a person's guts.

I don't think that I like asking other people for things, but I love it when they do things for me unasked. I kept all the cards and envelopes that you gave me. It surprised me when you said that it's okay to demand something from others. You may have understood me better than my parents. Usually, I push people away. But you, I pulled so close.

Onto a different note, because my mind is a fish swimming in circles. My latest music obsessions are Halsey and Melanie Martinez. Halsey is bubbly and bizarre. Melanie is downright strange. She wears rompers, like me. I recently learned that rompers were invented so that children in the Victorian era could play comfortably. I've decided that it's going to be rompers for days.

I've been trying out new recipes and feeding my housemates. When I get home, I don't know to do so I cook to keep myself busy. My housemates are eating more vegetables than they're used to eating. Sugar, sugar, sugar, obsession.

I wish that I could ask you questions. There's still so much I never learned about you and I know that wanting to ask questions means that I care even if some days I wish that I didn't.

Wishing that you were here,

Singer

Dear Fern,

I was too harsh with you. I'm sure you were annoyed by how I judged your reactions to the events that happen around you. Being able to act as you want when you want is a positive characteristic. Most people can't say that's how they live. You were ambivalent to people and things. And I don't necessarily think that you were self-centered. I thought you could have enjoyed life more if you reached out to people more often.

If you thought that my smiling face was disturbing, then you wouldn't want to listen to my laugh. I've reached a point in which when I begin laughing I descend into a state that's difficult to exit. You might have thought that you're self-centered, but I'm barely aware of my surroundings anymore. Daytime is a blur of black tree trunks and imagined flurries of snow. Nighttime is a haze of streetlights and darkness. Rainbows bellow out from the streetlights and rise into the air like smoke.

I've become fixated on the color red. Maybe it's because of your favorite red jacket. I still have it from the time we picnicked in the park and you gave it to me to wear. I've been sleeping with that jacket in my arms. I stroke it to feel the familiar pulls in the fabric.

When I walk around I search for red, like I'm searching for you. On a day with puffy dark clouds, I saw a boy in red. He was a height of bones. Your name brushed past my lips. I saw his face. It was round with liquid ironwood eyes. It wasn't your face.

Craving you,

Singer

Dear Fern,

I've been thinking about a conversation that we had a couple months after we became friends. We sat on the floor of the dorm hallway discussing attraction and affection. I told you that I thought the two could exist separately but usually one followed the other. You absolutely refused my viewpoint. You looked at me with a smile that just curved your mouth to reveal teeth.

In that conversation, I described a pair of friends. They were always just friends. The girl always liked the boy for who he was, but then he did something to make her see him differently. She began to be attracted to him. That smile was it for me. It started me on the track to liking you.

I described a second scenario in that conversation. A boy saw a girl saw a girl drawing Darth Vader on a whiteboard. He said hello to her. As she turned, her existence opened to him like he was peeling an orange. He wished that the orange peel would never end so that he could unravel her forever. That was you, attracted to me at first sight.

Before, I might have said that liking someone is rooted in thinking about them all the time and always wanting to talk. Those are the common ideas that I hear on media. What I know now is that loving someone feels like an animal has invaded your chest. That animal draws on your tears, your hunger, your heart.

When I thought of you with happiness that animal blew bubbles into my chest cavity. Now when I think of you that animal claws at my ribs. I think it's trying to escape. Some days I want it to leave because it hurts me. Other days I don't because without it, I'll have lost one more tie to you.

Love,

Singer

Dear Fern,

When I saw you should I have done the whole “honey, I'm home” thing? The voices in my head tell me that it was too generic. And then they scream like worms coming up out of the dirt when it rains. They're drowning! They question your existence as if you're an empty green dot.

I'm simply staring across at the other egg, seeing Gatsby's green light. That light in the distance should be reassurance that you existed. One day it will blink out, but now as I look across, I feel as if I should yell out, “Ahoy, matey, I see land on the horizon.”

But the land on the horizon could have been part of my dream last night. I was on a boat, then in the beautiful dense green land. It turned out to be a lie – survival games.

You know how feral I become when there's talk of rending. I was all teeth and sighs until morning.

Truly,

Singer

Dear Fern,

When I got your final letter, I was going to joke and say that my life was like a potato. I'm not sure what that would have meant, but it was my first thought and I wanted you to laugh at my silliness.

Since then, my life has become surreal. I'm constantly hungry. I wake up at five or six am to stumble out of my bedroom, stare at the wall then stumble back into bed, roll over a couple times, gaze out the window, get up, glare at the wall, then get back in bed. I almost never see the people I live with. We're all ghosts passing through.

I'm becoming close with a girl I've never met. I've named her Psycho Crazy. She almost had a baby when she was 18. Some days, she sends me hateful messages she claims were written by a hacker. Other days, she describes her eating problems and what it was like to be in a relationship with a man who impregnated both her and her best friend.

On the weekends, I walk two streets over and dance the night away. In the last couple of months, random men have been convinced that I make bombs and am Neo from the Matrix, especially when I'm spitting out descriptions of evisceration because I'm out of my mind with grief.

At one in the morning, I find myself in white-washed quiet hallways with a liar and a donut-faced boy. The janitor cleans the floor behind us. Donut Boy gives me eight gigabytes of books then walks me through the semantics of being alone. He has familiar brown eyes.

Liar interrupts to say, "Girls will be wanted if their faces are pure of makeup. They should be as fluffy as buns." Psycho Crazy is in love with Liar. I'm falling in love with Donut Boy's semantics and it hurts. I don't want to leave you in my past.

On Tuesdays, I eat dinner with Polar Kisses. She just moved back to the city for a job. Every time I see her it's as if we have the same conversation in a slightly different way. I love to have this conversation because each time I'm flattened by a steamroller. Afterwards, I'm formed into new shapes. I think she likes having this same conversation because it's "safe." There are times when we get out of the safe zone. I say, "I want to try swimming in the ocean." Her face stumbles. She says, "No, you don't."

It's morbid curiosity. I want to taste salt on my lips, then plunge under the water so that I can feel what you felt. Maybe in those moments, the ocean water will curve around my shoulders like your arms around me.

The forgotten,

Singer

Dear Fern,

I'm not angry at you, but I am unhappy. I feel guilty and restless. When I walk past my house I see a dark shadow in the window. For a moment, I think that it's you standing there, then I remember. Today, I went off on Hops on the phone about doors after the bathroom door wouldn't shut. It was such a little thing. Hops tells me that rage is a natural part of the process. It's not the same as my rant, but I thought this story would make you laugh:

Closed doors barely stop the dogs that I know. They all kick at the doors until they pop out of their jambs. They don't look at the doors. Their mushy fur faces say: it's only natural that the door would make way for me. Just like how closed doors don't stop the kicking legs of dogs, they also don't stop people from walking in on these two friends that I have.

These two friends don't understand that a closed door is not a locked door. They see a closed door and they think they should proceed to make out. This means that people walk in all happy, see them completely involved, and then back out feeling sad about their own singular natures. This same couple thinks that closed doors are sound proof doors, which means that those around this couple have invested their money in good headphones.

Some might say that doors are lies. A door that is a lie is a blank space that only looks like what a person imagines a door to be. Every door is different for every person. Doors being lies would explain why the dogs get through so easily. It would also explain why people always walk in on that couple. No door exists to separate them from the rest of the world.

If doors aren't lies and they're not really doors then they could only be dirty cheats secretly cackling at our human woes. They hear a giggle and they say, "My oh my, wouldn't it be lovely if everyone could hear this beautiful giggle?"

Then they release through the door what is an unnatural giggle. Everyone you know hears that giggle. Your life comes crashing down on you. You become known as The Giggler. People warn their children to stay away from you. Supermarkets stop selling tomatoes to you. You retreat into the woods to commune with cicadas.

As you sit on what remains of a tree that was cut down years ago, you shrink. You don't notice at first. Leaves and bark are all that you can see. Then you notice that you're getting smaller. The dirt is getting closer and closer to your face. When you sleep at night, you smell the dirt. You wonder if it will swallow you in a natural coffin. It eventually does, but you shrink a lot more before that happens.

While you're shrinking you grow wings. Skin sloughs off your main body. Your new skin is shiny and tough. You're very small now. The grass is taller than you. The noises of the night frighten you. It sounds like there are hyenas out there.

There are no hyenas. There are a couple of people telling jokes while they camp. A vague thought crosses your head about how hyenas sound like they're crashing apart with laughter. You dig into the dirt. You want to escape those kinds of thoughts.

You dig deep enough that you can't hear the hyena laughter anymore. Your awareness drifts until you're no longer you. You're the earth and the water flowing through the soil. Then you're nothing but darkness over a never-ending night.

Truly,

Singer

Dear Fern,

Every day of our lives we craft multiple personas. Last Friday, I walked around and around a block of dark homes while I sobered up Liar. I told him that I tell lies easily. I knew that he would understand. I lie to make myself into a different person. They're little lies that I forget immediately afterward. They don't matter to me. My brain tells my lips to say the words and they come out without a pause. I say them as if they're the truth. I've been lying since I was a child.

My parents didn't believe me at first. *I was protecting the chip bags from my brothers*, my child self said. My mom smiled and laughed. My lies became more believable. Now I can say, *Once I cut the head off a snake when I was outside cutting watermelon. I shrieked but knew that I had to move fast.* And my friends believe my straight face even though I cringe at blood.

I love the assassins in books. They pretend to be emotionless. You were the opposite of those assassins. Your emotions played across your face like clouds drifting. Your bangs were shaped into a crescent moon. Your eyes and mouth were lined with laughter. I thought that I wanted to crack someone so that they would only be mine, but you overturned me.

You were not who I expected to want, but I did want you. What I never told you was that I lied when I said I loved you. I lied about it again in one of my previous letters. I really did care about you, but I don't think I did in the way that you did. In our conversation about attraction, I said that friends have affection for each other. In that conversation, I realized that you loved me. I became weak. I didn't want to lose you so I began to pretend. But now I'll never be able to tell you the truth.

Fading,

Singer

Dear Fern,

Imagine that you're standing on a beach with your teddy bear. A woman comes up from behind you, grabs the teddy bear, and runs into the water. As she's going into the water she puts the teddy bear in her mouth and changes into a dolphin. She swims off. You never see your teddy bear again.

Imagine a man sitting in the middle of a road. A car is driving toward him. When it gets closer, he turns into a lamp. The car goes around him.

Imagine an old man sitting in a rocking chair on a porch. His old dog is beside him. Suddenly the dog stands on its back legs and presses its snout into the old man's neck. The old man smiles. Then the dog rips out the old man's throat. The dog steps backwards off the old man. It rises onto its back legs again. Then it changes into a person. The person cracks his neck and says, "Whew, it's been a long time."

Imagine that you're a cup of peppermint tea. There's a ring of water at your base where you meet the wooden table. The person drinking from you has left. You grow cold fast, then sit there and wait to be remembered.

Insatiably,

Singer

Dear Fern,

Psycho Crazy is trying to set me up with Donut Boy. If you were still here, I hope that would make you jealous, but now you're as far as stars. But you wouldn't have to worry, at least for a little bit.

Donut Boy called me morbid, but he's also so very curious about my thoughts. He wonders where I go when I look out the window, searching for red. I can hear it in his voice. He talks quieter and slower when it's just the two of us. He joked with me that clementines come from cow udders. I laughed from my belly. It felt good, like I was pushing that painful animal in my chest out.

For right now, Donut Boy can't bring himself to get closer to me. I don't think that will last. There's a locked door between us and he won't knock, but soon he will. I hate him a little bit for it. Hops says it's a good kind of hate. She wants to meet Donut Boy, "the pastry who's pulling me out of my darkness," she said.

The reason why Psycho Crazy is trying to set me up with Donut Boy is because she's worried that I'm going to steal Liar from her. I thumped to the floor and laughed for a night when I realized it. It was hysterical laughter, not joyful. How could she think that when I'm supposed to be hung up on a rack of coats, sleeves touching with you?

There hasn't been any snow for a few weeks now. I want to walk through a cold film of white and feel like I'm becoming one with it. A couple days ago, my housemates didn't invite me to go to the superstore with them. It made me realize that we aren't ghosts to one another. I've become the ghost to them.

Sincerely,

Singer

Welcome to My Head  
Essays

## On Being a Girl

People say that as the youngest child and the only girl of my siblings, I get more leeway. It's the opposite. When I had my first tantrum, my mother started laughing. Does your child's being a girl have anything to do with allowing her to have her way? It didn't for my mother. She had gone through two children's worth of tantrums. My tantrum had nothing on my eldest brother's tantrums.

•

For eight years of my life, I did ballet because I wanted to be as beautiful as a butterfly. My body was as thin as a beanpole. I was likely awkward as I waded myself about, but I enjoyed watching my body in the mirror as it obeyed my brain's commands. I especially enjoyed the part of my class, in which we did something called character dance. For character dance, I changed out of my pink slippers and into black shoes with a heel. I pulled a black skirt with a rainbow trim on over my leotard. The skirt flowed around my ankles pleasantly while I stepped heel then toe.

I always felt that it was interesting that both men and women who did ballet wore tight clothing. They were reduced to a blurred version of their bodies because of their tights and leotards. Their sexuality was both hidden and on display while they performed without saying a word. There's something primal in ballet that we've hidden with a show of delicate movements of muscles.

•

In elementary school, my best friend's mother decided to start a field hockey team. She had played when she was a girl. She wanted her daughter to have the same experiences that she'd

had. I joined the team because of my best friend. I remember some of the girls that I played against. They were determined to win even if it meant injury. They insinuated themselves between multiple players. They ran at you, biting down on their mouth-guard, eyes focused on the ball, stick raised and ready as if for violence. This behavior was unexpected in other girls. I might have had violent thoughts in the past but I didn't readily act upon them. I had only once thrown a plastic axe at my brothers for messing with my room.

My field hockey team was one of the times that I can acknowledge consumerism swaying all of the girls. There was a certain pink and purple stick that we all coveted and wanted. One after another, the girls on my team begged their parents for this stick and in turn received it. I too told my mom that I wanted that stick. When we went to the sports store, the only one of those sticks left was too small for me. I got it anyway. I wanted to be like the other girls.

•

In fifth grade, the boys watched us girls jealously as we shuffled off to the library. They thought that we were in for some kind of treat. Instead, we were going to listen to a talk on menstruation. Afterward, we were given a bag with the types of items that we would use when we started menstruating. My mom told me that when I came home from the talk, I took my "period kit" up to my room. The next day the pieces were all over as if I had ripped open and inspected each pad and tampon. I don't remember the boys asking us what we had done in the library and if they had, what any of us girls said in turn.

•

My family does not often go to church. Usually, we go on Christmas eve to see a young woman carrying a baby around in a pageant. We went sometimes outside of Christmas eve, and

on one of those times, I remember dressing in a long pink skirt with darker pink stitching. When I got downstairs, I shoved my feet into my black boots, then waited by the door. As my brothers walked down the stairs, they noticed the contrast of my shoes to my skirt. They said that I couldn't wear black with pink. I was disgusted with them. If I wanted to wear black and pink, then I was going to, no matter what they said. My parents told them to leave me alone with my clothing choices.

•

My aunt often passed down my cousins' clothing. They were five and seven years older. I remember after they had gone through puberty, my aunt gave me a bag with a couple of their old dresses and bras. All of the clothing smelled like her house. I now have a proclivity to never wear anyone else's clothes. There's a remnant of the person, their scent and the scent of their home. When I wear another person's clothing, I feel their ghostly self pressing against me.

The bras my aunt gave me made me uncomfortable as if I had traveled to some other country. They were silky, frilly, and pointy. They seemed like bras that my aunt had worn when she was a girl because of how out of style they were. I went to the store with my mother to buy my own training bras. Boys don't have an item of clothing that's as intimate as bras are. Bras lay over our hearts and hold us together.

•

When I was eleven, my ballet instructor told my mother that I should start wearing deodorant and shaving my legs. My mother took exception because she understood that girls sweat. She didn't believe that it was necessary at that age to attempt to hide that fact. My brother was already playing water polo, so she had me join him. I didn't know the difference between

freestyle and breaststroke, but I learned fast so I wouldn't seem completely ignorant. The girls my age weren't as rough as I remembered some of the field hockey girls being, but the older girls were able to swim over the boys and push them underwater with ease.

•

For sixth to twelfth grade (exempting ninth grade when I was homeschooled) I studied at a private school called Severn. It had once been an all boy's preparatory school for the Naval Academy. It wasn't affiliated with any belief system, but it did require students to wear a uniform. The look of the uniform changed between middle and high school, though it still required girls to wear skirts. I decided to be homeschooled for ninth grade so that I could focus on my writing more than my schoolwork. When I returned in tenth grade, I became a vegan. I lost most of my baby fat. My coaches asked me questions about how much I was eating. They told me that I needed to get more protein, that I should give up on my ethical reasons so that I could take care of my body better. What I knew was that by eating plants instead of oily foods, my body was doing better than ever and they couldn't reconcile that fact with the fact that I was a girl losing weight. I also knew for a fact that one of the boys on the team was suffering from an eating disorder, yet the coaches never asked him about his eating habits.

•

I don't know if I still consider myself a girl at 21, but I'll still face the same problems and themes that I have throughout my life. When I come home from college, many of my family members don't ask how my classes are going, but instead ask if I'm dating anyone. They ask my male cousin, how well he's doing by Airbnb'ing his apartment. They tell me to hold my cousin's

baby whose eyes are closed and lips are parted. He'll feel soft in my arms, but there will be a cold knot in my chest.

## On High School

In high school, I didn't think about what my mother did for me unconditionally. One night, I slept most of the way through a car ride along Big Sur. I woke in the middle to bright florescent lights around a yellow motel. The cliffs weren't far away. There was fog on the road. I told my mom that I wanted to go home. The sharp drop into nothing and the sense of being placeless scared me. My mother drove while I slept.

There were times when my mother yelled at me for not being good enough. I crushed up my face. I cried. My mind became stuck like in those horror movies when the music keeps playing the same verse and you know the monster is almost there.

I never slept without a light on. In California, I had a nightlight tucked in the far wall under a desk. In Maryland, I used the ornate lamp on my bedside table. When I slept I saw white shapes under my eyelids.

I was homeschooled in ninth grade or at least my family pretended that I was. I played water polo for a club team, slept, and reread my favorite books. I faked my French work and attempted to read my biology book. Someone who wasn't me did my geometry work.

In high school I spoke in third person. The name I used wasn't mine. I tore my writing to shreds and locked the scraps in a black box.

I started drinking soy milk and eating only one plate of food at dinner. I lost weight. I lost a cup size. I bought new clothes. I donated my old clothes. I packed away my favorite children's books then stored them in the attic.

I went back to my high school, forced myself into a uniform. I played nice with the other kids and tried to learn their names. Many of them never learned mine. The administration watched me like I was a bird with broken wings. They talked to my mother, implied that she was a bad parent.

In high school, our cat left and never came back. He fifteen, angry and black.

In high school, I cried for no reason. I cried when my brother told the truth. I cried when I was tucked in bed. I cried when my mother sat across from me at the table. I cried when I went up stairs. I cried when I was on the pool deck and made my uncaring teammates concerned for once.

I was told that I had a heart condition, that I didn't smiled for a reason. I had surgery.

When I was in high school I joined a forum. The moderators gave me an infraction. I pretended to be obsessed. It was fun. It was meaningless. I didn't care. I started laughing again.

I joined my school's swim team. I won 17 metals. I hung them from the lights above my mirror.

## On Death

“I was thinking about my body’s small, precise, limited, hungry movement forward into a future that seemed at every instant on the verge of being shut down.”

-Wayne Koestenbaum

On July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2016 I sat on a plane. The engines shook the metal shell. The ever-present AC was off. Without it to block noise, I could hear the whine of the engines. I shook with the plane. I was at the part in *Sunshine* when the main character and her unlikely friend are battling the darkest Others. The main character wonders whether she will die in the battle. She assumes that her death is the only outcome.

I looked up from my book at the blue backside of the chair in front of me. I felt the shaking of the plane. What would I do if the plane took off but the engines malfunctioned? How would my parents react when they saw the explosion on the news? I didn’t feel any fear. I looked down at my book. I thought, *there’s nothing for me to do even if the plane were to explode*. So I continued to read because if I were to die at least I would die while reading one of my favorite books.

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I am at ease with the truth that one day I will die. When I think of death I don’t imagine the pain I might feel at the end. I think about all the people I won’t see again, all the books I’ll never read. I feel regret and guilt that I haven’t made my life meaningful.

I think about babies that get sick and die in their first year of life. Is my life more meaningful than their lives just because I’ve lived nineteen years longer than them? Their

mothers and fathers worked hard to bring them into this world then cried, drank, and grieved as they remembered those small hands. No, my life is not more meaningful than those lost lives.

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As I rode back into Pittsburgh on the bus from the airport, I noticed a woman with an expression that I couldn't decipher. She drove her own car. Her face was partially shielded by her hair. I thought that she might have been about to cry. The bus fell behind her car. I waited for it to catch up so I could see her face again. It never did.

I wondered as I sat there if tears were falling onto her lap or if she was screaming into her steering wheel. No one would hear her sobs or screams because she was locked up in her metal coffin. Even if someone saw her face through the window, would that person care that she was suffering? I wasn't sure that I cared even though I had noticed. I was thinking more about how cars separate us. There was nothing for me to do for her. Was I supposed to hold up a note to the window saying that everything would one day get better? Was I supposed to bang on my window until she looked at my smiling face? No, I am only able to remember that moment in which I did nothing.

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You might wonder if you're worth more than the lost children. I wonder too. I feel guilty when I'm not the child that my mother imagines. When I do something well I become that child. I don't want to constantly be compared to an ideal. Yet I can't help comparing myself and thinking that I'm not good enough.

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In 2012 the Mayan calendar ended. Some believed that the end of this calendar meant that the world would also end. One night in 2012, an electrical power station exploded near where I live. The whole sky lit up and started flashing. People ran through the streets screaming that the world was ending. My father and I thought that the light outside was lightening, but it wasn't storming. We went outside. I felt as if the sky was going to turn, revealing gears. There would be a clunking noise as our reality and the truth welded themselves together. I had this feeling that our world was a small piece of what truly existed. We were ants who didn't know what being an ant meant.

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You might ask what separates human beings. I've been asking for a whole year. I know what we have in common (we're all human; we all die). You might answer that it's not a question of what, it's a question of how. You might say that we're separated by how we live and how we die. You wouldn't be wrong.

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The truth of our world is that all things decay. We can slow the decay. We can deny the decay, but we never will halt it. .

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The same man has been cutting and dyeing my mother's hair for a decade. She followed him from one salon to another. I know that he's shorter than her. He wears a crisp white shirt rolled up to his elbows. His thin, white – not blonde nor gray – hair is combed back. He has those round, rosy cheeks that everyone describes Santa Claus having.

When I think about my mother's dedication to Rick, I remember this quote from *Sunshine*: "She and Mary and Liz all used Lina, I think so they could get together after and discuss her love life, which was pretty fascinating."

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You will forget in your lifetime just as much as you will learn. I joke that I have a selective memory. But unless you have a photographic memory, you're also selective about the details of your past. What you remember of the past is different from what I remember. Your past is almost as unknown as the future. Just as you have vague ideas of what you'll do in the future, you have vague ideas that you were a messy child, an awkward, longing teenager, and a less awkward, but still longing adult.

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I've told my father that his best friend is Will. I think of Will as the man with all the birds in his basement. My father says that Will is just a client. They talk to each other every day. They call each other Doctor. Neither is any kind of doctor. I don't know who my mother's best friend is.

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The past you is not you, only the present you is you. You are only capable of existing within the present. The past of your life happened to someone else who was very similar to you, but still not you. You have been created by all of the experiences leading up to this moment. That other person hasn't become you yet.

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It's as if I'm at once coalescing and separating. I'm separating from my functioning mind in this instant. There is still a mind within me. It's not as if I can function without one, but the mind which enables me to respond to a question with a comprehensive answer, is saying *bye bye, I'm closing the shades and calling it a night*. My body zings with the shock of yellow lights, the pain of leftover chlorine, and the uncomfortableness of wood unmoving against my back. The rest of me coalesces into that single thought: *warmth and blankets*.

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Our society is highly focused on time. There are schedules for each minute of every day. I think that societies that don't think about time also don't think about death. Or at least don't think of it as much. The people are more accepting of the end. It's as if once you begin to use a clock you realize that there's a timer ticking above your head. The numbers roll over as they show how many minutes you have left. What if everyone could see everyone else's timers? Would you have your friends' death times written in your address book next to their birthdays and phone numbers?

## On Journals

Ever since I was a child I knew that I wanted to be a writer. I wanted my words between the covers of books and aligned on sheets of tough paper. My parents gave me a journal and after writing my name on the first page I left the paper blank because it seemed precious. If I wrote the wrong thing then I would have ruined the paper that a tree was killed to make. I thought my words instead so that they would become powerful. When I was finally comfortable with marring the perfection of the blank page I took up my first journal.

It was small, blue, sparkly, and its cotton exterior was stuffed. It seemed to be another type of animal to me. I held the matching pen over the first page and willed words into the ink. But my handwriting was large, didn't stay on the lines, and I wrote the same word again and again: bug, bug, bug. Bug was across the page, in the margins, and upside down. In my mind that single word told a story of heroes, fear, traveling, villains, and children with wings. I hadn't yet made the letters of the alphabet my own, but I was starting my own dictionary.

Between this journal and the next was a gap in which I doodled story ideas in the margins of school notes and created a character who walks beside me. Her name is Chia and her story has progressed and changed with each year of my life. In middle school, heroes were not my favorite characters. They were bland and never conflicted on what they wanted. Chia was conflicted. She wanted to live with her adoptive parents, but she was possessed by a spirit child. The spirit child made her think that her parents didn't love her, that they wanted to replace her with a child of their own.

When I was younger I thought that violence was the solution in stories, so Chia killed her parents. It seemed to me a happy ending. When I was in high school, Chia began observing her

parents. She realized that they were being purposefully harmful toward her. Pain built up inside her. I might have allowed her rest from her suffering by killing her off, but I loved her. I realized that violence would not solve this problem. My solution was to have Chia leave home. She kissed her parents on the cheeks. They cried to see her leave, but still they felt relieved. Chia broke some of the control of the spirit child. As she walked away, she held love with one hand and hate with the other. Now as she travels, she knows that she has a safe place to return to.

My second journal is still with me. It's also small, but is orange and on the plastic cover is a yellow flower. It contains biology notes, details on magic talents and creatures, poetry, definitions of phobias, character sketches, the composition of the human body, interesting words, and summaries of stories. It's my dictionary book and where I keep my solidified ideas.

The third journal had owls on the covers and I wrote my first true poem in it. It's called "Four Ways to Spot a Wraith" and is based on a poem by Wallace Stevens. Here is the fourth way of spotting a wraith:

IV.  
Death reanimated  
with skin coalescing  
into the sky

their black hair  
flutters like  
willow trees

and they  
are all  
unnoticed

Within the journal was a medley of notes on French and poetry. Because of this journal I wrote some poems which were a mixture of French and English. I started to understand how writing is not a tool, but an art.

My fourth and fifth journals are identical on the outside. They're yellow and were made in France. The paper has rectangular graph lines. I was told that you're supposed to use four of these lines for each line of writing, but I chose to do one for one. I write small and like when I was a child, I wanted each page to matter. The margins in these notebooks have writing in them. Many pages seem completely blue from a distance because of my ant scrawl writing. I use one of these journals now and have realized as I come close to the journal being full that over the course of my life I have become what I wanted to be. There was never a specific moment when I transitioned from lover of words to writer, but in each of my journals I can see the development and the process it took for me to become who I am today.