

“ALMOST ASTRONAUTS”:

SHORT STORIES

Laura I. Miller, B.A.

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APPROVED:

Barbara Rodman, Major Professor
Ann McCutchan, Committee Member
Bonnie Friedman, Committee Member
David Holdeman, Chair of the
Department of English
James D. Meernik, Acting Dean of the
Toulouse Graduate School

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In this collection of short stories, I abduct experiences from my own life and take them on an imaginative journey. I experiment with elements of structure and point of view, often incorporating the magical or surreal to amplify the narrator's internal landscape. As demonstrated in the title story, "Almost Astronauts," these stories all deal with a sudden and sometimes destructive shift in the narrator's perspective.

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PART I

METHODS OF DETACHMENT IN THE WRITING PROCESS

As an undergraduate, my education focused on classic literature, primarily male authors like Chekhov, Faulkner, and Steinbeck. Though I adored their fiction, I saw none of myself in their prose—I came to view literature as something separate from the self, an exercise in becoming “the other.” My experiences, it seemed, were of no value in the grand literary canon. I searched for inspiration in newspapers, photographs, song lyrics. I wrote many unsuccessful stories that peered into the lives of unusual characters, recounted the inexplicable unfolding of events.

Late in my graduate career, I began reading contemporary female authors (Lorrie Moore, Amanda Davis, Vivian Gornick), and I felt a weight tumble out of my chest. Their characters were funny and neurotic. They hated their jobs, had complicated relationships, made mistakes on purpose. Their prose was poetic and disjointed, often without a linear narrative. I began to feel—for the first time—that the way I experienced life had validity. I no longer had to hide behind characters and details.

I remember very clearly when I sat down to write a story that probed my own internal landscape, freed from the shackles of literary convention. There were cascades of adjectives and abstractions, tears spilled on the page. The “story” that resulted was pure catharsis, my insides turned out. I was so proud of my creation, that I sent it to several journals without revision (cringe). As the rejections rolled in, and as my peers gently explained that my story *didn't make sense*, I realized that raw emotion wasn't enough.

Alice Mattison explores the source of ideas in her essay “Where Do You Get Your Ideas?” She finds that stories begin by “starting with intense feeling and then groping toward story” (63). What Alice Mattison calls intense feeling, Lorrie Moore calls inspiration. In an interview with *Paris Review*, she says: “I believe in inspiration, which in creative writing discussions often gets short shrifted vis-à-vis ideas of hard, daily effort. But something uninspired will never recover from that original condition, no matter how much labor one pours into it” (Gaffney 5).

In the beginning, I started backwards; I began with a story and groped toward inspiration. The result was a gimmick, an attempt to trick the reader into feeling. I had to find inspiration within my own experience in order to give my characters meaning on the page. However, when I searched for inspiration in my life, I found it locked in a tangle of memory, couched in my own biases and subjectivities. Unleashed in its raw form, this inspiration was a grotesque, disfigured thing—a vehicle for emotion with misplaced wheels, no windshield or perhaps a shattered one. It was a hill of wreckage still smoldering from the heat of the impact. For a story to evolve from inspiration, I needed two things: distance and detachment.

I had learned from undergraduate professors that when writing about emotionally charged events, one must have distance in order to see them objectively: “One is probably best left assembling a narrative in a state of dispassion; the passion is, paradoxically, better communicated that way” (Gaffney 2). This distance is achieved, quite simply, with time. The author walks

away from the wreckage, and eventually, it begins to lose its shape. She forgets the fire, the sound of metal scraping metal.

However, unless the writer *detaches* from the characters and events, she can pull that wreckage back from memory and recreate it on the page. As Vivian Gornick says in *The Situation and the Story*, “without detachment there can be no story; description and response, yes, but no story” (12). To detach, the writer must cut the strings. Only then can she see each moveable part separately and begin to build something that will actually drive.

The stories included in this collection began with raw emotion culled from distant experiences. In their original forms, they were shapeless, sprawling essays with little or no resemblance to their current incarnations. What I will explore in this essay are the *methods of detachment* used to separate myself from the real-life events. Though these stories evolved into fictional narratives, this is not a requirement. The importance of detachment lies in its ability to provide a single piece of awareness, a direction, a unity of purpose. In fact, the method of detachment and the means of reconstruction are often the same.

Method 1: The Counterpoint Character

As Charles Baxter states in his essay “Counterpoint Characterization:”

“With counterpointed characterization, certain kinds of people are pushed together, people who bring out a crucial response to each other” (88).

Counterpoint characters most often have different backgrounds and ways of living; however, simply colliding opposites does not have the same effect as counterpoint. The true function of the counterpoint is to “expose elements that are kept secret in a personality,” (88) to expose what has been lost or repressed.

We see counterpoint character in John Cheever’s “The Angel of the Bridge.” In this story, a highly rational, first person narrator develops an irrational fear of bridges. Because he has already condemned his mother’s fear of flying and his brother’s fear of elevators, he has nowhere to turn for sympathy. Though he discovers the *reason* for his fear, “It was at the highest point of the bridge that I became aware suddenly of the depth and bitterness of my feelings about modern life” (Cheever 496), he is still incapable of overcoming it.

The counterpoint character comes in the form of a hitchhiking “angel.” Spontaneous, young, beautiful, playing a harp, singing love songs, the angel represents everything the rational narrator is not. Though their encounter lasts only the length of the bridge, her alternate perspective, rooted in the non-rational world of love and song, restores the world to him, and he now sees the bridge as an “astonishingly sensible, durable, and even beautiful construction” (497).

The counterpoint character's supernatural qualities make it easy to misinterpret her role. One might conclude, as the narrator does, that "merciful intercession" (497) resolves the conflict. However, the relationship is more complex, as shown in the first pages of the story when the narrator describes the experience of flying through the clouds. Cheever uses angelic imagery, the "hoop of light" reminiscent of an angel's halo. Similarly, in the scene following the angel's intercession, the narrator calls his newfound courage "blue-sky courage," directing our attention back to the airplane scene. The counterpoint character does not impose her views on the narrator, but rather, exposes the views already hidden within him.

I wrote the short story "Perspective, Inc.," after my mother moved into my apartment. The nonfiction version was thick with backstory and bloated dialogue that had no meaning out of context. The complexity of the relationship prevented a story from emerging. By introducing a fictional, counterpoint character, I was able to simplify the relationship, and the story became not about the dynamic between mother and daughter, but the deconstruction of the daughter's idealized view of the world.

Like Cheever's narrator and angel, the characters in my story "Perspective, Inc." have contrasting physical and emotional descriptions. Dolly is described as tall, blonde, and aggressive, "like some prehistoric bird." Mary has long brown hair, and her timidity is revealed in her embarrassment for her mother and her cautious approach to Dolly. Unlike the narrator in Cheever's story,

Mary's response to the counterpoint is not immediately apparent. In fact, she expresses outrage at what she considers a "wretched farce."

To produce a reaction other than disgust in the narrator, I had to foreshadow the shift. The crystal in this story functions similarly to the plane ride in Cheever's. The narrator plucks it from the tile and explains that she "sometimes kept stones or large buttons in [her] pockets, their foreign textures a welcome distraction" (Miller 2). This detail shows that the narrator is open to *foreign* viewpoints; she's searching for some answer outside of herself. When she sees her own reflection in the crystal, it becomes clear that the *outside* viewpoint has been *inside* the narrator all along. She places the crystal in her mouth, "tracing the little mirrors with the tip of [her] tongue" (6), literally internalizing the viewpoint she had considered external until the final pages of the story. The counterpoint character, Dolly, doesn't give Mary the courage to confront her mother, but instead reveals the courage Mary had repressed long ago.

Method 2: Imposed Structure

The inspiration for “Almost Astronauts” began with a story my mother told me during her stay at my apartment. I had known of the space shuttle in the town where I grew up, and the explosion, but I hadn’t known it was to carry tourists to the moon. I hadn’t known that the entire town’s economy, my parent’s photography business included, was rooted in the prospect of space tourism. I wrote a fiction story titled “Sudden Valley” with the singular purpose of using the literal explosion as a metaphor for the internal one my parents faced with it.

I struggled with this story; I had too many strings attached and wanted them all in there: my father’s military history, my schizophrenic grandmother, my homeless grandfather, my mother’s early pregnancy. I was lost in backstory and fore-story; I didn’t have the space for the time I wanted to cover.

Brenda Miller’s article “A Case Against Courage in Creative Nonfiction” came to me during the revision process and encouraged me to drop the fiction story and pursue the material from another angle. She says: “I’ve come to see that at some point—some crucial point—we need to shift our allegiance from experience itself, to the *artifact* we’re making of that experience on that page” (Miller, Brenda 80). Her article emphasizes the importance of structure, the conscious use of form.

Her discussion of the braided essay, in which “the personal and the more ‘impersonal’ can play off each other to create new meaning,” (86) captured my

attention, as I had just finished Lorrie Moore's *Self-Help* and recognized the braided form in the story "What Is Seized." Moore weaves the story of her parents' relationship with descriptions of photographs of her mother. What strikes me most about this technique is that it allows the writer to move backwards and forwards in time, simultaneously.

The majority of the story takes place in the narrator's memory, beginning when she was four years old. Moore allows these descriptions to wander into abstraction; she acknowledges the subjective nature of a child's experience: "That night, or was it another night, my mother came into our room late after we had already tucked ourselves in" (32). The "or was it another night" establishes the narrator's unreliability, the blurred quality of events. At the same time, the narrator takes us through her mother's childhood, also beginning when she (the mother) was four, via very specific and chronologically ordered photographs: "a photo where she is six," "she is eight," "she is nine," "she is fourteen." The photos' objectivity balances the subjectivity of the narrator's memory and heightens the forward momentum. Using this technique, Moore covers the mother's entire life, from four to death, in just 21 pages and with almost no exposition.

I used the same form in "Almost Astronauts" to detach from the backstory that surrounded my characters and to condense time. Photographs worked in this case because of my mother's history as a photographer and because they prevented me from wandering down the multiple avenues that surrounded the

real-life events. I contained the explosion within the photographs, using them to reveal my mother's personality and, by moving chronologically from "rocket to launch to flumes of smoke cascading like flower petals from the great orange eye" (Miller 24), to build suspense. The structure pushed the metaphor into the background, and it became a method of reinforcing the meaning of the story instead of the story's singular purpose.

Method 3: Magical Objects

I never wanted to be the person who wrote emotionally charged short stories about his or her significant other. Relationships were forbidden territory for me; I didn't think I could refrain from slipping into melodrama, embodying a cliché. And then came a time in my life where I couldn't stop myself from writing about them if I tried. I knew I would have to tread lightly to avoid that vitriolic s-word that my peers spat out in workshop: *sentimental*. I would have to detach from the events of my life, to find a new way to say what thousands of other writers had said already.

Amanda Davis provides a successful model for a relationship story in "The Fat Ladies Floated in the Sky Like Balloons." In this story, Davis displaces the anxiety, the forfeiture of ideals, that results when one allows an ex-lover into his or her life. The fat ladies, who *literally* float in the sky, carry the feeling for her. The physical manifestation of anxiety as magical objects exposes the narrator's vulnerability, and shows us how even though she can clearly see where she's headed, she is still powerless to stop herself. She was thinking *with noodles, with duck sauce and white rice* (Davis 22). The displacement exaggerates the narrator's desperation, but because she can see it too, the reader trusts the narrator and sympathizes with the sacrifice she makes.

I used a similar approach in my story "Sleep Walking," in which the narrator's anxiety manifests as narcolepsy. The narrator obsesses about whether

she should stay in a relationship speeding toward a premature end. This obsession manifests in the dream-work, as it does in Davis' magical, floating ladies. The displacement of anxiety prevents the story from veering into sentimentality because it exposes the narrator's insecurity.

The narrator of "Sleep Walking," Phoebe, sees the fate of the relationship in the dreams, which becomes evident in the exchange with her mother: "[I] tell her about the plumber and the paintings. I leave out the part about the walls crumbling" (Miller 30). She hides the imminent dread because she doesn't want to acknowledge its existence; she prefers to live in a dream world. In the final scene, we see that the narrator has chosen to keep dreaming, though she says previously that she "could stop [the dreams] any time" (30). She relinquishes the anxiety and embraces the fantasy life she has created. The antagonist, Zach, does not share her desire; he says of his out-of-state job application, "I've never wanted anything so badly in my whole life" (32). The narrator realizes she is not the object of his desire, and "suddenly feels as though [she] can sleep for days and days" (32); she still chooses the dream. The reader sympathizes with her rather than pities her because she went there willingly—because the narrator retains control.

Method 4: The Grand Metaphor

In his 2011 article “Kevin Brockmeier’s Heartrending Genius,” Jacob Appel places Brockmeier’s “The Ceiling” in a category with Cheever’s “The Swimmer” and Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery.” The category is the grand metaphor: “[A] metaphor both so extraordinary that it pushes the limits of human imagination, and so persistent as to encroach into nearly every aspect of the underlying story” (Appel 66). The grand metaphor works well as a method of detachment because it serves as the organizing principle of the story, a through-line for the structure and the recurring themes, and it shifts the focus away from the individual and toward a sense of community.

In “The Ceiling,” Brockmeier uses the metaphor of a ceiling slowly descending to represent the feeling of losing one’s spouse to infidelity. The metaphor, though, does not stop here. Themes of blank space and turning skyward for answers provide the story with its structure. For example, we see the narrator making superficial attempts to bridge the divide between himself and his wife, tinkering at the window of her walled-up thoughts (Brockmeier 8), but when she offers some small insight, “‘We’re not all that much alike, are we?’ she said” (9), Brockmeier cuts away. The line is followed by blank space; we’re left hanging on the edge of those words. Instead of communicating with his wife, the narrator shifts his attention away from her and back outside. The next section begins: “The plaza outside the library was paved with brick” (9). What the narrator leaves

out, the blank space within the story, parallels the literal blank space—the ceiling—that hovers above the characters and the town.

The metaphor is reemphasized by thematic through-lines, recurring images of sky and birds. The narrator fails to notice the disappearance of the birds: “I did not notice they were gone, though, nor the muteness with which the sun rose in the morning, nor the stillness of the grass and trees” (10). Brockmeier returns to this image to describe his wife’s expression at the moment her infidelity is exposed: “Her face seemed to fill suddenly with movement, then just as suddenly to empty—it reminded me of nothing so much as a flock of birds scattering from a lawn” (14).

The metaphor persists structurally and thematically, but also *literally*. The ceiling is visible to all members of the community—the barber, the street performers, the weeping weatherman—everyone is affected by this falling sky. Though the event mirrors the emotional condition of the narrator as his wife systematically shuts him out of her thoughts, his personal tragedy extends beyond the self. The metaphor raises the question: If my anxiety was visible for everyone to see, what would it look like? The metaphor forces the writer to view the situation through a community’s eyes.

When I applied the grand metaphor to the anxiety I felt after a friend’s going-away party, the result was “Locust St. Circus,” a story in which two metaphors, one of a circus and one of a photo booth, create the tension between place and movement felt when a friend moves away. The story is structured

around the photo booth and the recurrent use of circus imagery, and I was able to extend the metaphor beyond the people at the party by using the first-person plural narrator.

In its original form, "Locust St. Circus" was a second-person story that covered a span of multiple years before and after the real-life going-away party. The photo booth provided an anchor for the scene, something around which all the characters revolved. I could not spend time wandering down avenues of backstory because I needed to focus the attention on the photo booth and its stasis. The booth reinforces the idea of being *arrested* when a good friend moves away. The narrators point to this tension between stasis and movement while observing the fireflies' interaction with the lights strung across the booth: "We studied the exchange and decided it was profound, the heavy machine and the weightless animal, but we didn't know why" (Miller 34). The exchange represents the conflict between adventure and settlement, the problem of *if* and *when* one should plant roots.

To reinforce the themes and heighten the tension, the story's structure mimics that of a photo strip, and the language is couched in circus imagery. Divided into four parts, each part dedicated to the description of a character, the physical structure resembles the structure of the photo strips in the story. The similes and metaphors used throughout reinforce to the metaphor: "The rain unleashed our uncertainty like a whip to a caged animal's back" (35), "We were experts at walking the tightrope between recognition and obscurity" (38). The

grand metaphor provides unity and cohesion to the raw, desperate emotion the characters experience.

The importance of the story's setting was revealed to me one night as my friend (a Denton native) and I sat on her porch and watched lightning zipper through the sky. We were discussing the trauma and excitement of the constant influx and evacuation of people in Denton. The university, and the town by extension, recycled minds, hosted a thousand births and deaths with every admission and graduation season. She explained that among her local friends, two attitudes prevailed. One type of person felt loyal to Denton, nostalgic, and always returned. The other type felt trapped, a victim of circumstance who resented every person who left for a better life.

At the same time my friend relayed this story, the heavens bloated and buckled on our heads. I seized the image of the sudden flood, which lasted only ten minutes or so, and used it as a metaphor for the urgency the characters feel during every going-away party. I framed the story in water imagery, from the bog of hesitation the narrator splashes through in the beginning to the light rain that collects on the narrator's eyelashes in the final scene.

This ambivalence of attitudes within the town encouraged specificity in the story's location and solidified the use of the first-person plural narrator. Though the characters in the story each have a different insecurity, as revealed by the photo booth, the anxiety springs from the same source: a deep-seated fear of inadequacy. This fear extends beyond just these characters and reaches toward

the larger community of recent college graduates—the conflict between stasis and movement became especially poignant within the bounds of a college town. The plural perspective shifts the focus away from a singular experience and toward a community of shared experience.

These four stories represent my first gallop into the field of fictionalized personal narrative. Detachment came in sheets, each revision like a rain that assuaged excessive sentimentality, a lawnmower that trimmed long blades of backstory. The journey for these stories is far from over; I recognize that many more revisions are necessary before the narrator gains objectivity. I've learned to find comfort in the detachment process, to embrace the sloppy flood of inspiration, to mold it into a recognizable form. Most importantly, I've learned to muzzle that academic cricket that sits on my shoulder and chirps: Chekhov did it better. I'm through cramming myself into other people's boxes. This thesis marks the beginning of my pledge to *always* write from the heart.

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PART II
ALMOST ASTRONAUTS: SHORT STORIES

Perspective Inc.

We pulled up to the brick building around noon, the address scrawled in black paint on the white double doors. Two skeletal bushes pocked with red berries framed the entrance, and a lone shopping cart loitered in the parking lot.

“This doesn’t look like any doctor’s office I’ve ever seen,” my mom said as I parked the car.

“Wait here while I find out what room we’re in.” I said, squinting through my bangs at the newspaper ad in my hand.

“I can’t stay in here long. It’s too hot, and you know how my nerves don’t like the heat.” She squished an index finger to her forehead.

The car door closed behind me, and I hesitated. A familiar warmth unraveled in my esophagus. It was the same sour feeling I had when friends came over and saw the stains on my mother’s velvet jumpsuit, the bread mashed between her teeth. I didn’t want the doctors, nurses, anyone to know that she lived on my futon and hadn’t washed her hair in a month. I hoped this would be the last of the many doctors we had already seen.

I pulled open the double doors and stepped inside the building. The lobby was void of furniture except for a bulb-less chandelier hanging by a chain from the ceiling. A gust of wind followed me inside and upset the tear-shaped crystals, causing one to fall the floor and skitter into a corner. I nudged it with the tip of my shoe before plucking it from the tile and sliding it in my coat pocket. I sometimes

kept stones or large buttons in my pockets, their foreign textures a welcome distraction.

I approached the only open door and peered around the corner. Light from an undressed window freckled the podium and the whiskey bottle beside it. In the corner, a woman perched atop a yoga ball rattled the ice in her Styrofoam cup. When she saw me, she stood and walked toward the door, wobbling a little in her heels.

“I’m Dolly,” she said and grabbed my hand, giving it two hard pumps, before stepping behind the podium. The ad I had been holding fell crumpled to the floor. “Let’s get started, shall we?” Dolly squinted through her rimless frames, tortoise-shell detail on the temple, and fluffed her thin, blonde hair. “Usually we do this with two people,” she said. “But whatever gets your ghost.”

“No, actually.” I stepped toward the podium to close what felt like the enormous distance between us. “I just have a few questions.”

Dolly slouched a little and reached for me, curling a lock of my hair around her manicured finger. “Aren’t you a sweet little thing,” she said and released the tress. “Go for it, honey pie.”

I removed a notebook from my sweater pocket and tried not to notice as Dolly rolled her eyes. “For starters, your credentials...”

Dolly puckered her lips as if slurping the answer from the air, gripped the edge of the podium, her knuckles whitening. “Pumpkin face, let me tell you about my credentials. My grandfather is an alcoholic, my brother shoots meth in his

arm, my mother has been schizophrenic for 10 years, and my ex-husband works on Wall Street. I know a thing or two about dealing with assholes.”

“I see,” I said and knew immediately that it was the wrong thing to say. Dolly teetered out from behind the podium like some prehistoric bird, her beak-like nose pecking the space in front of me.

“Lover, what’s your name?”

“Mary,” I told her and leaned on my heels to escape the finger that hooked toward my jaw line.

“Mary, I’m a busy woman. I run sixteen of these joints. Thirty-two people work under me, and I have twelve more appointments today. You want to tell me why you’re here?”

“Well, I came with my mother, but I just don’t understand what exactly it is that you do.” I plunged my hand in my pocket and found the crystal, scratched the surface with my fingernails.

Dolly stood upright and looked down at me, her glasses slipping to the end of her nose. “I’ll tell you exactly what I do, sugar plum. I give *perspective*. People come to me because someone in their life has a twisted point of view.

Sometimes people can’t see what’s right in front of them. You get me, Mary?” Her heels clacked as she adjusted her weight. “It might be a close friend, a coworker, a boss. Most often, though, it’s a family member. How about that mother of yours?” she asked. “Could she use some perspective?”

“My mother?” I squeezed the crystal hard and thought about what Dolly said. Did *my mother* need perspective? I was the one who spent all my time working and going to school when I should have been taking care of her. I couldn’t slow my life down long enough to help her get back on her feet.

“I don’t know,” I told her. “What exactly do you say to give *perspective*?” Dolly stepped back behind the podium. “Let’s pretend that mother of yours is right here,” she said, pointing to the space in front of the podium. “This is how it works. You stand beside me.” She waited for me to move closer. “Perfect, doll face. Now I look your mother straight in the eye and say...

“Go Fuck Yourself.”

The words bounced off the walls and wriggled like fish through the air. I started to lose balance but caught myself on the podium, my fingers nearing Dolly’s. She cupped one cold hand over my own.

“You all right, cherry cheeks?” she asked.

I opened my mouth to say something, but the words didn’t come right away. “I... I...”

Dolly exhaled, and for the first time, I could smell the whiskey on her breath. This close to her face, I could see the varicose veins spidering up her nostrils. Her eyes were sacks of fluid. She was drunk.

“I can’t say that to my mother,” I said, moving my hand out from beneath hers. “What kind of person... How could you... I mean she’s my *mother*.”

Dolly sighed and reached for the whiskey bottle. The cap made a scraping sound as she unscrewed it. “Out of ice,” she said as she poured. “Would you like some?”

I shook my head.

“Here’s the thing,” she took a drink and sucked the liquid from her teeth. “Sure, she’s your mother. I get that. But she’s also a person. And you’re a person. And you’re each responsible for yourself.” She squinted into the cup as if willing the liquid into her mouth. “You see, lover, you can’t change a person. This is important, Mary. You can’t ever change a person, but when you try, and when you fail, that can kill you.”

All the blood rushed to my face, and the air seemed thicker, wooly. I couldn’t believe this woman thought she could help us. She didn’t know my mother or what she’d been through. My mother was sensitive and needed me to be patient and understanding—she needed sympathy. That Dolly could stand there, pretending to help people with those three awful words, the whole thing was a wretched farce.

“I can’t say that. I mean I can’t have *you* say that to my mother. No, thank you, this just isn’t the right place for us.” I turned away from Dolly, remembering then that my mother was still in the car. “I have to go now,” I said and walked outside, the crystal clutched like a seed in my fist.

It was mid-October and still in the upper 80s, but a cool wind sliced the heat. The trees had shed their leaves all at once, and now they tumbled like

paper swans through the parking lot. I could see my mother in the passenger's seat, smoking with the windows rolled up. Already, I could hear her complaining about the heat. She would probably lean her seat back and moan all the way home. "I'm going to die soon," she would say. "There's no hope for me." And then she would resume her poker game the instant we walked inside, the chips plinking as they aligned in virtual stacks.

A pearl of pain rolled down my wrist, and I felt the crystal give a little, swelling and shrinking like a rubber ball. I pulled it out of my pocket and held it up to one eye. A dozen faces, small and fractured, stared back at me. They were pretty faces, with lips like licorice whips and big blue eyes. I liked that girl and wanted to believe that she and I were the same. I popped the crystal in my mouth, tracing the little mirrors with the tip of my tongue, before opening the driver's-side door.

She turned to me, enveloped in a cloud of cigarette smoke, but didn't speak. We pulled out of the parking lot, and I watched her as much as I could, pressing the crystal flat against the roof of my mouth. Her eyebrows had grown out a bushy brown, a deep V dividing them. Despite the gray roots and the circles under her eyes, I could still see the young, carefree mother I had once known moving beneath her skin like a hand inside a cloth puppet.

She spoke at the stoplight, tossing her cigarette out of the window first. "What the hell was that place?" She paused for my reply, but wind rushing through the open window was the only sound between us. "Was it a nursing

home?” We faced each other, and she drew her lips into a thin, pink line. “If you even think about putting me in a nursing home... I’ll *never* forgive you.”

The light changed, and I stepped on the gas. I hadn’t considered a nursing home, and the idea had never been mentioned. I doubted a nursing home would even take her; she was too young and—the doctors claimed—in perfect health. She lit another cigarette. “I can’t believe you, Mary. If you couldn’t handle the responsibility, if you were so immature, if you hated me so much, then you should have told me.”

I bit down on the crystal and it caught on my incisor before falling back to my tongue.

“So you’re ignoring me now, Mary? Nice. Your own mother,” she said. The anger yawned in my stomach. In the past ten months, she had never thanked me. Not for all the times I left work to drive her to her doctor’s appointments. Not for the meals I cooked for her that she didn’t eat. Not for bringing her movies and books that she didn’t watch or read. Not for missing class, cancelling dates, and ignoring friends. She always wanted more.

My tongue muscle tautened behind the crystal, pushing it forward. It slid through my lips and dropped to my lap; a thin string of saliva trailed behind it. I curled my fingers around the steering wheel and turned to my mother.

“Go fuck yourself,” I said before turning back to face the road. The anger dissolved and needled through my body. In its place, a smile percolated without cresting the surface. For the first time in a long time, I didn’t care what my mom

thought or said. I didn't care that she sat there with her mouth propped open or that a wet spot was forming where the crystal had landed on my skirt. I held in my mind the reflection staring back at me, separate, yet not, and let it carry me like a cloud to the next street, and the next.

Almost Astronauts

Leah packs up her apartment every two years, moving a little farther from the center of Dallas each time. She starts with the closets, flips through blouses like a Rolodex, steps into thrift-store dresses and graduation robes. She wears her past selves up and down the hallway before shedding them like a skin and placing them neatly in empty boxes. She makes three piles: give away, probably give away, and keep. The give-away pile is the largest, takes up the whole living room, a miniature Christmas tree perched on top. Every few minutes her brother, Topher, emerges from the bedroom and snatches a blank VHS tape or sombrero and carries it off.

The probably-give-away pile is the second largest and contains all the things her mother left when she moved out, taking with her only what would fit in her sister's minivan. A half-empty stamp collection, two electric pencil sharpeners, high-heeled sandals, Lipton noodles, seven ashtrays, lipstick and shoulder pads. Leah stares at these things like an ugly puzzle and considers dumping the lot in the give-away pile and never looking back. She steps on the trash bags containing her mother's ex-life, lets her cat eviscerate the pots of fake flowers. She waits until after she's finished with the closet, wearing a red-velvet bathrobe and a fisherman cap like armor, to upturn the sack of photographs slumped in the middle of her bedroom floor.

The first photo she pulls from the sack isn't what she expects to find. She expects photos of herself and Topher in front of Christmas trees or Easter bunnies, him propped like a loaf of bread and her wearing tights and laced sleeves. She pulls out a rectangle of blue sky. Not clouds or birds in the sky, just blank blue sky, cleaved from its surroundings, as if by cookie cutter. And behind it, she imagines her mother's eye searching the grass, tree trunks, branches, before finally turning to the heavens and claiming this slice as her own.

When her mother first moved to Dallas, Leah drove her to all her favorite places, bookstores stocked with split spines and pages stained yellow with the yolk of time. She drove her past the restaurant in uptown where she used to wait tables, the restaurant in downtown where Topher tended bar four nights a week. The sky was a bright, cloudless blue those days in early October. The windows stayed down, and no one mentioned notes of exhaust in the air. They pulled up to a stoplight at the corner of Park and Forest—the man there young but missing his front tooth. Most days, Leah would have rolled up the window, stared straight ahead, and thought about how hard she worked and how little she had. But this day, she reached in her purse and pulled out three dollars, her mother placed a ten-dollar bill in her palm. The man thanked them, told them someone had stolen his tent. "Let's go back," Leah's mother said with tears in her throat, "Let's take him home with us."

The photographs are bent and some of the edges have turned the color of rust. Even in their faded state, or perhaps because of it, they feel substantive between Leah's fingers, weighty and saturated. Their texture reminds her of the thin layer of fur on magnolia leaves. They're not like the slick digital prints reproduced on computers, she thinks. Many of these photographs were likely developed in her mother's photo studio, twenty years earlier, her hands unwinding the film, applying the chemicals that burn the blank paper with histories that stretch out in all directions like trails of scent, most of them invisible unless Leah imagines them into existence.

For the first few weeks, Leah carried her mom's laptop outside and showed her how to use Craigslist. She laughed when her mother called the ctrl key "central" and frowned when she couldn't grasp the concept of copy/paste. Leah was in her third year of copywriting for B&B Advertising and felt nauseous when she sat down to a computer screen. Her eyesight blurred and sharp pains sputtered down her wrists.

"I'm too old for this town," Leah's mom said with a cigarette raised to her lips. Leah typed "works well with others" into her mom's LinkedIn profile. "Why would they hire someone who's almost fifty when a bunch of twenty year olds will do the same work?"

"You're not almost fifty, you're forty-five," Leah said and kept clacking words into the screen.

“It’s humiliating. In Florida, I was the young one. Everyone wanted me. I have excellent letters of reference. I work hard!” She wore a pink suit-jacket, and her gold-colored hair was curled up to her shoulders. Some stubborn tears fought their way out and she wiped them away with the back of her hand. “I thought it would be different here. You told me it would be better.”

Leah looked at her mother through blurry eyes, irritated with the lipstick-stained stub of a cigarette, the negativity and ignorance of it all.

“Everything *is* better,” she said and touched the tip of her nose, “You just don’t see it that way.”

Her mother furrowed her brow and mashed the lit cigarette into the ashtray’s green glass.

The next photograph is blue also, and Leah thinks it’s more of the same blank sky, but in the bottom left corner, a rocket has nosed its way into the frame. Only the red tip and half an inch of the white shaft are visible, so the rocket looks as though it arrived unexpectedly, like an elbow or a fingertip intruding on the shot. She wonders if her mother expected to see it there, the metal bird piercing the sky. If she left that day, her Pentax K1000 strapped around her neck, intent on capturing someone else’s dream—a dream she had made her own. Or if she stood haphazardly in a field of marigolds, as she had done so many times before, and found something unexpected when she shifted her gaze from the ground.

Topher moved in after he was evicted from his apartment for vandalizing the swimming pool. Their mother made a big to-do of converting the dining area into a bedroom. She carried the kitchen table down the stairs by herself, heaping it on her back and refusing any help, whispering to Leah, “Chris is so irresponsible—we’ve got to help him get back on his feet.” She called him Chris, even though he asked her not to. “He can’t just take the Christ out of his name,” she said. “It’s wrong, a bad omen, not part of the plan.” She screwed her eyes into the top of her head, as if searching for something she had lost there, an expensive earring, the firefly flicker of a thought.

“You forget he’s twenty-four now,” Leah said holding her cat up to the ceiling to inspect the gray popcorn, the color and texture of moon rock. “Old enough to heave stone planters into a swimming pool. Old enough to change his name.”

She ignored Leah and continued clearing out the dining room, removing framed records and replacing them with cheap prints of Jesus crying.

The next photo shows the storefront, One Hour Photo written in big red letters over the door, photographs of Leah in pink lace and fields of orange-red poppies just visible on the wall inside. Her mother opened the store when she was twenty-five, Leah six and Topher four. She took all the photographs herself and developed them in the back room. Leah used to sneak past her mother and put her arms in the film-processing machine. She would look through the

peephole at the accordion-foil sleeves, pretending they were astronaut arms carrying scissors, tape, action figures through the moon's zero gravity.

After the store went bankrupt five years later, Leah's mom never touched a camera again, not professionally. She tucked her Pentax in a dresser drawer, still loaded, and forgot about it. The only pictures she took came from disposable plastic boxes.

It was Saturday afternoon when Leah broke her brother's blender with a batch of undercooked chickpeas. She waved both hands at the smoke—as if disposing of the evidence would remedy the crime. “What's that smell?” her mom asked, walking up behind her.

“No smell,” Leah said. “You're imagining things.” She turned from the blender, attempting to shield it with her back. Leah's mom held a cylinder pill case in her outstretched palm.

“They're Percocet. I think Chris stole them from me. Where else would he get Percocet?” Her face said: everything is terrible and what are you going to do about it? She took Leah by the hand, led her into the bedroom, and dumped out her stash, a flood of orange bottles on the blue bedspread.

“Just in case I need them,” she said.

She wanted to know if they should have an intervention. “What if he's selling them to his friends? Should we call the police?” She asked, biting her lip, knitting her eyebrows. Leah knew she shouldn't laugh, but her mother's

expression, her saucer-sized eyes and child-sized body, struck her as funny.

“This isn’t funny, Leah! This is serious!”

“Mom, it’s two pills. And it’s Topher we’re talking about. Why does everything have to be so serious?” Leah’s arms went limp; she leaned forward and took big steps around the room, attempting to mimic Topher’s lankiness, his lifelong struggle with walking upright. In the end, her mother agreed on hiding the most dangerous pills in a hollowed-out copy of *Great Expectations*.

The next photo is glossy, taken on the beach in Florida where Leah and Topher spent summers when they were teenagers. A flock of seabirds pecks at Topher’s shirtsleeves. He’s running through the sand, inexplicably un-blurry. The birds, on the other hand, move too fast for the camera—their wings are edgeless half-moons. The sign in the distance reads, “Do not feed the birds,” but, as Leah recalls, that only made Topher want to feed them more. He tossed out some Hot Tamales, and then two birds were twelve. When he tried to run, they took to the sky, filling the heavens with their sharp beaks and shrill cries. “Help!” he yelled, shielding himself with the empty box of candy. Leah and her mother fished out the disposable camera, both of them laughing, careless, unafraid.

“Your grandmother’s eyeball fell out again,” Leah’s mom said to her as she walked in the door, placing her purse on the kitchen table, her mind still flirting with taglines written that day: *Reclaim your youthful smile with stain-*

resistant porcelain veneers. Her mom stirred a pot of split peas and continued, “After all the surgeries and all the pain, the terrible pain, it just fell right out.” She left the wooden spoon spinning in the pea-green water and turned to Leah, expecting to find shock or sadness in her expression. Leah stared back at her mother blankly, the news settling like dust in the endless debris of misfortune that showered from that side of the family.

“Maybe she can get an eye patch,” Leah said. “One with magical powers. Or better yet, a glass eye. You can see underwater with those.” She waited, expecting a laugh.

“Why is everything a joke to you?” Her mother said, taking up the wooden spoon. “Life is just a series of painful decisions and then one day your eyeball falls out.” She stared into the pot, as if seeing her future there.

Some of the photos Leah lifts from the pile are square with rounded edges. Some are so orange, that she can’t see what’s happening in the background. Her mother’s teenage face floats, arms outstretched, palms cupping a blurred piece of flower or a crumpled piece of paper. Strangers in knee socks and roller skates. Leah’s grandmother wearing a blue wedding dress, surrounded by white lilies and dripping white candles. These are photos from her mother’s childhood.

Leah visited her grandmother in Tennessee once; she napped in her twin bed and stared at the fake flowers pinned to the white walls, the bible verses

printed on floral paper. Faceless, filled with second-hand furniture, the apartment could have belonged to anybody. Maybe, Leah thinks, because her grandmother unsaddled her belongings, things like wedding photos, passing along all the hurt and regret, all the hope snuffed out like a flame between fingertips. Leah uncrosses her legs, secures her fisherman's hat, and wonders if one day—inevitably—you wake up to discover yourself turned mother.

Dancing, she discovered late in life, was one of the few things that disconnected Leah from reality, made her feel present and absent at once. She had never taken lessons and felt no pressure to perform well or even with rhythm. Crabwalk, running man, moonwalk—leftovers from her childhood came bubbling up through her limbs. And there were new moves too—the bank robber, kneading the dough, no-bones. She danced on weekdays after long shifts at B&B, sometimes jumping over her mother in sloppy pirouettes.

“I don't understand how everything went so wrong,” her mother said from her seat on the carpet, her insides spinning. They would learn the term “vertigo” later, though not the cause or the cure.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” Leah said and rode down the hall spanking an imaginary horse.

“I want to punch you right now,” Leah's mom said, clutching her forehead.

Though she knew it was true, Leah still crab-walked in circles around the apartment, thinking that sooner or later the feeling would bleed out of her and into her mother.

Photographs are spread like playing cards in a semi-circle around Leah, and every once in a while her cat, Harvey, paws one from the pile and sinks his teeth into the paper. The next one she removes shows the rocket standing erect on the platform, pre-launch, tiny figures perched beside the metal tower. Yellow dust rises from the foreground, and green-tipped mountains crash like waves on the horizon. Leah sees now that her mother came to see myth in the making. She pressed her body against the barricades, fingered the buttons on her camera, the crowd of spectators squeezing against each other, buzzing like crickets. She heard the roar of the thrusters as the engines fired, listened to the announcer count down to zero before saying something like, “Ladies and gentlemen, this is the moment when—literally—our dreams take flight.”

Harvey moved through the rooms at night, visiting Leah’s mother briefly, then smelling Topher’s shoes where he placed them on the living-room floor. The cat jumped in bed with Leah once the apartment settled, usually around three AM. It was near this time when Leah heard her mom yelling, “It’s not funny!” and tried to decide if she should unfold the covers or go back to sleep. A few minutes later, she heard it again.

In the living room, Leah's mother lay in Topher's bed, curled like a cashew, like a nightmare-addled child. Chris was propped up on one arm, a little drunk, and laughing at his own jokes. She saw Leah and her body stiffened, pupils dilated, as if someone has shone a spotlight on her. Then it happened—a can of bees opened inside of her, and her body went tight as an ice cube. Leah pushed Chris out of the way and took her mother by the shoulders to contain the tremors. After a minute, the shaking, the gasping like a land-logged fish, stopped, and the attack was over. Except that Leah's hands were shaking, her eyes moist. She felt as if a tiny egg had broken in her chest, trickling through her veins like a disease.

Of the photographs she finds, Leah's favorite is her mother in a tank top, white jeans, and heels, her back pressed against a newly purchased Camaro like a used-car model. Leah remembers asking her mother if she had spent *all* the money on the car, *every penny*? And her mother said *yes every penny*, and Leah felt afraid, uncertain of her future for the first time in her life, but when she looked down, she saw three pennies shining at her from the cup holder and knew that it was just a joke, that her mother would keep her safe. Leah wants to sieve this memory, to lift it clean and glowing from the rest, but the photos are locked in a silly-string tangle of memory, and when she looks at her mother's smile, the crooked canine rise of her lip, she sees the cigarette stains, the cracked molar, the scent of copper pipe rising up out of it.

Leah's mother made lists in black sharpie and taped them to the bedroom wall. Lists of medications prescribed, doctors visited, possible causes of vertigo. She sat at her desk and copied words from her computer screen:

benzodiazepine poisoning, heavy metal toxicity, vertebral subluxation complex.

Leah stood in the doorway, thinking her mom's life was like a million-point game Scrabble—all those Xs and Zs.

Leah made her own lists and taped them beside her mother's. They said: *paperclips, pancakes, bowling shoes, palm trees, silk flowers, whistling, manicotti, long dresses.* All the things her mother loved. She made separate lists for herself and carried them in her pockets, kept them close so she wouldn't forget, so the words would rub against her body and maybe one or two would burrow its way beneath the skin.

Leah is surprised to see a photo she had taken just fourteen months earlier mixed in with the others, the bag indifferent to the plot, to the proper order of things. The camera only captured her mother's face, her raccoon eyes, the top of the birdcage on her lap, and half a box pushing against the seat. It doesn't show the suitcases strapped to the roof of the car, the paintings wrapped in trash bags in the trunk, the ashtrays, pencil sharpeners, and photographs. It doesn't show the palm trees or her mother's vacant apartment in the background, the bad dreams she had the night before, the stone her boyfriend left in her throat

when he didn't ask her to stay. It doesn't show Leah in the driver's seat with her chest almost touching the steering wheel or her green eyes filled with so much certainty that she doesn't even need her glasses to see through the rain.

When she couldn't get Leah on the phone to ask for bandages, she taped a Maxi pad to her foot and hobbled angrily around the apartment. She was cursing the scissors that sliced past the calluses to the softer skin, whispering, "This is bad, this is really, really bad," when Leah walked inside, holding her mail: a thick stack of hospital bills and unemployment-claim reminders.

"This is bad, Leah," she said, limping as fast as she could to block whatever path Leah might take. "First the unemployment, then the vertigo, now this? I don't know how much more I can take." Her pupils darted like water bugs across Leah's face. They stared at each other like that for a while, Leah's mom casting, reeling, fishing for answers, and the hook snagging before coming back empty each time.

If she had known that this would be the last photograph she would take of her mother in their apartment, Leah would have told her to clip down the wayward curl spiraling out of her barrette. Her mother had placed a silver bow on Harvey's head, the kind with a sticky square on the back for attaching to gifts, and the flash refracted off the metallic ribbon, creating a nimbus of light just below her mother's chin. It was Christmas Eve and Leah remembers waking the

next morning to find Harvey missing, having escaped through the open patio door. She could see him on the neighbor's balcony, yowling in the rain, but he didn't respond to the chunks of tuna or bits of string she flung toward him. For two hours she sat on the balcony, talking to him, her voice a cracked plate. She could still feel the silk of his fur between her fingers, smell his campfire odor. He was just feet away, yet she felt the loss profoundly, as though everything that mattered had been wrenched from her fingertips, and she could do nothing but watch the struggle and listen to the cries.

Topher slept all day and mixed Manhattans and Cape Cods five nights a week, and Leah woke early and wrote ads that lowered people's self-esteem just enough to convince them to make a purchase. They rarely spent time alone together, but before their mother moved out, they went grocery shopping. Even though she was four years older, Leah felt awkward around her brother. He was the tall, handsome, popular one everybody liked no matter how many times he messed up. She thought he still saw her as the bookworm, the over-thinker, the nerd.

He used the shopping cart like a scooter, doing wheelies and donuts. He plucked items from the shelves haphazardly, without a list. He started conversations with strangers. On the way out, the rubber wheels vibrated along the rocky asphalt, and his roasted chicken rode a six-pack of soda cans to the rear of the cart. "Quick! It's trying to escape!" he shouted, lunging toward the bird.

Leah looked at her brother and could see in the bulb of his nose the twelve-year-old kid who collected POGS and firecrackers. She saw how little life had affected him, and she unwound like a yo-yo, releasing the kind of laughter that sounded like a dove was beating its wings somewhere inside of it. She couldn't remember the last time she had laughed.

Leah finds the explosion sandwiched between photos of wildflowers: smoke, poppies, fire, bluebonnets. The shuttle sailed through the sky for twelve wonderful seconds before the fuel chamber malfunctioned. All that reached the crowd was a muffled pop. The story comes back to Leah in a flash of light. Her parents built their lives around this shuttle, expecting their town to be the first in the world to offer commercial flights to the moon. And after the explosion, after the program shut down, people left in waves. The town depopulated, businesses bankrupted.

She sees her mother, again, at the launch. The camera in her hands, going through the motions—wind, focus, press—as pieces of the shuttle rained down in flames. And then, for weeks after, her arms shoulder-deep in the film-processing machine, uncoiling roll after roll of film, and just watching as the conveyer belt spewed orange blossoms of fire.

Leah and her mother watched from the bottom of the stairs as her sister parked the minivan. When the brake lights flashed just feet from them, reflecting

red on the wet asphalt, Leah's mom looked at her and then walked unevenly toward the lights, one hand on the back brace she had started wearing over her nightgown. She made "ahh" and "ssss" sounds wherever she went.

Her sister had spotted a litter of newborn rabbits wriggling in the grass, a good omen, she said. This was after they had packed the van—unpacking and repacking to make space for a birdcage, a bedspread, a winter coat. For every article loaded, another was left behind. "Maybe you can mail them to me someday," Leah's mom said, aloof, unattached.

"Maybe you shouldn't go. You don't have to," Leah said.

"I have to go," she replied. "Because you don't take me seriously." She stared at Leah a final time before turning away, to seal the moment, lock it in Leah's memory like frozen peas. She didn't see any change in her daughter. She looked at Leah and saw only her own reflection.

Leah stands with a handful of photographs and walks into the living room. Harvey is perched atop the garage-sale pile, chewing on the miniature Christmas tree. She finds Topher standing in front of a full-length mirror in their mom's old bedroom, a dagger strapped to his belt and a bandana tied around his head. They acknowledge their respective outfits with a smile.

"Look at these," she says and hands him the prints. He rubs his fingers through his beard and flips from rocket to launch to flumes of smoke cascading like flower petals from the great orange eye.

“What is this?” he asks and marches over to his bulletin board, empty except for a cutout of a T-Rex. He tacks the photos in succession along the top. Leah tells him about the project and the town, their parents and the business they left behind when he was five and she was nine.

“Were there people in the shuttle?” he asks, sitting in a squeaking desk chair that used to belong to their mother.

“Yes, of course,” she says.

“Wow, that’s terrible.” He spins around to face the photos. “But what if they had made it? What if we could take vacations to the moon?” he asks.

Leah considers this. She thinks about how moon rock might feel beneath her feet or how the earth might look suspended in space like a great blue whale. She thinks about what it might be like if her parents were still married or still owned the photo studio. What her mother might be like if she had stayed put.

“Would you go?” Leah asks.

“Yeah. I’d go right now,” Topher says, “Wouldn’t you?”

“I guess so,” Leah says, though she doesn’t know if it’s true.

Sleep Walking

Rabbits, fluffy and white as coconut meat, bounce through my apartment. A large wooden cage swings from the ceiling. Don't forget to feed them, my friend says to me, and she hands me a turkey baster. But before I get the chance, they escape through an open window. Next I'm chasing them through the parking lot. They've shed their ears and leave red puddles wherever they land.

Zach smiles at me from across the table, laughs almost, speaks in dimples. It's never bothered him – the falling asleep mid-conversation, but I feel a little bit naked every time, like a nipple's just slipped out during dinner with his parents. I still wonder if I drool or grind my teeth or just sit there, eyeballs rolling beneath closed lids. I want to tell him about the dreams, how they started after I met him. I want to tell him that he's the reason I started writing again.

“Ricochet,” he says, raising his eyebrows and smiling with teeth. It's something he does when he's changing the subject. “When I see a word like that I see the action. The word itself slamming into walls, ping-ponging off other words, and then I get distracted and I have to write a new story.” He's holding a beer between his hands, fingers tapping lightly against the glass.

We were talking about using a thesaurus. I had told him it's a crutch; it stifles the imagination. When I use the thesaurus, I feel angry at its inability to find the right word, and then I have to stop and regroup, regain control. He uses

the thesaurus to slip into new worlds, his mind like a system of tunnels. He can bounce from television to movies to books, excited and eager to tell me about all of it. He takes road trips, and when he gets back he's decided to apply for publishing jobs everywhere but here.

"That sounds amazing," I say, reaching across the table and touching his moist fingers. He's strong and lean and without body fat. I think of dolphins when I see him naked, and I want to catch him and put him in a tank in my living room, but he's just too happy and slippery and smart.

Our food arrives, and we both start dancing. Hand gestures mostly, pointing and curling our fingers. It's something we've done from the beginning. We look from our plates to each other, so excited in this moment that it spreads through our whole bodies. He doesn't think about what will happen to us after the food, after graduation, after all of it. I wish I could stop.

*

Twins appear in my bedroom, one large and one small. They're not real to me. They're flabby kewpie dolls that weigh as much as portable televisions. I keep reading my book, unwilling to acknowledge this sudden change. Feed them every three hours, I remember with dread between pages. Where have they gone? The big one lies face down in a laundry basket behind the couch. It didn't even have a name.

Vicky, my step-mom, places her hand on my shoulder and waits for me to open my eyes. She's cooking dinner for us and the whole kitchen smells like

garlic. "He's cute," she says. "Nice teeth." It's been two years since I've brought anyone to my father's house. "Thanks," I say, as if I had something to do with his teeth being so straight. "He's no Hasselhoff, but I guess he'll do." She laughs and stirs the tomato sauce. "Dinner's almost ready," she says.

"We won't be gone long," I say and grab the can of Fix-a-Flat from below the sink. I walk back outside where Zach squats beside the flattened bicycle tire. It's not cold outside, but crisp, like starched shirts on telephone wires. The leaves are ripe with color and have fallen to the ground. Zach unscrews the tire's nozzle and attaches the plastic tubing. The can hisses, filling the tire with foam.

Zach stands and places the can on the patio table, awkwardly, unsure of where things belong. I mount my bicycle and lead him past the upturned flowerpots and two-by-fours that litter my parent's backyard. We semicircle to the front of the house, toward Oak Street.

I want to show him where I smoked my first cigarette, where I went when I fought with my parents, where my brother used to test his homemade bombs. I want him riding around in my memories, mashing the past and the present and the future into one. I want to create something permanent in each of us.

I look back and Zach has stopped half way down Oak Street. His rear tire has flattened. I turn my bike around and make big circles that overlap the grass on either side of him. He stares at his tire for a minute, and then gets off the bike. I pull up beside him.

"Dang," he says. "I really wanted to see your neighborhood."

I get off my bike and we walk back toward the house.

"I know you did," I say.

*

A plumber takes a shower in my bathroom, uninvited. I walk in and see his pale body quivering behind the clear curtain. He turns to me and says, I'm sorry, I'll just be a minute. I leave the bathroom. He finishes showering and pays me for my trouble in murals. Ghostly women, naked, smoking, half-finished. The murals are priceless, but the walls will crumble as soon as he leaves. Only an eye, a breast, half lips, salvaged from the white hill of wreckage.

"What was it this time?" my mom asks, pouring a bag of split peas into boiling water. She turns away from the stove and faces me, her expression greedy, wanting everything.

"What do you mean?" I ask, both arms wrist-deep in sudsy sink water, grasping forks.

"The dream, of course," she says and opens the fridge, removing a small bag of whitened baby carrots. "You have a gift, you know. Remember what the doctors said? The narcolepsy is probably just your body's reaction to stress; it could disappear anytime. You have to pay attention to the dreams now, while you're still having them." She arranges the carrots into rows on the chopping block. "Dreams are like prophecies," she continues, butcher knife in hand. "They can tell your future. Before I moved here, I dreamt of a stop sign and a flood."

“So you didn’t listen?” I ask, picking up something octagon-shaped, my mother’s ashtray.

“No, of course not. I wanted to be with my kids. Tell me about your dream, Phoebe.”

I run the sponge over the ashtray and tell her about the plumber and the paintings. I leave out the part about the walls crumbling.

“Wow, Phoebe,” she says, chopping away at the petrified carrots. “Those are all great signs. I mean a plumber is someone who fixes problems, leaky pipes, things behind walls. So the plumber probably represents your inner landscape, and paintings represent creativity, that’s obvious. So...” she lays the knife on the counter and scoops up the carrots between cupped hands. They drop like bombs in the pea-green water.

“So it probably means that expressing your inner creativity will bring you wealth and success.” She smiles, triumphant. “Yes, I’m sure of it. Keep doing whatever you’re doing, Phoebe, because something great is headed your way.” I raise my hands from the dishwater. The soap bubbles have melted into a gray film that clings to my wrists. I hadn’t told her that I knew exactly when the dreams had started, that I could stop them any time. The film makes shapes on the surface of the water: a parabola, a double helix, an infinity sign. I wonder if it’s better to live in a dream than not to have dreams at all. The shapes stretch, evolve. I wonder if I should pull the plug.

*

Cannoli, stiff and golden, rocks gently in the Styrofoam container I have placed in my lap. Zach sits beside me, dwarfed by the steering wheel. The truck belonged to my dad when he was sixteen: 1965 canary yellow Ford. We're parked facing a gray wall, and it's cloudy and sunny at the same time, like there's a spotlight above the windshield. I open the box and split the cannoli into two pieces, flakes of crust shower my arms and legs. I hand half to Zach. "I like you," I say when he touches the other end, our fingers connected but not touching, the Chinese-finger-trap dessert between us.

I open my eyes and see Zach reaching into the red-and-white striped box. He pulls out a single popcorn kernel, tosses it in the air, and catches it with his open mouth, fishlike. He smiles at me.

"Sea bass," I say, touching his lower lip, "It's what I'm calling you now in front of your friends. They'll be so jealous." He makes popping sounds, like a caught fish gasping, and leans toward me. I give him my cheek and he puckers, knowing what I expect and giving me quick puff of air instead. It's what he does when he's comfortable.

The theater is small, and everyone knows everyone but us. The owner, a man with a white mustache and Hawaiian shirt, tells us he restored it recently, and the props up front are from the acting troupe that practices there every Thursday. Spread throughout the theater, the gray-haired regulars say, "Look how young they are" and smile at us, wrinkled hands affectionately clasped.

“Hey, when we get back can you look at something for me?” Zach asks. He’s rubbing salt-covered hands on his jeans now. His puffy jacket makes swooshing sounds when he moves his arms. He taps his foot. His eyes skim. “I’m almost finished with my editing sample for Penny Press,” he says. It’s the publishing company in Minnesota where he’s applying for a job.

“For a small fee,” I say, grabbing his knee, trying to pin it down. “Maybe some nickels. Or jellybeans.”

“Mmhmm,” he says, still kicking.

“Hey,” I say, facing him. “You’re getting the job, Zach. You’re the best. How could they not hire you?”

He bites his lip. It’s something he’s never done before. “Yeah,” he says. “It’s just that I’ve never wanted anything so badly in my whole life.”

The words sting. They’re poison-tipped arrows. I’m covered in them, I realize. There’s hardly a bare patch of skin left on me. I must look ridiculous, sitting there, walking around, dancing at dinner with metal pins in my hands and eyes and forehead. I must look insanely jovial.

“I think I’ll get some more popcorn before the movie starts,” he says, standing, swooshing. “Do you want anything?”

Don’t go.

But it comes out, “Nope. I’m just fine.”

“I’ll be right back,” he says and squishes between my legs and the row of chairs, walking quickly to the aisle, avoiding the curious eyes of the 80-something woman in purple and her soft-skinned husband.

He goes.

I roll my jacket into a ball and place it beneath my head. I pull my legs to my chest and lean against the empty velvet seat beside me. I suddenly feel as though I can sleep for days and days.

Locust Street Circus

The living room was a bog of hesitation. We splashed through it, ignoring the girl with pigtails and the going-away card she wanted us to sign. “Not now,” we said with bottles in our fists. We made for the kitchen and found the corkscrew, the bottle opener. Our glasses filled, bubbles swam to the surface and loitered. We swallowed them before they had the chance to burst and poured another drink.

We found Jamie in the backyard, admiring the photo booth she had rented for the party. She was tall and thin, a lovely beanstalk, with a front tooth slightly askew. Bits of pepper would collect in the crevice, and sometimes we would tell her—sometimes we wouldn’t. She had on a new dress, a denim boat-neck number with a matching flower pinned to the chest. Her hair caught the glow from the Christmas lights and shone like golden feathers. We raised our glasses to our lips and stared, conscious of the fact that in the morning she would be gone.

She swiveled toward us and smiled, unsurprised to find us muted and standing there. “Congratulations,” we said and handed her gifts wrapped in brown paper. “Tell us about the promotion.” She told us what we already knew. San Francisco, upper-level management, five weeks vacation, and training in Europe that summer. “Travel is so important to me,” she said, her blue eyes studded with certainty. “And besides, when I make a big change like this, people tend to follow.” We laughed and stared into our drinks. We thought we had

settled in Texas, embraced its traffic jams and level-orange pollution, absorbed its hamburger smell.

“Are you bringing your futon with you?” we asked, chopping the soil with the ends of our shoes.

“Of course!” she laughed. “Everyone is welcome to come visit.”

The photo booth made a noise like a coin tumbling down a pipe, and we turned to face it. Lights strung across the top reflected off the wood paneling and cast a yellow glow that attracted the fireflies. We studied the exchange and decided it was profound, the heavy machine and the weightless animal, but we didn’t know why.

Jamie was the first inside. She arched her long neck, upturned the corners of her mouth, and stepped through the half-curtain. We watched her legs walk around as the flashbulb flashed once, twice... four times. We didn’t like the booth’s unbiased observation, its authorless accuracy. Rachel usually took the pictures and could be trusted to appropriately edited the experience.

The photos slid with a click into the dispensary. We feigned nonchalance while baby-stepping toward Rachel, who pawed the strip with damp hands. “Oh my god,” she said and brought the photos closer and closer to her face, until her brown eyes crossed.

“What is it?” We asked, setting our drinks aside. Jamie stepped out of the booth and tripped, landing on her knees in the grass. We ignored her and wrestled the photo from Rachel.

The image resembled Jamie—pixie haircut, Hollywood eyelashes, red lips that stood like soldiers in the white sand of her skin. It was missing the dirt-colored roots, the crooked tooth, the bulbous end of her nose. The photo booth had taken the raw material of her and fashioned a glowing, golden goddess. We sucked the air into our lungs, one giant breath, and held it.

Rachel broke the silence. “Let me in there,” she said, flinging back the photo booth’s curtain. Jamie laughed, and it was like a bell ringing, awakening us from a reverie. We helped her up and showered her with compliments. “So beautiful. Just like a movie star.” She brushed them off with the back of her hand. Everything about her was confident, effortless, serene. We wanted to sink our fingers into her like clay, to mold her into bricks.

*

The booth sank when Rachel jumped in it. She had broken her diet again, and we could see it in the bracelet of fat around her ankles. She and Jamie had grown up on West-Texas diets rich in butter, fried meats, and whole milk. When Jamie lost the weight, Rachel seemed to absorb it, to settle into it. The gaining deflected her friend’s loss.

She lived in a duplex within walking distance of Jamie’s apartment and the university. We all lived within walking distance of the university. Everton had a way of arresting things: English majors, ambition, rain. The town was built in a pit, a city inside a pothole. We remembered after every flood, as the sky bloated and buckled on our heads, as the squirrels paddled through sudden puddles. The

rain unleashed our uncertainty like a whip to a caged animal's back. We grew restless, stacked ladders under the stairs to help us climb our way out.

On clear days, we returned to our blogs and *I heart Everton* t-shirts. We settled in with blankets and mugs of tea, our lungs flattened, our pores swelled with the thick air. We told ourselves that we loved this town and didn't need jobs that used our liberal-arts degrees. We could keep running these same treadmills and eating this same Thai food, at least until the next flood, the next going-away party.

Rachel had it the worst. She had a house-full of flashbulbs and backdrops, a new job figuring the payroll at a small hospital, health insurance, an expensive car. She had skewered an avocado pit in her sink, and a green flower had sprouted from the vine. Without meaning to, she had taken root.

Jamie's sudden momentum unearthed the peppers we had planted, the liquor bottles we thought we had recycled. It wasn't fair for her to make plans without us. Now we had to scramble; we had to pull the ends of our noses and talk in tumbleweeds. "I'm probably moving to Portland next year," Rachel said. "I'm definitely looking at jobs."

We all were.

The lights inside the machine flashed four times, and Rachel peeled back the booth's curtain. She was still wearing a false mustache that matched her hair. We thought this was funny. The photo slid into the tray, and she held it up to the light, then squealed and pressed it to her chest.

It was too late, though. We saw the images she held. Each frame exposed more and more of her body, from her pale pink nipples right down to the bracelets of fat around her ankles. There was no goddess, there. She touched the mustache to steady her quivering lip.

“What is it?” Jamie asked, her voice a nerve tonic.

“The photo!” she said, handing over the strip. “I never took off my clothes!”

The blood ballooned beneath Jamie’s alabaster cheeks; a soft smile uncoiled. We had fallen in love with her the first time we met her—that skin, that smile. As much as we told ourselves we preferred the dark and mysterious type, we fell for translucence every time. She could never hide an emotion, a thought. It sailed up from inside of her and docked in her face for everyone to see. She was exposed, and confident. It never occurred to her that she had anything to hide.

Rachel looked up at Jamie, a full six inches taller, and paused. In the blinking light of Christmas and the innocence of a grassy backyard, they resembled mother and child, suspended in the moment of certainty that precedes reaction. Jamie spread her arms and offered Rachel her breast.

*

Derek loved cats, which was only funny because it was true. White hairs stood off of him like cacti needles; they danced in the night air when he gestured. He used words like *cerebral* and *sublime* to describe them, calling them mini monks. He mentioned them during his comedy routine at the Laugh Factory, and

we didn't laugh just to be polite. He was somewhat of a celebrity in the Everton-comedy circuit.

He and Jamie wrote jokes together, though she never performed. We liked to watch their exchange, the way they refined each other's words: grabbing, thrusting, *gyrating*. The valves opened when they were together and laughter tumbled out unrestrained. Derek exhaled thick hiccups and Jamie exposed her throat to the sky and gargled, finishing with a modest, close-lipped smile. We felt weightless, like winged insects. We didn't know two opposite-sexed people could be friends like this. We suspected they couldn't.

He was handsome in a John Travolta sort of way. His black hair fell in his eyes and veiled his thick eyebrows. He'd grown his beard out long, and it looked strange paired with his skinny legs and long torso. He looked like a bespectacled Pez dispenser. He walked around the party with a cell phone glued to his palm, kicking over beer bottles without knowing it. His girlfriend was running late, he said and fell into the hammock. Twice, the stakes buckled, and Rachel had to reset the strings to better support him.

The photo booth excited him more than anybody. We thought this was because he was accustomed to performing in front of unknown audiences. He saw it as a challenge, and he thought he could win. We were good at winning things in Everton, at organizing events that all our friends would attend. There was no competition, no risk of failure, and we were never paid. We were experts at walking the tightrope between recognition and obscurity.

Rachel's photos cleared the heady fog that he had brought to the party, and he became a beacon of blind courage. "Ladies, step aside," He said and popped his collar. He looked over his shoulder and wiggled his backside before throwing the curtain open. "That's just a taste," he said and disappeared. Rachel laughed, too loudly, and we exhaled one great alcohol-laced breath that warmed the air and unclenched our jaws. The fireflies regained their spasmodic shutter.

We glued our eyes to the photo-strip slot, to Derek's unlaced black boots fastened to the floor. We wanted to see him naked, to see Jamie see him naked. We wanted doubt to scamper rat-like across her face, to seize it and breathe its black scent.

The booth fell silent for a moment before the gears shifted. The paper uncoiled somewhere inside, and the strip ticked into the slot. Rachel moved closer to the machine; we allowed it. She pulled the photo free and grabbed Derek by the shirtsleeve in one motion. We didn't notice him standing there, two pairs of prop glasses still perched on the end of his nose. They turned their backs to us and whispered.

"What is it?" We demanded.

Derek wasn't smiling; his thick eyebrows weren't salsa dancing across his forehead; his hands weren't clasped in shock over his helmet of hair. We didn't recognize the expressionlessness, or know what it meant. He took the strip from Rachel and turned toward us, still with the glasses on his forehead. "Behold," he said, flourishing the strip like a magician with a deck of cards. "The Invisible

Man.” He dropped the photo, the dual pairs of spectacles floating faceless against the white backdrop. It landed in the bedewed grass for us to retrieve.

*

If it had been anyone but Maggie, we would have thought it strange to see her float out of the house in a wedding dress. The dress was off-white, satin, strapless. The train formed a half-moon behind her, the edges crisp with yellow mud. Her blonde hair stood in pigtails on top of her head, and she held a sheet of construction paper to her chest. It was the going-away card we had forgotten to sign. She came around to each of us and placed a Sharpie in our hands, explaining that the dress was a backup, the one she had worn on the beach in Hawaii three months earlier. It didn't matter that it collected stray blades of grass as it swept the lawn.

What we knew about Maggie: she taught art to third-graders, she wore patterned knee-socks over her clothes, she went to church every Sunday, and she and her newlywed husband saw a marriage counselor three times a week. We hadn't gone to the wedding, though we'd seen pictures: the two of them face-to-face on cliffs, waves committing to the undisturbed rock below. They had exhausted their savings for the sake of those photos and the memory of having them taken. When they returned to Texas, a ceiling of debt unbuckled and caught her husband in the debris. He wondered openly whether his life would be better without her.

On the card, Maggie had drawn in orange marker the Golden Gate Bridge, four rectangles stacked horizontally formed the tower with descending vertical lines for the support cables. Beside the tower stood Jamie and her husband, Ren, their hands clasped, a red heart suspended between them. Ren smoked cigarettes socially and had an impressive blonde beard. He wrote film criticism in his free time and quoted Proust unbidden. He sat on a picnic table at the party and discussed politics while drinking Pabst Blue Ribbon from a can. They'd been married for two years, and though he sometimes interrupted her too forcefully or laughed at Jamie instead of with her, it was obvious in the way that he wrote couplets on her lunch bags, the way he quit his job in order for her to pursue her dream, that he loved her as much as the rest of us.

Maggie approached Therese, or Tess, as she liked to be called. She was new to the group, a friend of Jamie's from her previous job, an outsider. Maggie, with her blonde pigtails and innocent eyes, looked the most ridiculous standing next to Tess. There was something about her, the curvature of her body or the shape of her teeth, the way her cocoa-colored hair fell in waves down the small of her back, something animalistic. Maybe it was her scent. We wanted to like her and dislike her at the same time, to be seen in public with her, that pink cotton dress hugging her hips, and to expose her assumed ineptitude: Tess is pretty but not much upstairs, you know?

We watched as Maggie offered her the card, eyes wide and never leaving Tess, like a cat approaching a more dominant cat. Tess took the card. She

sketched two clouds above the bridge, one for her signature and one for her date's signature. We'd never met her date, Alex, but he was easy to like, sociable, and smart. He seemed too pale and clean-shaven for Tess, whom we pictured with the type of man that would model chainsaws in *Outdoor America* catalogues. We suspected her date had found a trophy girlfriend, and those never last.

Tess pinched her date by the elbow and drew him back toward her, to sign the card. The wedding dress made him nervous; we could tell by the way he avoided eye contact with Maggie, the way he wandered toward the shadows when she approached. She made us all a bit nervous, her deflated dream, her misplaced rising action. We wanted to push her aside and just watch Jamie and Ren, their blonde heads nested together. We resisted the idea that our dates loved us like they loved Everton: temporarily, the thought of permanence a clot that travels slowly to the brain.

"Where's John?" Tess asked of Maggie's husband. Jamie must have told her his name, which meant she knew more about us than we thought.

Maggie eyed the construction-paper card that Tess held in her outstretched hand, evaluating the placement of the clouds, the subtext of the question.

"Late shift at the liquor store. He'll be here soon," Maggie said and took the card, delicately, as if it might dissolve with too much pressure.

They parted; we watched Tess and her date watch the cream-colored fabric ripple as it tugged the grass. Then she did something we didn't expect. She grabbed Alex by the hand and pulled him into the photo booth. We'd never seen her move that way: too sudden for romance too awkward for whimsy. In that moment, she forfeited her animalism, her dominance; she became as jerky and stilted as the rest of us. We dropped conversations and found the shortest path between ourselves and the booth.

If we tilted our heads, we could see her bare calves, taught, the color of fresh baguettes, circling Alex. Derek pretended to peek under the curtain, but he was still too afraid of Tess, too unfamiliar. The lights flashed four times, thirty seconds between each flash, and she was spit out still wearing a top hat and tie. We hardly noticed the green flicker of unripe fireflies encircling her, or that she had opened her arms wide, ready to receive laughter, applause. The strip landed in the tray. Just before we snatched it, she said, "We're the new Ren and Jamie!"

Silence but for her heavy, solitary breath.

She didn't know we already knew she had leased Jamie's apartment. She had visited the landlord, Jack a red-faced man in his 60's, earlier that week. Jamie had told us. We imagined their exchange: "I've been doing this for 40 years, and I've only had to seize property twice," Jack said as they entered Jamie's vacant bedroom, a pine bedframe standing empty against the wall, a gift for Tess. "Ren and Jamie were great residents. Always on time and never complained," he said and then, "You have something stuck to your leg."

Our eyes yo-yoed from the still-damp strip to Tess and back again. Her smile began to droop, her eyes skimmed, searched for Jamie's blue dress, her red lips. She also didn't know that we knew about Alex, that he had accepted a scholarship to the University of Minnesota and would be leaving soon. She would stay in Everton, scholarship-less, boyfriend-less, and the photo showed her this way: blanched, domestic, the ghost of middle-age thick in her shadowing. Her posture relied on Alex, who had disappeared from the shot. She was a mime, graceless and leaning on something imagined, on shapes stamped into air.

*

Jamie came over and collected the strip, a thin smile parted her lips. "You're so funny, Tess," she said and slipped the photo into the pocket at her waistline. Tess removed the top hat and held it with both hands over her chest; she released a nervous laugh, and her skin reclaimed its olive hue. Jamie touched her lightly on the shoulder as she passed through the center of the crowd to the outskirts, where Ren waited.

What was so funny about the photo? Why didn't she see how desperate and helpless we had become? Did she capture us this way because she knew it wouldn't last, that we would rise like bunyips and slough drippy Everton from our shoulders? Or was her lack of hesitance a byproduct of her surety that we would never leave, always be here waiting for her return?

We amalgamated, slowly, creating a divide between ourselves and the shoulder-locked silhouette of Jamie and Ren. The flicker of the former

interpretation inspired confidence, and we seized it, held it in our fists. Derek took Tess by the shoulder (he was no longer afraid), who took Maggie, who took Rachel, and we formed a train that trekked into the booth.

The curtain slid shut on metal rings and filled the room with its harried bell toll. Someone sat on the vinyl stool, and it popped like a bone, screamed when it swiveled. We pressed against the walls, the diamond-patterned gunmetal of catering trucks, and it left tracks on our skin. The camera swiveled its red eye toward us, and this time we were unafraid. We did not hear the pulleys whisper to the belts, the lens zoom, the timer tick. We listened to the bustle of props as they flew from Derek's hands, the unguarded laughter that somersaulted through the air.

We landed in the grass, misshapen and out of breath, expecting to find Jamie bent in half beside the photo-strip slot, waiting anxiously with that thin smile frozen on her lips. Our necks craned outward from the tangle as we searched the hammock, the picnic table, the beer chest. A light rain began to fall; droplets collected in our eyelashes. We spotted her near a bush, her arms raised then lowered, as one by one she emptied the contents of our glasses onto the lawn.