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Sea of Broken Things

Laura Elizabeth Smith

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Sea of Broken Things

by

Laura Smith

Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

Mr. Randolph Thomas

Department of English

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Bursting

The road carved through densely gathered pines swaying beneath the swirling sky. Fallen needles shone in the dappled sunlight that dripped through the dark boughs. Pine roots knotted into the deep red clay, soil that glistened after a rain and cracked dry beneath the sun. Adam watched silently as his uncle drove. The truck rocked over jagged potholes, and his uncle's arms flexed, gripping the steering wheel more tightly. Adam focused on the underbrush as it jolted by. The past several months floated across the mottled landscape, his brother in a hospital bed, white gowns and tubes, black dresses and too many flowers, but Adam forced memories from his mind as he stared at the dark line of trees.

Curving, the road opened into a clearing. Huge azalea bushes bordered one side. The rest of the yard sloped into the bank of a pond nestled against a little red cabin, stone chimney standing starkly against the sky. Adam's uncle pulled the truck off the road and onto the grass, roughly hitting the brake next to a persimmon tree. He clicked the ignition off, truck shuddering, engine clicking as it cooled.

Behind the screen door, a woman's pale outline, face framed with white, emerged from the dark house. Her hand pressed against the gray mesh.

“Alright, let’s get your stuff inside.” His uncle’s door swung open as he stepped out underneath the persimmon tree. “Nee will probably have something waiting on the stove for you.”

Adam hesitated, absorbing the smooth, rippling water stretching away from the little house. Shadows gathered beneath the eaves, shrouding the house in twilight. His feet hardly made a sound among the sky and the pines when he lowered himself to the ground and stepped towards his grandmother’s home.

The house was dark. Fading sunlight fell through huge picture windows that faced the pond, dimming squares on the wood floor like smoldering embers. Adam’s uncle set his suitcase in the middle of a faded rag rug. “Need help, Mama?”

“No, Tom, it’s all ready.” She moved her head with her words, as though her chin provided subtle punctuation. Her frail shoulders, drawn together like a little bird’s folded wings, were wrapped in a light sweater. “Just come here.”

The stone fireplace looming in the center of the house was empty. Adam remembered throwing magnolia leaves into flames that licked the mantelpiece, waiting for the pop when the glassy leaves exploded. Drew’s grin, macabre in the firelight, shuddered at the sudden sound, both boys insisting it hadn’t scared them, their insides quivering. No fire broke the gray of ash and stone now.

“And you.” Nee stepped away from her son towards Adam. “You come here now.”

Adam let her squeeze the breath out of his ribs. “Mm, mm,” she cooed. Stale perfume, holding the memory of crushed flowers, surged into Adam’s nose. “It’s good you came to see me.”

Adam nodded, moisture gathering at the corners of his eyes. She pulled away, her gnarled fingers digging into his shoulders. “Alright,” she muttered, turning towards the little dining room. “Let’s sit down at the table.”

Adam’s uncle left after supper. He had work the next morning and needed to make the drive back across the delta before it got late. Nee saw him to the door before instructing Adam to clear the table while she rinsed the dishes. She made quick work of the clean up, leading him into the living room. The sun had fallen behind the pines. Only dim rays stretched through the windows, falling against the stone fireplace. Nee clicked the lamp into light, an old kerosene lantern, converted into an electric lamp, resting on top of a Singer sewing machine. The sewing machine was antique, a wooden top and an iron pedal balanced on decorative whorls. Adam remembered Drew pumping the pedal vigorously, watching the sewing mechanism rise and fall until Nee caught him, warning him not to tear up a family heirloom. Confining the memory to his throat, Adam looked through the picture windows, across the pond.

Nee pulled a sewing basket from behind her armchair. She lifted a bundle of white yarn, unknitting a slender crochet needle. Pulling length out of the skein, she hooked her needle into previous stitches and began adding new ones. Her needle caught the light, flitting in and out.

“It’s quieter up here than you’re probably used to.” She smiled. “It’s been a long time since you’ve had to get used to crickets for company.” Her hair looked darker in the dim light, streaks of gray coursing through the soft waves.

Adam nodded. A mounted deer’s face stared solemnly at him from above the doorway to the kitchen. Cobwebs laced its aging antlers.

The hearth was bare. “Where’s Lady?” No bundle of white and red fur curled on its stones.

Nee’s needle danced around her yarn, spinning stitches into being. She bit her lip. Adam wasn’t sure she’d heard him.

“Where’s the dog?” His voice echoed against the fireplace.

“She’s around.”

“Want me to let her in?”

Nee shook her head. “I put her food out this morning, but she never came to eat it.”

“Did you look for her?”

“She’ll probably come back.” Nee shrugged. “Or she won’t. There’s a lot of woods out there.”

“So you aren’t even going to try?” Adam’s voice was too loud. “That’s it?”

“No, that’s not it.” Nee’s needle flashed, moving rapidly. “She’ll probably come back. And if not, she can take care of herself.”

Adam swallowed loudly.

She stopped, studying him. Her eyes were gentle.

“It’s been a long day.” Gathering the loose yarn in her lap, she looped it around her fingers and laid her needlework back in its basket. “Why don’t we call it an early night?”

Adam couldn’t remember another night that had held so much noise. The humming of crickets rattled his teeth. Throaty bullfrogs resonated across the pond

outside his window. The little window unit air conditioner did nothing to stifle the night songs of nature, its dull humming and shaking small compared with the waves of sound echoing off the water. He tossed restlessly as seconds spun into minutes, melting into hours without dreams. Shadows crept along the walls and ceiling of the little bedroom where his twin bed was tucked. He tried not to look at the empty bed next to his, leaving his mind the freedom to follow vague memories that danced along the floorboards and tumbled behind his eyelids.

Adam woke late. The drip and rattle of percolating coffee stretched thinly through his bedroom walls. He rubbed his eyes, considering going back to sleep, but sunlight pushed through the drapes, making the room too bright. He should look for Lady. Or try, anyway. Maybe she was somewhere along the creek.

In the kitchen, Nee stood in front of the stove, bacon sizzling next to a steaming pan of eggs. She looked up at his footsteps. “Good afternoon.” Her voice croaked slightly. “I was just about to wake you. Sleep well? Or at least long enough?”

Adam rubbed his eyes, shrugging.

“Mm.” Nee stared at him, nodding. “Well, coffee’s almost ready. You can have breakfast for lunch.”

Adam sat down at the little kitchen table, pushed up against the wall, the top half divided into large glass panes. The windows looked out on the yard, overflowing with unruly grass, broken only by a little brick path leading to a rusted water pump and a birdbath. He stared unseeingly out the window.

“I was thinking you could start with the side yard there today.” Nee gestured over her shoulder.

“What?”

“I don’t mean to be insensitive.” Nee lifted a slice of bacon out of the skillet and onto a paper towel to drain. “We’re all grieving. But you need to be busy, and this old woman needs help.”

Adam rubbed his forehead and leaned forward, putting his elbows on the table. He nodded.

She looked over at him. “The push mower is in the shed. I’ll show you where after you eat.”

The Alabama heat was merciless, snaking around his throat, tightening humid fingers as sweat blossomed through the fibers of his shirt. The push mower was dusty, grey silk trailing from its handles to the walls of the shed. Adam pulled it into the sunlight. He struggled with its ancient cord. After several tries, yanking irritably, he coaxed it to life, its voice a dull purr. He jerked it into the yard and began carving even lines in the grass, moving quickly. If he worked fast, he could have time to run along the creek before it got dark. His feet found a rhythm as sweat poured down his back.

He guided the mower carefully along a dip in the ground. Grass filled out an old wound, fringing the reddish soil with green. Drew helped him dig the hole, years ago, two boys digging through the center of the earth to China. Drew threw a dog bone in the hole, covering it lightly with soil, and led Lady to sit in the fragrant earth, hoping she’d do the digging for them. She hadn’t obliged. The void was changed, shifted with time, but it was still too deep for the mower. Adam pushed towards the birdbath, breathing heavily.

The engine sputtered, choking loudly. Adam stopped it, letting the blades slowly spin to a halt. Its rusted handles led down to an aging body. Wiping sweat from his brow, Adam knelt beside the mower, peering at the ancient mechanism for the source of the problem.

A frayed wire had split. Adam cursed under his breath. He didn't know how to fix it. His father owned a fancy riding lawnmower that had never broken. He rose to his feet, shaking his head, and kicked at the mower. His foot bounced dully against the stained metal. It didn't fall over. He kicked again, harder, watching it slowly tilt to one side, toppling into the grass.

The mower was decrepit, the yard overgrown with dying memories, the house shrinking with time. It was all old, had all fallen into disrepair. Adam walked angrily towards the water pump, wanting to splash water across his heated forehead. He grabbed the rusty handle and pumped it up and down, harshly jerking it, waiting for cool water to gurgle out of its depths. But none came. He stopped, staring at the pump. Gripping it more tightly, he tried again, roughly forcing the handle. Only air gushed out of its trough. He wiped his hands on his jeans, leaving rusty streaks.

Pine trees loomed over the pump, stretching away into unbroken forest. The creek was somewhere in there, carving a wavering trail through endless trees, sweeping leaves and eddying against fallen logs. Who was he kidding? Lady could be anywhere. The trees crowded his vision, swelling, haggard vines dripping from their limbs crawling up and out, filling the air, blocking the sky, forest stretching undisturbed as far as he could see. His breath was loud in his ears. He couldn't get enough air, couldn't open his chest against the heaviness that pressed into his throat and lungs.

The pump hadn't always been broken. When he and his brother were boys, they would wash themselves off under it before coming inside. Adam would work the pump while his brother stood under it, catching the copper-flavored water in his mouth. Adam could picture it now, picture Drew's muddy clothes, his tousled hair, water running in rivulets down his upturned face—

But the memory was incomplete. Drew's face was blank. Adam could see the shape, but the features were gone. He tried to resurrect them, tried to mold eyes, a nose, a mouth onto the shapeless void of memory, but none fit. Adam stared at the ground in front of the pump, willing an apparition of Drew to appear, willing an outline to fill in his recollection, but beneath the tousled, dirty hair, there was only shadow.

Adam recoiled from the pump. Drew was gone, Lady was gone, that stupid pump, that broken, failing pump, gone too, all dying anyway, all fading, all falling victim to sluggish decay. He couldn't breathe, the humid air snaked more tightly around his throat, choking him, squeezing his trachea, leaving him gasping, elbow slung against the pump.

He turned back to the mower. Why was everything broken? He kicked at the mower, catching the top of the handle with his foot, spinning it around itself. He kicked again, harder this time, missing, tried again, catching the body of the mower, his foot hurt, but he kept kicking, kicked it into green stems, crushing them under its weight, kicked it across the hole Drew left incomplete before he reached China.

A voice called to him from the house. Adam ignored it. He grabbed the mower with both hands, hefting it as high as he could, and threw it, listening for the satisfying

clatter as it skidded across the ground, collided with the earth with a clunk, rocked once, and lay still.

Nee called again, louder. Adam turned his head, looking back over his shoulder. She teetered on the stone steps outside the kitchen, clutching her loose pants in both hands. She was tiny. Frail. Her face was a myriad of wrinkles sagging beneath too many years. How much longer did she have? The shadows under her eyes were hollows, growing ever darker, decaying, withering away into something smaller and less alive. Drew's eyes had taken on a similar darkness, become tired, shriveled as he grew sicker, broken down to hollow sockets that rarely opened, outlined in bruises. He was too young for that, they were all too young for that, but nothing was invincible, not the rusted broken pump or the choking mower that shuddered in the grass a few yards away, all deteriorating, all lessening, all weakening into nothing.

Adam turned back towards the shed as sobs wracked his lungs. The door to the house clicked shut. He didn't look back.

The porch swing creaked rhythmically. Adam looked across the darkening pond. The glow on the horizon cast a thin reflection across its watery surface. His pulse throbbed in his temples. He rubbed them, trying to blot out the ache of the afternoon.

A switch clicked on, throwing buzzing yellow light over the patio. Nee opened the door, stepping carefully down the stone steps. She held onto the door for balance, moving gingerly, and settled herself into a rocking chair across from Adam.

"Listen to those frogs." Her voice was calm. "They never shut up."

Adam shook his head slowly. He stretched his legs against the stone floor, pulling the swing back.

Nee stared beyond the circle of light, eyes unfocused. She held her head high, her bird-thin shoulders lowered, relaxed. “Did I ever tell you about the ghost in the church?” She turned her face towards Adam. He shook his head.

“Up at Montgomery Hill,” Nee nodded. “In the church up there, where I got married. When we were little girls, everyone thought there was a ghost living inside it.” Her voice cracked slightly. “But, turns out, there was a man living in there.”

Adam looked up. “Yeah?”

“Mm.” Nee pursed her lips. “There was a man living there for three months without anybody knowing.”

“How?”

“He was a convict. From the prison over in Atmore. He ran seventeen miles, running at night, all the way from Atmore, and hid out in that church for three months. He stayed in the attic most of the time, during services and all, but at night, I guess he’d come down for a while. He snuck around to people’s farms, stealing their chickens and eggs at night to feed himself.”

Adam shook his head, rubbing his hand against the stubble along his jaw. “That’s crazy.”

“Some people saw a light in the church late at night and thought it was a ghost.” She chuckled. “Some ghost.” The legs of her chair groaned as she rocked forward and then back, scraping against the brick floor of the patio. “Do you remember that straw-pee?”

Adam shook his head.

“Really?” Nee’s eyes widened. “You don’t remember that thing? You and Drew used to play in it all the time.”

Adam’s throat tightened, eyes squinted, considering.

“Your grandfather built it for you. He put a bunch of sticks up, in a triangle shape, like a teepee, and let you boys stuff it with pine straw. Don’t you remember?” Nee paused, clearing her throat. “Oh, you boys played in it all the time. I couldn’t keep you out of there. I was sure you’d come out with chiggers all over your little hides.”

Adam remembered. He remembered the red walls of stifling needles, remembered countless hours spent with Drew, rolling around in dried pine straw, whooping, hollering, blowing imaginary smoke signals to the sky.

“Whatever happened to that thing?”

Nee shrugged. “I never go back there anymore.” She scratched her cheek absently. “But I’d imagine it fell down a long time ago. Sticks and pine straw. Wasn’t meant to last.” She smiled. “But it was perfect for a pair of little boys.”

The crickets and frogs filled the silence. Their voices rose in robust waves off the water and shimmered against the trees. Only the creaking swing competed for sound.

“Did your daddy ever tell you about the nickel balloon?”

Adam shook his head.

“I thought he was going to burn this place down.” Nee rocked forward in her chair. “He took one of those nickel balloons, like they used to make, one of those big ones, and he blew it up with his brother.” She pointed towards the yard. “Him and Tom,

they stood out there next to the pond and tied 25 feet of toilet paper to that thing. Then they lit the end of the toilet paper on fire and let go.”

Adam snickered.

“I was inside when they started, but I stepped out just as they let go. I coulda killed ’em.” Nee shook her head. “That balloon didn’t rise fast enough. I thought that toilet paper was gonna hit the house and set the whole thing on fire.” She chuckled. “It almost did, mind you. The wind pushed that thing too close for me.”

Adam tilted his head back, letting his laugh rattle his chest. “I didn’t know that.” He shook his head. “Dad never told me that one.”

“No, I doubt he did.” Nee’s voice croaked. “He didn’t want you taking after him. That boy was a mess.” She shook her head gravely. “He’s always getting into something or another.”

“Like what?”

Nee paused. “You know that black mark on the hearth? That sooty mark?”

“Sure.”

“That’s from your father.” Nee rocked back in her chair, pursing her lips together. “He did that when he was just a small thing. He was playing with the coals.” She shook her head, laughing softly. “I don’t know how he didn’t burn his little hands. Your grandfather came in and found him sitting on live coals. On live coals!” She scratched the arm of the rocking chair, tilting her head to one side. “He yanked your father up off the ground and scolded him pretty good. But your father, he just shook his head, his eyes all wide, saying, ‘I didn’t know! I didn’t know!’” She leaned forward, lowering her voice. “As he sat there with his britches on fire.”

Adam's laugh burst across the patio, startling him as it spread, resonating along the stones, glittering back in pealing echoes. Warmth started in his throat, spreading downward, seeping into his collarbones and meshing into his ribs. Nee was laughing, too. Her hand covered her eyes, shoulders shaking, bound beneath her thin sweater. Adam let his throat fill, let moisture gather behind his eyelids, let his shoulders fall as his belly swelled. Nee was wiping her eyes, they were spilling over, leaving glistening streaks on her face. She gasped for air. Adam did too, his lungs expanding slowly, air flooding the passageways beneath his skin.

Nee sighed. "This house," she sniffled, bringing her hand to her nose, "it's just bursting at the seams with memories, with all them lives."

Adam looked at the worn steps, at the green mold creeping along the mortar in between the stones, at the scars from so many footsteps, at the moon shimmering across the still pond. He watched Nee's shadow rock back and forth against the layers of peeling paint. He saw the fishing poles in the corner behind her, bamboo fishing poles he and his brother had made by hand, poles knotted and marked from plywood barges and pond mud. He breathed slowly, letting warmth swell his chest while a dull ache rounded out his stomach, and he didn't think of going inside.

Down Wildwood Lane

“They need you.” Her voice pleaded across the satellite connection.

Traffic had been bad coming out of Atlanta that morning. The constant motion of the city narrowed to a dull hum, buzzing under everything, a throbbing reminder of other selves, other ideas, other lives pulsing and growing within the maze of concrete and glass. Michael’s car hugged the curving interstate, barreling out of town, twisting into backwoods avenues stretched along lonesome rivers. He stopped for lunch outside Montgomery, content to prolong his retreat into ignorant simplicity.

His sister had called earlier that week, insisting that he take some time to visit their parents. Michael knew she was right. Their mother’s mind was deteriorating, fallen prey to the invisible wrenching of dementia, and Pop wasn’t much better. His mind was clear, but his sight was worsening, his retinas slowly bleeding, tiny vessels bursting one at a time in the irreversible progression of macular degeneration.

The dirt road leading off the highway was scarred now, pitted with potholes, riddled with grasping root systems exposed by heavy rains. Sunlight faded from the sky as he pressed deeper into the woods, a heavy gloom descending upon the landscape. He turned off the lane, into the clearing where his parents’ home straggled upwards from the earth, shrouded in dusk.

Translucent webs draped thickly across the sweet gum limbs. Pop hated those things, said they would kill a tree, the swollen gossamer masses creeping slowly outwards, spinning leaves and limbs into a sticky snare. He called them tent worms. The day he discovered them hanging from the branches of the persimmon guarding the road, he stood in the yard, cursing, his flannel shirt untucked, his hands stained from long hours behind the bush hog. The persimmon was gone, now.

Michael pulled his car close to the house, sliding the transmission into park beneath the diseased sweet gum thicket. He leaned forward, elbows on the steering wheel, peering through the windshield into the tangled limbs above. He tilted his head, rubbing the back of his neck.

He hadn't been home in a long time for a reason. An unspoken reason, a reason beyond articulation, a shameful reason that he hardly dared even to think. He rubbed his forehead, transitioning his thoughts from the bustle of his life in Atlanta, from his career, from progress and thought and expansion, to the inhalation of quiet, of brambles and tradition, of stagnant ponds and rigid pines that closed in the clearing as darkness streamed from their limbs. He looked up again, absorbing the mess of tent worms draping the sweet gum, a thousand tiny strands strangling the life away. He sighed, opening his car door, listening to the *ding ding ding* before yanking the keys from the ignition.

Michael jumped up the board steps, knocking on the front door that was once a bright, shiny blue, weathered now, paint chipping in places.

He heard a voice inside, calling to him to come on in.

The door was swollen, sticking against the floor as Michael pushed. He kicked against its baseboard, sending it skittering forward on creaking hinges. Behind it, the cabin was lit only by the dim glow of the sunset, creeping thinly through the trees and the windows.

“Pop?”

“In the kitchen.”

Michael paused in the doorway, fumbling for a light switch on the wall, a tired bulb buzzing in response from the ceiling. He stepped forward, striding down a dim hallway, stopping at the entrance to the kitchen.

His father stood in front of him in semi-darkness, tossing chicken in a skillet. Michael strode to the center of the room, pulling a cord hanging from a naked bulb, illuminating the small space. “What are you doing?”

“Making you some dinner.” His father released the skillet, leaving it simmering above a lit eye, flames licking upwards. He held his hand out to be shaken. Michael grasped it in his, gripping the ancient fingers firmly. His father grinned, sliding his thumb in between the tender bones in Michael’s hand, pressing down as hard as he could to see when his son would give up, a tradition the men in the family offered in greeting.

Michael grimaced, dropping his father’s hand. “Shouldn’t you have a light on?” He rubbed his sore hand. “You shouldn’t strain your eyes like this.”

His father shrugged. “I do things my way just fine.” He put a hand back on the handle of the skillet, reaching for a spatula with the other. “Better get used to doing things in the dark now so I’ll know what to do when I have to. I always turn the lights on for your mother when she comes in.”

“Where is she?”

“In the bedroom.” Michael’s father pressed the spatula against the chicken, coaxing a steaming hiss from the stovetop. “She’ll be so glad to see you. How was the drive?”

“Uneventful.”

“Good, good. That interstate makes me nervous with you on it. Lots of bad wrecks at high speeds, you know.”

“I’m careful, Pop.”

“Good to hear.” Michael’s father picked the skillet up from the stove, stepping to the side, scooping its contents onto a platter on the counter. “Well, this is just perfect timing. I’m about ready to put all this on the table. Why don’t you get Myrtle from her room, bring her to the table?”

In the back bedroom, Michael’s mother sat in an armchair by the window, her glazed eyes fixed on a small television set, its rabbit-ear antenna casting v-shaped shadows on the wall. Trying to make enough noise to let her know he was there, Michael walked heavily, his footsteps loud in the small space.

She looked uncertainly in his direction. “Mike?” She stretched the syllable, widening her lips.

“It’s Michael.” He stepped close to her, offering his arm. “You ready for dinner?”

“Well, I guess I am.” She put her hand on his arm, slowly pulling herself into a standing position. Finding a walking stick leaning against the chair, Michael put it in her hand, keeping his fingers on her elbow, guiding her step by step into the dining room

adjoining the kitchen. He pulled a chair out for her, helping her to sink carefully against the wooden frame.

Michael tried to help his father carry the food to the table, but the old man brushed him away. One hand under a platter, the other grasping for the Formica tabletop, he moved slowly, "It's six steps from the stove to the table. Should be right about," his hand brushed the cool surface, "here." He set the steaming chicken down, the platter clattering.

"Pop, can you not see at all now?"

The old man pursed his lips. "Naw, I can still see." He faced Michael. "I just see things differently than I used to."

Michael stood in front of the refrigerator, studying a grid pasted against the freezer with a chipping magnet. Colored lines crossed out huge sections of the grid. "What did the doctor tell you to do with this?"

"With what?"

"With this grid thing, whatever it's called."

"The Amsler Grid." The old man tottered back into the kitchen, reaching for the breadbasket. "He has me look at it every once in a while and see which parts are distorted. Then I mark them. Lets him know what areas are changing."

Michael nodded. "How are they changing, Pop?"

"Some parts get blurry, cain't see no detail." His feet tapped six steps. "Other parts fade out completely, or jump at me funny. I cain't tell how far away most things are."

Shaky pen lines snaked along the grid in green and dark blue, covering its regulated pattern in distortion. Six steps back into the kitchen pattered on the wooden floor.

“Where’s Benny?”

“Out back, honey.” Michael’s father fumbled in a drawer by the sink, rubbing his fingers over forks and spoons.

“Benny?” Michael kept his voice low.

The old man gathered the utensils, shutting the drawer. “She forgets that he’s gone sometimes.”

Michael turned from the refrigerator, opened a cabinet to grab three glasses.

“Pop, did you want tea?”

“I didn’t make any. Water’s already on the table.”

The old man said grace before helping Mom’s plate. Rubbing his fingers across the plate’s edges, he oriented himself to its center, ladling peas onto its smoothness.

“How’s young Mike? Where’s he at these days?”

“No need to yell, Mom.” Michael cut his chicken slowly. “But I live in Atlanta.”

“He’s in Atlanta?”

“I’m here.”

“He’s doing great, honey.” Michael’s father raised his voice to match hers.

“He’s really making it with his job. His career’s really taking off.”

“I have his toys in the other room. I can send them to Atlanta if you want.” His mother’s mouth quivered as she chewed, her lips not quite touching. “Is he staying with his cousin there?”

“Yes, honey.” Michael’s father lowered his voice. “She don’t know the difference these days.”

Michael brought his napkin up from his lap, dabbing at his lip. He drew his eyebrows together, taking a breath. “Should you be taking care of her, Pop?” He kept his voice at a whisper. “We can think about other options, you know.”

The old man tightened his jaw, shaking his head. “She’s happy.” He sawed his knife through his chicken, jerking his elbows. “I’m happy.” He brought a piece to his mouth, speaking with his mouth full, “I don’t see no reason to change it. She might as well be at home.”

Michael reached for his water glass. “It’s just so much for you to take care of.” He ran his fingers around the condensation dripping onto the table. “You have yourself to think about.”

“Myself to think about?” Michael’s father cleared his throat. “I got a whole mess of other people thinking bout me. You know the Bradleys? They get my groceries on Tuesdays. Go all the way to Bay Minette for them, too. And you know Darlene Mason? She comes and reads to Mama a few times a week. It’s real nice of her. She’s always upbeat, always makes Mama laugh a lot. Always checks to make sure I’m keeping things clean, too.” He shoved a piece of chicken in his mouth. “I get by.”

“That’s good chicken.” His mother nodded, pursing her lips. “That’s real good.”

“Now,” Michael’s father grinned, “tell me about this job of yours. It’s going real well, yeah?”

“Yes sir. I’m up for promotion.” Michael traced his fork along the edge of his plate. “I have a pretty good shot at it.”

His father shook his head. “Well, I’ll be. That’s great. Just great.” He stretched his arms against the table. “What would you be doing, exactly?”

“Now, I’m doing field work, taking data, that sort of thing.” Michael stabbed his peas with the tines of his fork. “And there’s a manager who oversees everything I do. If I get the promotion, I’d take his job.”

His father laughed. “Look at that. My boy, doing things I never thought about doing.” He leaned forward. “So you’d be the boss?”

“More or less.”

“Aren’t you chilly?” His mother yelled. “Where’s your coat? Are you warm enough?”

“I’ll grab it in a second, honey.”

“I’d be in charge of a group of geologists, and it’d put me in a good place in the company. Corporate may be opening some new branches in the next few years, and if I do well, I could be in a position to be a branch manager.”

“That’s fantastic, son. That’s really something.”

“Where’s Benny? I want Benny.”

“He’s at the store, darlin’. He’ll be back soon.” Michael’s father turned to his son. “When will you find out if you’re getting the promotion or not?”

Michael swallowed. “They’re flying me out to Irvine next week to take a look at the office out there, see how I like it. I guess they’ll let me know by the time I get back or soon after what the plan is.”

“Irvine?”

“Yes sir. I’d be moving to California if I get the job.”

“Damn.” His father’s jaw tightened. “California’s mighty far away.”

“Don’t you need a jacket?” Myrtle pursed her lips. “You’re gonna get sick if you run around like that.” She turned her head, shaking her finger at Michael. “And you, too.”

“We’ll be fine, honey.” Michael’s father fumbled for his water glass, moving his fingers carefully across the table. He tilted his head back, swallowing. “I never thought my boy’d live in California. That’s really something.” His glass clinked against the table. “You won’t be ashamed of us here, will you?” He smiled, “of your humble folks in Alabama?”

Michael looked at his father, at the cloudy irises framed with crow’s feet, at his mother’s aging frame across the table, the dim overhead light casting warmth into the shadows. He took a breath, inhaling through his nostrils, absently biting his lip. “Of course not.”

Michael’s father put his mother to bed while Michael cleared the table. Michael scraped the leftover food into a bucket for compost kept under the sink, rinsing away the residue, neatly stacking the plates and utensils in the dishwasher. His shoulders were tense as he worked. Soft noises came through the walls, low rumblings of dim voices, a dull clunk echoing every now and then. Michael considered checking on his parents, but he shrugged off the thought. His father didn’t seem to need him.

Clicking the dishwasher shut, Michael reached for a rag. He ran it under the faucet, squeezing the excess moisture away, wiping down the counters and moving across to the table. He moved methodically, leaving wet streaks in geometric circles, drawing a gleam from the tired surfaces. He looked up at his father’s footsteps.

“Almost done, there?”

“Yes sir.” Michael crossed to the sink, squeezing the rag one last time, draped it along the edge to dry.

“Why don’t we set out front for a spell?”

The old man tottered down the hallway without a cane. He kept one hand against the wall, thoughtfully measuring his steps.

“Pop, should we maybe get you something to walk with? They make some nice canes, you know. Could help you feel around for what’s in front of you.”

“Well,” the old man let go of the wall, stepping across the living room to the front door, “as long as I’m at home it don’t matter much. I know my way around.”

Michael jumped in front of him, yanking the door open. “It could be nice, though. For when you go places.”

His father sniffed. “Well, I reckon so.” He stepped through the doorway, putting a careful foot on the wooden steps. Michael pulled the door to behind them, reaching for his father’s elbow. The old man leaned against his son as he bent his knees, lowering himself to sit on the top step, his back against the door. Michael paused before sitting next to him, stretching his arms and cracking his knuckles.

“Shouldn’t do that.” His father clucked his tongue against his teeth. “You’ll get arthritis like your mom.”

“I’ll be alright, Pop.” Michael settled his back against the door, inhaling the humid air drifting across the moonlit yard. His eyes slowly adjusted, dark forms solidifying in the milky warmth that emanated from behind the trees.

“Listen to them crickets.” His father spoke softly. “They’re just singing up a symphony tonight.”

Resonant strings whirled in the branches around them, cicadas joining the ensemble, enriching the swell of sound. Michael took a breath, swallowing. He cleared his throat. “You getting along ok, Pop?”

“Yeah. We get along just fine.” He sniffed, rubbing his nose absently. “Can’t complain with a view like this.”

Pine trees drew stark lines across the clearing, their rigid shapes softening into bowery fringe as they stretched upwards. Beyond them, swirling water glittered dimly in the starlight, a narrow creek cutting a path through the woods. The tent worms looked soft, wispy, adorning the sweet gum limbs.

“Sometimes, if I sit here long enough, I’ll hear the owl that lives along the creek. She don’t come this way every night, but sometimes, sometimes she does.” Michael’s father adjusted his back against the door. “Owls are such interesting creatures, you know.”

“Hm.” Michael grunted.

“My mama, she always said the Indians used to believe they were evil birds. Foretold death, that sort of thing. But you always hear about ‘em as being wise.” The old man exhaled, air whistling as it passed through his nostrils. “Maybe the two kinda go together. Wisdom coming right before death, or something.”

“Maybe.”

“If I got any of that, I’d say that this is all that matters.”

“Wisdom?”

“No.” He paused. “Sitting here with my boy, my wife sleeping peacefully inside, waiting for the owl to fly by if he wants to.”

A breeze trembled through the pines, stopping against the thick mass of tent worms, unable to bend their heavy boughs.

“I’m proud of you.” The old man fumbled for his son’s knee, slapping Michael’s thigh, sliding his hand downward to squeeze the kneecap firmly. “That promotion of yours is really something.”

“Yes sir.” Michael nodded. “I’ve worked really hard for it.” Solitary days in the lab, weekends sacrificed to time in the field, countless hours spent catching and cataloguing diseased fish in the suburbs outside Atlanta, days without sleep, piles of paper stacked on every surface in his studio apartment, long hours spent glaring into the harsh glow of his computer screen, all this and more was validated, justified, rewarded with the chance to step up, get recognized, get a raise.

“I know you have. Me and your mom, we’re both real proud of you. You take that with you, when you head out to California. Whatever happens with the job, we’re real proud of you.”

“I can come home whenever you need me.” Michael’s tongue was dry. “I can always fly back if you need anything.”

“Aw, we get along just fine. You don’t make things harder on yourself, thinking about us. Just keep doing what you’re doing. That’s enough to keep us happy.”

Michael’s father looked frail in the moonlight, his frame hollow along his bones. Michael studied the crow’s feet lining the old man’s face, the marks of life and love scarred in crevices of skin, the aging profile mirroring his own.

Home was a long way from Atlanta, a long way from the emails waiting in his inbox, from the silver bullet that would carry him to California. Michael looked up at the sweet gums, their wispy forms ethereal beneath the stars that flickered between the treetops. The tent worms stretched across their boughs, fusing them together, catching a myriad of sticks and leaves in layers of strangling silk, a futile empire balanced on fragile limbs. He leaned against the front door beside his father, waiting for the owl to fly by.

Of Camellias and Kudzu

Tuesdays are pine days. Pinky walks down the stairs along the bluff, between the kudzu vines, to the duck pond along the bay. There's a white bridge that crosses the pond, running perpendicular to the shore. Pinky walks along the right side of the bridge, brushing her hand along the whitewash, rubbing the chalky powder between her fingers when she walks down the steps. She keeps her notebook under her left arm, a pen tucked tightly inside it. She smiles if anyone makes eye contact with her. Sometimes there are children along the bridge, throwing pieces of bread into the water for the ducks to snatch. Sometimes they smile back. Pinky never says hello.

Pinky wears sandals on Tuesdays. Sandals are better for the sand. The sand drifts over her toes, but when it's time to go home, it's easy to pour the sand back along the shore. Pinky wears sandals so that she can walk through the sand to the cluster of pines along the bay. Erosion has stripped the sand from their roots. The gray trunks balance on spindly limbs, thin spider's legs curled under the hulking boughs. Pinky sits carefully between the roots. Sometimes it's uncomfortable, but she can see the duck pond and the beach all the way to the municipal pier from her vantage point. On clear days, she can even see past bobbing sailboats to the handful of skyscrapers on the Mobile side of the water.

Tuesdays are observation days. Pinky curls her legs beneath herself, tangling her limbs in pine roots, and puts her journal in her lap. She tries to look mysterious and purposeful at the same time. There are always people at the bay on Tuesdays. Mothers bring small children, old couples sit on benches and watch the sailboats, sometimes there's a picnic basket. Pinky has lots to observe.

She takes careful notes. She tries not to dwell on physical descriptions. It's more important to understand what's beneath the surface. Pinky can look at a woman and tell if her marriage is happy by the way she holds her arms. Pinky takes notes on the half-marriages she observes.

She walks along the water to the pier before she goes home. There are usually people fishing on the short pier next to the municipal one. Sometimes they use nets. Pinky likes to watch the wide cast they throw. She takes notes on what the angle of their shoulders says about the fishermen's lives.

Pinky makes a loop around the fountain before she heads up the hill. If the fountain is on, the sound of falling water covers the conversations held in the flowerbeds. If the fountain is off, Pinky can hear mothers telling their children not to touch the thorns on the roses.

Pinky doesn't take the stairs up the bluff to go home. She dumps the sand from her sandals and walks up Bayview Avenue. A sidewalk follows the road. Pinky feels safe walking along it. There are feral cats in the park on the left. Sometimes they watch her. She wonders if they can tell if her writing is insightful by the way she holds her head.

Kudzu fills the gully past the park. Pinky knows that kudzu is the fastest growing vine in the world. If it isn't weeded out, it will overtake even the pine trees, stretching up their trunks and squeezing the light from their gentle boughs. No one bothers to weed the gullies. Kudzu rolls and flutters into the crevices, hiding the soil beneath a wall of green. Pinky skirts nervously by the gully past the park. She can never tell what's hiding beneath the fringe of vines.

Tuesdays are gardening days, too. Pinky puts her journal inside, then sheathes her hands in leather gloves. Gardening can take different forms. Sometimes she pulls weeds. Sometimes she squeezes mulch between tender shoots. Sometimes she prunes away dead growth. She does whatever the plants need. She always stands on her porch and smiles at the result before she goes inside.

Every night is a writing night. Tuesdays are usually more fervent than others. Observations give Pinky a lot to write about. Sometimes she writes on her laptop, but usually she writes by hand. Her words feel more deliberate when she writes by hand.

Pinky goes to bed early. That way she can wake up before the sun. Sometimes she gets up before the paper is delivered. Then she snatches it from the steps before the dew has time to settle.

Pinky has published three novels. People buy them and read them. She gets a royalty check every month. She knows that she's insightful. Her words resonate with people. Or they did, once. The royalties aren't very much these days. Pinky's savings are strained. She hasn't published anything in a while. But surely she will soon. Pinky's agent and editor are antsy. They send her frequent emails from Atlanta. Sometimes Pinky doesn't answer.

Pinky is working on a story based on Tuesday observations. Her main character is a fisherman. She has seen him on the short pier on several Tuesdays. He always uses a net. He never uses a rod and reel. This fisherman always casts a wide sweep with his net. That means that he's confident.

*The fisherman's net hovered above the bowl of bay water,
like thin smoke above the shallows, its fibers trembling in cadence with
the rhythm of strong hands. Once, the stained mesh had fallen in sync
with the wings of a pelican, the noose of connected diamonds sinking
around the thick beak and stippled feathers. The fisherman threw more
carefully now, arcing his lacy hook only through sky and water, lassoing
the bay and not the birds.*

Lately, Pinky has had company to further her writing. A feral cat crawled beneath her house to have kittens. Pinky can hear them when she walks across the living room. When she steps on the board that runs against the couch, they all mew. Pinky imagines the view from below, the sight of the thick board curving towards the little downy heads. She leaps off the board quickly, careful not to scare them. But sometimes she eases her foot back onto the board, pressing gently, reveling in the sounds of life from below. She leaves food outside, on the soil beneath the living room. The cats burrow into their den at the sound of her feet, but the bowl is always empty in the morning.

Lately, Pinky thinks she has had other company. She found footprints in the mud next to the camellia after the rain on Saturday night. They weren't very large. Her shoes

were too big to match. Pinky assumes that a child befriended the camellia. Maybe a neighbor-child wanted a flower or two. The blossoms are so thick. Any child would want to pluck the mass of petals, one at a time, stripping the pink away from the frothy stamen.

It's Wednesday. Wednesdays are grocery days. Pinky drives into town for groceries. She tries to buy as many fruits and vegetables as she can, but she always treats herself to a bag of Dove chocolate. The marketing department of Dove takes such care with the messages inside the candies. She appreciates the poignancy of their silver linings.

When she pulls into the driveway, there's a child under the camellia. A puffy blue ski jacket covers the child's frame. The thick coat seems inappropriate for a Southern winter, even though it has been chillier than usual over the past week. The child is facing the bush. Her hair is brown and stringy, pointing down like so many needles. Pinky doesn't want to scare her. She turns off the ignition, opening the car door and standing. "Hello there?"

The child turns around. She is older than Pinky realized. Her face is dotted with freckles, her eyes squinted tight. "Hey lady."

"Do you like the camellias?"

"The whats?"

"The camellias." Pinky steps closer. "Those are the flowers. The pink ones."

Pinky doesn't know why she specified. There are no other flowers blooming in January.

"Oh." The girl shrugs. "Yeah, they're okay I guess."

Pinky smiles, taking a step closer to the girl and the bush. The girl steps away.

Pinky stops. "What's your name?"

The girl stares at Pinky for a moment. Her eyes are sullen. "Mackenzie."

"Mackenzie, do you want a camellia? You're welcome to pick one."

"No." Mackenzie fumbles in her pocket, pulling out a carton and lighter. "They can all stay on the bush."

Pinky studies Mackenzie. She can tell from the way she flicks the lighter that she hasn't smoked very long. Pinky wonders what her story is. But there's milk in the car.

"Should you..." Pinky isn't Mackenzie's mother. She doesn't know if she should criticize her choices.

"Light up?" Mackenzie juts her chin out, puffing a cloud into the camellia leaves. She looks at Pinky. Mackenzie's eyes are wide now. They're clear and green. Pinky isn't sure if they're defiant or scared. Pinky also isn't sure if Mackenzie's question is rhetorical or not.

"What are you going to do? Tell me it causes cancer?" Mackenzie puts the cigarette between her lips, pulling carcinogens into her lungs. "I've heard that before."

"Why are you smoking in my yard?" Pinky keeps her tone of voice pleasant, but she needs to make this quick. The milk should go in the refrigerator.

"Because." Mackenzie shivers, shaking into her ski jacket.

"Where do you live, Mackenzie?"

"Nearby."

"How close?"

“I’m not telling you.” Mackenzie rolls the cigarette between her fingers. “You’re not going to tell my mom I’m here.”

Pinky nods. Mackenzie is rebellious. She can tell from the way Mackenzie clenches her jaw. Pinky doesn’t know what to say. She’s never had someone smoke cigarettes next to her camellia before.

“Are you just gonna stand there and stare at me?”

“I…” Pinky stops. Honesty is the best policy. “I don’t know.”

“Who are you?” Mackenzie coughs, hiding her mouth behind her ski jacket.

“I’m Pinky.”

“And you live here?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve never seen you before.”

“I’ve never seen you before, either, Mackenzie.”

“Do you ever do anything?”

“Yes.” Pinky smiles. “I garden a lot. You haven’t seen me outside?”

“Nope.” Mackenzie flicks the ash away. Her fingers are awkward. “I bet you never leave your house.”

“I do.” Pinky doesn’t understand Mackenzie’s comment. “I go to the bay on Tuesdays and the grocery store on Wednesdays. I garden every day. On Fridays I go to the bookstore downtown. They have readings.” She pauses. She doesn’t know why she’s telling Mackenzie these things.

“Do you talk to people?”

“Yes.”

“About what?”

“I’m a writer.” Pinky clears her throat. “People read my books.”

“Do they talk to you?” Mackenzie tosses the cigarette onto the soil beneath the camellia.

“Yes.”

“I bet they don’t.” Mackenzie stuffs her hands into the pockets of her ski jacket.

“My brother has never seen you before, either. He calls your house the hermit house.

Why do you got such a big fence? What are you trying to hide in here?”

Pinky does have a tall fence. It’s white, with a trellis running along the top. She planted ivy that drapes along its lines. But it doesn’t hide anything.

“I’m not hiding anything.”

“Then why don’t you ever talk to people?”

“I do. I am right now.”

“Because I came in your yard. I bet I’m the only person you’ve talked to all day.”

“I have milk in the car.” Pinky remembers.

“Then go get it.” Mackenzie turns around, putting her hands in the camellia. Her ski jacket looks like the sky against the leaves.

“What are you going to do?”

“Pick a calimma.”

“Camellia.”

“Whatever.”

Pinky doesn’t have many groceries. She can drape the bags along her arms, hauling them all inside in one trip. She drops the produce on the kitchen table and puts

the milk in the fridge. She looks out the window. Mackenzie isn't beneath the camellia anymore. It's not muddy enough to leave footprints today. Pinky thinks she can see the gray ash of the cigarette butt from her kitchen.

Pinky's hands are shaking. She thinks a Dove chocolate might help. She finds the package inside the bag with bread and avocados. Pinky rips the package open. She pulls a chocolate out, tossing the rest of the package onto the kitchen table with the warming produce. She unwraps the piece of candy, letting it melt on her tongue. She smooths the wrapper with her hands.

"In chaos there lies opportunity."

Pinky crumples the wrapper, pinching it into a tight ball. She rustles in the package for another.

"Share a chocolate moment with a friend."

Pinky's hands are still shaking. She thinks the chocolates might have made it worse. She wishes the marketing department of Dove candies had been more sensitive to personal turmoil.

She paces into the living room. There are big windows that look out from the porch, over the fence, onto the street. She peers outside to the asphalt. Mackenzie isn't on the other side of the ivy trellis.

The groceries are warming on the table. The fruits and vegetables need to go in the fridge. Pinky strides back into the kitchen, stepping on the board that runs along the couch. There is no noise from below.

Every night is a writing night, but tonight, Pinky struggles. She doesn't know why Mackenzie came into her yard. She can't be insightful. Children are too complicated, especially rebellious ones that smoke beneath her camellia.

Pinky is adding to her story about the fisherman she observes on Tuesdays. She wonders why he uses a net. Does it mean that he's primal, somehow? That he wants life to go back to simplicity? Maybe fishing reels are an example of how people overcomplicate their lives. But Pinky isn't sure. What does he have to uncomplicate?

The fisherman watched the sun hover above the water, the horizon slowly meshing as light and reflection mingled in a golden glow. He lifted his fingers, shielding his eyes from the glare, rubbing salty sweat above his eyes. His head ached, his heart heavy with

Maybe his life is too busy. Maybe he can't catch enough fish to sell to feed his family. But why is he confident? Maybe he doesn't have money worries. If he lives alone, he wouldn't have many expenses. He lives alone and fishes during the day. Does he walk home through the rose garden, listening to mothers telling their children not to touch the thorns when the water from the fountain is turned off? Does he talk to anyone?

His head ached, his heart heavy with silence, with too many conversations overheard, with too many words not said

Pinky is frustrated. Her agent and her editor will be frustrated. The fisherman dissolves on paper into a woman who dumps the sand from her sandals on Tuesdays before walking alone up Bayview Avenue, passing feral cats and a kudzu gully to return to an empty house.

She puts her papers on her desk in a neat pile. She will try again tomorrow. Her hands are shaking. Maybe she's just cold. Her house is old. It doesn't hold heat well. She picks up the afghan from the couch, wrapping it around her shoulders. Pinky moves across the room, putting her hand on the space heater. She hopes it has enough propane. It hasn't been used in a while. She can't remember the last time it was this cold in the house.

The switch clicks, warning Pinky to expect the line of blue flame that flickers behind the grate. She holds her hands above the flames, looking over her shoulder to the windows that point across the porch, over the ivy trellis, to the dimly lit street. She wonders how far away Mackenzie lives. How many people live in her house.

Pinky sits on the couch, leaning back against the pillows. She watches the branches drift beneath the glow of the streetlight outside. She should move to her bed. She will soon. She pulls the blanket higher onto her shoulders. She tilts her head against the back of the couch, looking at the boards running along the ceiling. She imagines the thick board curving towards little downy heads in the den beneath her house. Pinky wonders where the cats are tonight. She hopes they are warm enough.

Her mind drifts into a kudzu gully, hovering above the fringe of vines that flutter and whisper to each other. There are cats inside the vines, curling their warm bodies next to each other and meowing. The vines unravel into waves, into the churning bay, Pinky's

on a sailboat, the water is tossing her, she swings the sails around roughly, startled by the heat of the water as it splashes onto her knees. The boat is sinking, or maybe it's drifting towards the sun, Pinky isn't sure, but she can't steer it by herself.

She isn't sure if it's the sound or the smell that wakes her up, or maybe in some dreamlike way even the sight, but suddenly, Pinky knows that the living room is on fire. The wall behind the space heater is pulsing with heat, throbbing with orange and red. The boards of her old house shimmer.

The fireman tells her she was lucky to make it out alive. Some people wouldn't have woken up in time with a space heater burning away the oxygen. One of them holds her hand while the others douse the remains of her house with water. "You're okay, lady," he says. "You should be thankful."

Pinky nods. Her shoulders tremble. Her fisherman is going up in flames. The pages he struggled to life on are curling and charring somewhere in her living room. Her agent and her editor won't know what to do. Pinky doesn't know what to do. Her house is burning. The flames are creeping and coiling in too many shades of red.

"Do you need anything?" The fireman asks. "Can we call someone to come get you?"

Pinky shakes her head. She's cold in places she can't touch. The beams framing the roof are splintering. She watches the structure of her house flare and crumble. The flames begin to steam, smothered in water.

"Why don't you let us call someone?" He squeezes her hand. "Let you get some rest? You can figure things out later."

Pinky swallows. She shakes her head again. She is glad that he keeps talking.

Pinky isn't aware of time as the firemen work. She realizes it's a new day when the sky begins to lighten. Smoke billows into the sunrise, smearing the pink sky with gray. Pinky smells charred wood. She watches the damp boards that remain glisten in the early morning light. She shivers. It's cold without the flames. She wonders if Mackenzie will see the damage. She wonders if Mackenzie will worry about her, if Mackenzie will know that she got out of the house, that someone talked to her, that someone held her hand.

A section of her fence is missing. Pinky has nothing to hide, now. She wonders if she could call someone. Maybe someone from her book club, the one she left a year or two ago. Or someone from the bookstore, someone from the weekly readings. Pinky wonders if she can find Mackenzie again. She wants to say thank you.

The fireman lets go of her hand. He walks over to the other men. She watches him. Pinky looks back at her house. She steps closer, through the garden full of plants seared from the heat.

There is a lone green thing, a twisted vine creeping through the chill. Pinky notices the symbolism. The kudzu vine curls against the soil. In chaos lies opportunity. She hopes the marketing department of Dove chocolate is right.

Sea of Broken Things

We were small when Dad made us cane poles to dip in the creek leading out to the bay. We'd sit on the edge of the boardwalk, feet swallowed in muddy boots, legs exposed to the dappled sunlight dripping through the trees, cane poles sparkling where gossamer line met water. Sometimes we wouldn't catch anything, flashing minnows drifting past unsnares, but every once in a while a glistening bream would catch our hook as we yanked upward, spinning the little fish onto the wooden slats.

When Dad couldn't supervise our small fingers and sharp hooks, we'd take butterfly nets to the creek instead, waiting patiently to startle an unlucky fish with its gentle mesh.

One morning, Aaron caught two bream. He grinned, sliding them into a dark bucket. His feet squished in over-sized boots as he walked the bank below the boardwalk, curving up a hill, back to paved ground. He walked quickly, impatient to show his bounty to our father.

I stopped beside the creek, making one last drip castle before I followed my brother, letting the thick, wet sand flow down my fingers into careful gleaming turrets that fell like carved sugar. Aaron was halfway up the hill when I picked up my empty bucket and turned away, his butterfly net trailing above the pavement.

“Aaron.” My voice was small against the asphalt. He didn’t hear me, or maybe he just kept going anyway, trudging up the steep incline towards home.

I called again, louder, but Aaron didn’t turn around. His feet left wet splotches on the ground behind him, a fading path outlining the trail I should follow. Ahead, the road curved, twisting out of sight behind pine trees. Heavy boughs swallowed his shiny pail and flashing boots.

Later, he told me what he saw beyond the line of trees, what danger waited with gaping jaws to spur his flight, what menace growled in his dreams for years afterward. He told our father he’d seen God’s watchdog, but neither of us ever saw the beast again. Whatever it was, exactly, Great Dane or fierce bulldog, it lay crouched beyond the bend in the road, waiting beneath the underbrush to raise its lip in a red growl at my brother’s footsteps.

He saw it and stopped, hair bristling along his arms, breath whistling quickly through his open mouth. The dog flexed his legs, gripping the dirt with spread claws, slowly raising himself on sinewy haunches. Aaron said later that the dog was black, a splash of ink beneath the bushes, but his eyes were golden, burning into Aaron’s retinas. They stayed locked in silence, each observing the other, both waiting, legs tense, until with a clatter, Aaron flew, shins knocking against his bucket, water splashing freely, a terrified little boy with large eyes and squishing boots tearing down the hill. His knees flailed clumsily as he ran, butterfly net ballooning behind him, fingers tightly gripped around the furiously swinging bucket.

I’d never seen Aaron’s eyes so flooded with terror. He flew down the hill, covering ground in huge strides, not stopping till he reached me. The white mesh of his

tangled net trembled violently, his breath shaking from his lungs in rattling gasps. I waited while he struggled to speak. His words fell between huge gulps of air. My eyes widened as the beast lurking around the bend solidified through telling.

We forged a trail through the woods, making a broad circle around that stretch of road, to get home safely. I kept a lookout for any sign of menace while Aaron crept beside me, his butterfly net brandished before him like a club.

Its fibers still trembled when Dad met us on the porch steps. He listened to our wide-eyed tale of terror with one hand on his elbow, the other fingering the curve of his chin, the corners of his mouth slightly upturned. We both spoke, filling out each other's sentences, the story becoming as much mine as Aaron's, the dog growing from black lab to Saint Bernard-proportioned bulldog, Aaron's flight of terror somehow slipping into an act of heroism.

"That's an ordeal." Dad raised his eyebrows in sympathy. "I'm glad you two made it back alright."

We gulped, nodding seriously.

"Sounds like you were quite the brave little man." Dad swung his hand to Aaron's shoulder, rubbing the fragile joint between broad fingers. "Protecting your sister. Keep looking out for her, you hear? You two have to do that for each other."

Aaron nodded.

Dad took the bucket from Aaron's hand, peeking over its rim. His hands were grimy with dirt, the half-moons in his fingernails ringed with brown. "Whatcha got here, son?"

Aaron swallowed. “I caught two bream, two of them, all by myself, but I spilled all the water when I was running for Sanna, I was running so fast, and then we had to get home safe, but I don’t know if there was enough water for them to breathe.” He licked his lips. “So I don’t know,” he sighed. “I don’t know if they made it back.”

Dad nodded, drawing his eyebrows together. He tilted the bucket, looking straight into its bottom. His laugh echoed across the yard.

“Well.” His eyes crinkled at the corners. “Looks like you came out alright after all.”

He lowered the bucket for our eyes, angling it so we could see the two fish chasing each other’s fins in shallow water.

My father was a chemist of sorts. He read everything he could and worked in a lab across the bay. As children, my brother and I loved to walk along the bay with my father. He understood everything. He knew why the red rocks that lined the base of the bluffs were really wood, petrified wood, and not rocks at all. He knew why the bluffs were slowly moving back into the forest, sending sand cascading into the bay. He knew why, sometimes, the fish would breach themselves on the shore by the hundreds, in the eerie phenomenon fishermen call a jubilee. He knew why the pelicans had an extra pouch under their beaks, why sandpipers were different from gulls, why barnacles were more than shells. In the summers, we would spend long hours walking the strip of sand that lined the bottom of the bluffs as the sun set across the bay. Golden light shimmered across glassy water that licked at our feet as Aaron and I bolted across the sand and our father explained the world.

We lived in a frame house only about two blocks away from the shore. The plank walls resonated with our laughter after my father's jokes and shivered with our tears after my mother's death. When we were small, my father hung a swing from the roof of our porch, but after the car accident left him swinging without her, he put it in the attic. Sometimes I would sit where it had been, holding my back straight, imitating the elegant memory I held of my mother.

We could cut along a quiet avenue through the woods to an old boardwalk that led out between the pines to the open bay. The boardwalk teetered precariously above a little creek chasing us to the water. Too many hurricanes had weakened the weather-stained boards, but we never worried about stability. Our young feet hardly brushed the wood as we streaked towards the world of wheeling gulls and salty sand.

We were twins, two for the price of one. We came into the world together, separated by minutes, no one bothering to tell us who first gasped cold air in tiny lungs. We were fraternal twins, part boy and part girl, but when science classes explained the fractured egg splitting identical twins in two, I felt it. Aaron was a part of me.

We looked identical until childhood changed chubby arms and legs, delineating us into boy and girl. My hair wouldn't grow, leaving me with a boyish crop, so in our toddling years we mirrored each other. Sometimes Dad would tell stories about me that were really about Aaron, or remember Aaron's victories that were secretly mine, but even we didn't always catch his mistake. Those memories were shared.

The little boardwalk running to the bay defined our childhood, its wooden railings bordering the realm in which we ran, its weathered face expanding towards open water. We laughed in the creek running below, dammed the stream into muddy pools and

bubbling waterfalls, ran clumps of clay embedded in the ground through its cool water to sift away twigs and dirt. It was on the bluff above the boardwalk that I found a rope swing dangling from a magnolia tree, branches yielding to fraying strands anchored by a heavy knot. We'd swing our legs around the knot, taking turns, one pushing while the other flew above the woods and the water. It was underneath the boardwalk, ankle deep in cool water, that a black snake slung from above to land on Aaron's shoulder, coiling and slithering down his ribs, birthing a phobia that would follow him forever. It was the place we both snuck to, secretly, independently of each other, the night our mother didn't come back, leaving two pairs of eyes reflecting cold glitter in an inky sky.

It was the first place I wrote about. My first stories, childhood scrawls about fairies or traveling sea turtles or daughters with mothers, were set along the curve of sand and water. The rich clay under the boardwalk, the splintered pieces of pier slowly washing into driftwood, the blue crabs scuttling along the jetties, these images repeated themselves across words and paragraphs and years.

It was the first place Aaron took his camera, the one he came back to the most. Rolls of film gave way to frame after frame of creek and tree and bay, of pelican and sunset and piling, of waves and foam and sky. Even as a child, he had a knack for composition and fluidity with light. Our bay tributary molded his fascination with beauty, renewed his images against its changeful backdrop, silently taught him the formula for splendor. As childhood yielded to burgeoning adolescence, my brother became an artist.

Our boardwalk was always his favorite place to photograph, but as sixteen passed and our world expanded above the wheels of our shared car, Aaron's fascination with

broken things grew. He'd drive to whatever abandoned buildings he could find and creep through broken doorways, above rotten floorboards, to capture splinters and holes. He told me he wanted to find forgotten things, overlooked things, misunderstood things.

Sometimes he'd bring me along. He took me to an abandoned nursery once, a series of glass greenhouses in rows, stretched over cylindrical metal frames. We climbed through a hole into the inside of one, a chambered jungle, green vines and flowers conquering the structure in a profusion of color. Dust coated the glass panes. Aaron had me stand with my back to one of them.

"Like this?"

"Don't look at me." Aaron waved his hand to the side. "Look over there somewhere."

I stared at the mass of green. Rusted pipes, red with time, stretched in rows above the plants, remnants of a sprinkler system. They ran in tight vertical lines, slowly being blurred by hundreds, maybe thousands, of leaves. Aaron's fingers tapped against his camera as he aligned the light meter. The shutter clicked, the sound muffled within the cavern of green.

"That's good." His eyes drifted away from me, across the sea of plants. He stepped forward carefully, lifting his knees high through the tangled mass.

I was the only one who ever modeled for Aaron. Other girls, captivated by blue eyes and sensitivity, clamored for his attention, but my brother was always aloof. We both were. Socially, we relied on each other, had always relied on each other, for cane pole and magnolia swing adventures, for company and quiet understanding. An absent mother and a mechanical father had left us shaping each other, leaving my voice too low,

his too melodic, blending two halves into pieces of one, into subtle androgyny, into two teenagers who were too skinny, too timid, too introverted.

“Susanna, let’s go back out.” Aaron stopped moving, turning his head to face me. “There’s a shed down at the back of this place. You know what I’m talking about?”

I shook my head.

“I’ll show you.”

We slipped through the jagged hole in the glass, back into the sunshine. The world swelled, a ripped tarp whipping in the breeze, birds calling, our footsteps crackling in the grass, each sound amplified beyond the glass chamber. Aaron fiddled with his camera, checking to see which frame the film was on.

“Almost out?”

“Nah.” He patted his back pocket. “I have a few more rolls.”

I nodded. He walked quickly, a step or two ahead of me. His hips were thin, his shoulder blades sharp through his t-shirt.

“Aaron, did you pick up the film you dropped off at Calagaz yet?”

He shook his head. “I’ll get it later.”

We reached the end of the row of greenhouses. Pine woods fringed the nursery, their boughs heavy, pungent.

“Aaron?”

He grunted, motioning for me to turn the corner beyond the last greenhouse, an avenue between the nursery and the forest opening up with a dilapidated shed at its end.

“Did I tell you that Kristin’s having people over Friday? She wants to watch a movie, I think. I told her we’d come.”

“Friday?” Aaron tossed his bangs out of his eyes. “Okay. Wait. No. I can’t on Friday.”

“Why not?”

“I have stuff going on.”

“What stuff?”

He shrugged.

“Aaron.”

“It doesn’t matter. You’re just going to fall asleep anyway.”

“I don’t sleep through every movie.”

“Right. Just really loud action ones.”

The shed was bigger than it looked from far away, not really a shed at all, but the shell of something beautiful. Grey stucco walls rose in front of us, splintered beams fringing the top of the left wall where the roof had caved in. Broken glass gaped in the windowpanes, brilliant shards sparkling in the grass creeping among the debris. Aaron stomped dramatically as he stepped, scaring away any potential snakes, pushing the door open while holding his camera close to his waist. The door stuck on something behind it, leaving only a thin opening. Aaron slipped his narrow hips through, disappearing into the shadows.

“Be careful,” I cautioned.

He stepped to the window, grinning at me above the peeling frame. “Come see this.”

Glass crunched under my feet. I sucked in my stomach, shuffling around the door. Stale air, heavy with must, plunged into my lungs, startling them into coughing.

Sunlight fell through the holes in the roof, illuminating a murky world. We were inside a large room, littered with dusty knickknacks. Cobwebs cast a gray sheen over the furniture, clods of dirt speckled the ground, boxes stacked from floor to ceiling in winding avenues. A crumbling wall separated us from the roofless room we'd seen from outside, leaving a jumble of vines and rubble pressing against collapsing mortar.

"It's the bay, Sanna." Aaron's voice was quiet.

I looked across the sea of broken things, confused.

"No." He shook his head, pointing to my right. "There."

Black water stretched across the wall, brown lines jutting into the wavering backdrop, a chipping tapestry of pier and bay painted in childish scrawl.

I smiled. "Did Grandma Moses ever live in Mobile?"

"Either that, or someone nailed her style pretty good." Aaron stepped away, shuffling among the furniture, head down. He stopped before a hulking dark box.

"Sanna. Look at this."

"What is it?"

"I think it's a piano."

The ivory was peeling off, curving in the humidity, leaving skeleton fingers in place of the keyboard. I rested my hands on the wooden strips, pressing down gently. They pushed back against me. I stroked the keyboard, feeling for ghosts of sound.

"What was this?"

"There are two more." Aaron had wandered away, weaving among the relics. His voice was hollow across the mound of forgotten things. "There are three pianos in this place."

“What was this?” I repeated, louder.

“A club?” Aaron stopped in front of a stool, puffing his cheeks and blowing away the dust covering its seat. “Some kind of dance hall?”

“At the back of a nursery? In Sibley?”

“I don’t know. Why not?”

“It just seems kind of random.”

Aaron shrugged. “Stranger things have happened, I guess.” He bent out of sight, scuffling in debris, next to a smaller keyboard- or was it an organ? Dust spun in the light from the rafters, flickering like fireflies. Aaron shot up quickly, dirty glasses with one eye popped out on his nose, a scarred hubcap held in front of his chest like a shield.

I laughed. “Some nightclub.”

He cocked one of his eyebrows, raising a shoulder with it. An empty light fixture, a triad of tentacles reaching down, wavered above his head.

“How old do you think this place is?”

“I don’t know.” He glanced back at the mural. “I mean, it doesn’t take a lot of weather without a roof to make a place pretty messy. I’d guess it’s been left alone... well, I don’t know. The roof damage must be at least kind of recent.” He shrugged. “Ish.”

I knelt, sliding a thin piece of aluminum out from under the piano’s rusted pedals. Black block letters, “closed,” stood against a white background. The metal was cool under my fingertips.

“Susanna, I bet I know what this was.”

“What?”

“I bet this was that place that woman had, Josie, or whatever her name was.”

“Josie?” I moved among the rubble, stepping towards a smaller, more decrepit piano than the first one. “Should I know her?”

“She lived in a house on Fly Creek. I mean, we never saw it. It burned a long time ago. But Dad told us about her. Remember?”

Shadows darkened my mind, a scarred refrigerator, barely visible from the road through the trees, scraps of tin, grass needling through dim remains. “He showed us where it was, didn’t he?”

“Her house? Yeah. Over on the bluff.”

This piano was smaller than the first, its insides stripped, sprays of strings bleeding where wooden panels should have been. “So what was this place?”

“She owned some kind of nightclub.”

“Did Dad tell you that?”

“Nah. Not exactly child-friendly information.” Aaron’s teeth flashed in the dim light, his lips curved into a smile. “I figured it out.” He turned his back to me, stepping towards the mural. “Don’t you remember hearing about some woman who turned up missing?”

Rumors spun lazily around Sibley, snippets of lives that floated between adolescents and bored mothers. Aaron and I rarely listened with any credulity to news that came secondhand.

“I don’t think so.”

“Keith told us about her.”

“Aaron, I don’t remember.”

“He said some woman turned up missing.” Aaron spoke forcefully. “A black woman. She’d made some people angry, and then she disappeared.”

“And she’s the woman Dad knew?”

“I think so.”

“Why?”

“Keith said this woman’d pissed some people off.” Aaron had stopped weaving through debris, stood still with his back to me, his face upturned towards the mural. “She was a black woman who owned a bar, and people didn’t like that.”

“I thought the woman Dad told us about died in her house.” I fingered fading keys, struggling over a half-remembered tragedy. “It burned down while she was sleeping.”

“It burned down. But she was gone already.”

“What are you talking about?”

“She was a black woman in southern Alabama.” Aaron turned, a crease in his brow fading, muscles collapsing into blankness. He kept his voice on an even pitch, on one rumbling low note. “She was a black woman who owned property. Called too much attention to herself or something. I bet something happened here. Some idiot got too drunk, some whore spread her legs, some white kid got in trouble, something, and they blamed Josie.”

“Did Keith tell you that?”

“No.” Aaron stretched, scratching his head. “Sort of.” He dropped his arms to his sides, his ribcage angled slightly out. “Keith said she turned up missing, but that it was sort of understood that she didn’t do the leaving. I think that’s the way he said it.”

Tender strings twisted around my stomach, stretching through my chest, tightening about my throat. “So some bigot lynched her, or God knows what, and burned her house, and people didn’t talk about it? They just let it happen?”

Aaron nodded, his shoulders taut.

“Here, Aaron? Really?” He didn’t answer. “This isn’t Selma. Or Little River.”

Aaron shook his head, opening his mouth, closing it and sighing when no words came.

“I mean, something like that wouldn’t happen here.” My tongue was thick in my mouth. “Right? To someone Dad knew?”

“People are funny about things they don’t understand.”

“What’s hard to understand about killing someone?”

“I don’t even really mean that.” Aaron swallowed loudly. He looked frail next to the piles of broken crates, in front of the smeared vision of the bay. “I mean, I do. The whole lynching mentality, the mob idea, whatever, that’s crazy. And terrible. But people... they don’t even try to find out, sometimes. They don’t understand how something could be true, so they don’t ask questions about it. It doesn’t make it any less wrong, but it’s what people do.”

Pine branches sighed outside, the light coming in through the tattered roof dimming, harshening Aaron’s features in shadow.

“Aaron, doesn’t that scare you?”

“Yeah.”

I reached for the keyboard, stroking the rough surface with uncertain fingers. Neither of us spoke, trembling in a darkening space.

“I think Dad’s that way.”

My voice shook. “Dad’s not some ignorant racist.”

Aaron’s face was tight. “Not completely.”

“No. He’s not at all.”

“He’s not a racist.” Aaron’s voice was hesitant. “But he won’t understand things he can’t explain. You know that. He won’t try.”

“That’s all he does.” My voice was too loud. “He looks for explanations. He finds answers to things he doesn’t understand. I mean...” I laughed hollowly. “I mean, we saw a spotlight as kids, a huge one, searching the bay, remember? We saw light on the water and didn’t know where it was coming from, and when we asked Dad, he drove us to find the spotlight itself, the whole time talking about alternating and direct current. We asked him what a spotlight was, and he explained how electricity travels.” I stopped. “All he does it look for answers.”

“He looks for order.” Aaron looked down at the camera bag slung around his waist, opening its buckle, sliding his hand inside to fiddle with the lens cap. “He looks for patterns, for things he can explain. If he can’t, he doesn’t. If something doesn’t fit in his logic, in his science, then it can’t be real. He wouldn’t accept it.”

“Dad wouldn’t accept racism as wrong? He would let some atrocity happen to someone he cared about?”

“I’m not talking about Josie.”

“Then what are you talking about?”

Aaron’s eyes wouldn’t catch mine, staring somewhere else, blank, unfocused.

“Aaron? What are you talking about?”

“Susanna.” His voice was small in the hollow room, absorbed by crates of other people’s memories. “Sanna, I...”

“What, Aaron?”

“I don’t know.” His shoulders fell, his spine suddenly limp, his eyes away from me, a careless hand across his camera. He slipped away from the tangled mess, through the door, into the sunlight. I lingered, stroking the ancient keyboard, listening for melody and chaos in a darkening space, watching shadows ebb and flow across the dark water on the wall.

I watched quietly over the next few weeks, looking for a reason for the rigid tension in his shoulders, waiting to understand the ways that he didn’t make sense, but he remained enigmatic, his bony frame differing from mine in a silent struggle that tightened his elbows against his hips, clenched his jaw in harsh angles, made him vaguely but undeniably different than me.

The weather cooled, briefly spinning the leaves from Indian summer into ephemeral fall, quickly slipping from a handful of perfect-weather days into the unpredictable cycle of southern winter. Some mornings, my breath would fog from my lips as Aaron scraped the frost off our windshield before school, while on others, the great bowl of Gulf water hovering outside the bay steamed our shore into a humid sauna, banishing coats into closets only to be reclaimed when thunderstorms whirled across the landscape, chilling fragile leaves from barren trees.

College loomed in the distance, threatening our horizon as a string of lasts paraded by, last Halloween in Sibley, last tree-lighting ceremony shivering outside while

strands of lights draped over the downtown Bradford pears switched into an ethereal glow, last Christmas dance in the echoing Civic Center. College applications papered our kitchen table, more for Aaron than for me. I only applied across the bay, reaching no farther than Mobile and the welcoming arms of the University of South Alabama, but he aspired to Atlanta, to Chapel Hill, to Vanderbilt and Virginia. Dad encouraged him, paying for each application, making a chart of required materials and highlighting approaching due dates. Aaron wrote essays, defined his resume, acquired stacks of unblemished transcripts that waited in sealed envelopes to journey into the hands of strangers who would weigh my brother's fate.

Aaron applied for scholarships, spending long nights typing essays, never asking for help, a quiet determination keeping his eyes open and his fingers on clacking computer keys. Digital markings accumulated, clumps of words glowing in harsh fluorescence, piling up in weighty potential, carrying both the threat and the promise of a life beyond the boardwalk and the bay. Dad began coming home from work more quickly, cooking us dinner, watching from the window if we came home later than he was expecting.

I wrote poems about a girl who was left behind, wandering an empty house alone. I wrote a mural of the bay onto her walls and loneliness into her voice. I wrote heavy dreams into her sleep, drowning out the noise of the world, leaving her to wake in the night to searing heat and the light of flames.

On cold mornings, I'd take the keys and wait in the car, letting the engine warm up. Aaron was always late. I'd watch the digital clock on the dashboard slip from 7:20

to 7:22, to 7:25, to 7:30. One morning, I warmed my hands above the air vents until 7:35 before I stormed into the kitchen.

“Aaron!” I yelled from the doorway, slamming the door behind me.

He was walking around the corner, his bookbag slung over his shoulder. “I’m ready.”

“Do you know what time it is?”

“Calm down, Sanna.” He stopped at the table, pulling his knee up and his foot onto a chair to tie his shoe.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m coming.” He hurried out the door, leaving it open for me.

“You have to do better than this.”

“Shut up, Sanna.”

“Don’t tell me to shut up. I was ready on time.”

He opened the car door, throwing his bookbag into the backseat. “You won’t be late.”

“I better not be.” I threw my bag at my feet, slamming my door and buckling my seatbelt.

Aaron slid behind the wheel. “Calm down, Sanna.” He cranked the ignition, sliding the gearshift into reverse. I played with the radio while he looked over his shoulder, backing out of the driveway.

“You have to get up earlier. This isn’t working.” I crossed my arms across my chest, tucking my fingers into my fists.

“Shut up, Sanna.” Aaron reached for the dashboard, flipping the radio to a punk station.

“Seriously?” I slapped the tuner back to my station.

“I’m driving, I pick the music.”

“You make me late, you don’t push it.”

“You’re not going to be late.”

“I probably will be. I was supposed to go by Mrs. Brown’s room to pick up a form she was signing for me.” I bit my lip. “For South. A recommendation form.”

“Quit being dramatic. You can do that at break.”

“No, I can’t.”

Aaron twisted the radio knob. “You’re being dramatic. You probably weren’t even planning to get the form before school. You’re just being pissy.”

I slapped at the radio knob. “And you’re being irresponsible. And an asshole.”

“Whatever, Sanna.”

“Do I have to come watch you get ready? Really, Aaron? You can’t keep getting later.”

“We’re not that late.”

“The late bell rings in five minutes.”

“Then one tardy won’t kill you.” He twisted the radio dial.

I slapped the button, pushing it too hard, accidentally turning it off.

“Aaron, it’s 7:40.”

“I get it. You can stop talking.”

“We have to leave by 7:30. Really, 7:25. Aaron, are you listening?”

He didn't answer.

"So what time should you get up if you know we need to leave at 7:25?"

Aaron slammed the palms of his hands against the steering wheel. "Goddammit, Susanna. You're not my mother."

"Well, no one else is."

His face told me that I shouldn't have said it. But the words were there, spinning somewhere between the rearview mirror and the silent radio, settling in Aaron's clenched jaw and my rolling stomach.

Dad was at the sink, washing cucumbers in cool water, the day that Aaron came home late, clutching a manila envelope in one hand. My brother's face glowed as he stepped through the doorway.

"Hey, Dad." He kept his voice steady, nonchalant, tossing the envelope onto the kitchen table. I craned my neck across the counter, trying to read the inky heading.

"Hello." Dad looked over his shoulder. "Where've you been? Your sister had to get a ride home with Kristin." He looked back at his hands, scrubbing the cucumbers beneath his thumbs. "Something going on up at the school?"

Aaron raised a corner of his mouth. "You could say so."

Switching the faucet off, Dad put the cucumbers on a cutting board, grabbing a towel for his hands. "A meeting or something?"

"Mrs. Coleman asked me to come by after school."

"Oh?" Dad's voice was gruff. "The art teacher?"

"Yes sir."

“What for?”

Aaron picked up the envelope, sliding its lip open, the paper shaking with his fingers. “She helped me submit one of my pictures to an art contest.”

“Oh yeah?”

Aaron nodded. “Yes sir. A photography contest through Emory.”

Dad raised his eyebrows. “That school’s on your list, huh?”

“Yes sir.”

“It’s a good school.” Dad sniffed, leaning back. “Ivy League of the South.”

“Yes sir.”

“When will you hear about the contest?”

“That’s why she asked me to come by today.” Aaron grinned, sliding a piece of smooth cardstock from within the envelope. “I’m in.”

Confusion flickered across Dad’s face. “You’re in the contest?”

“I won.”

“Aaron.” I smiled, but my stomach lurched.

Dad smiled. “That’s great, son.” He nodded. “That’s really great.”

Aaron stood up straight, his letter clutched in one hand. “Yeah.” His smile broadened. “I’m pretty excited about it.”

Dad leaned his arms on the counter. “Now what does this mean, exactly? Are they gonna publish your picture? Or is there a cash prize in this?”

“Well.” Aaron swallowed. “It was a scholarship competition.”

Dad’s jaw dropped. He shook his head, stammering. “Well, I’ll be.” He grinned. “That’s great, Aaron.” He chuckled. “That’s really great.”

I forced my lips to stay above my teeth, but the seams of my throat were closing as next year, as Atlanta, echoed in my chest.

Aaron looked down shyly, glancing at the bold writing on the university letterhead.

“How much?”

“Full tuition.” Aaron’s hand shook. “It still leaves room and board, but full tuition at a private school.”

“For a photo competition?” Dad shook his head. “That must be some picture you took.”

Aaron nodded. “I guess so.” His lips wouldn’t stay over his teeth, creeping up, dimpling his cheeks. “They offered me acceptance to their studio and full tuition.”

“Studio?” Dad narrowed his eyes.

“Yes sir.” Aaron rubbed the letter between his fingers. “Their photography studio.”

Dad’s face contracted, his lips pursed, his eyes thoughtfully considering the towel wrapped around his hands. “So it’s a scholarship to study photography?”

“Yes, sir.”

“So not really a competition so much, in the conventional sense?” Dad twisted his hand towel idly. “This was more of a portfolio you sent in, an application? That they really liked?”

Aaron’s reply was quiet. “Yes sir.”

Dad nodded. “Okay.” He unwrapped his hands from the towel, leaving it crumpled across the counter. “Why don’t we talk about this later?”

“What is there to talk about?” Aaron dropped the letter onto the table. “I got a great scholarship to a really good school.”

“That’s fantastic.” Dad nodded. “That’s a definite accomplishment. And you should be proud.” He rubbed his hand across the back of his neck. “But won’t you have to study photography if you accept it?”

“Well, yeah.”

Dad sighed. “Aaron, maybe we should talk about this later.”

“What’s wrong with studying photography?”

Dad grimaced. “There’s nothing wrong with it.” He paused. “It just doesn’t open much up in the way of a career for you. Couldn’t you make it your minor? Maybe take some classes in it? Would they let you accept the scholarship if you just make it your minor, let something else be your main focus?”

Aaron looked down at the letter of congratulations, shaking his head. “I don’t think that’s the way it works.”

Dad nodded. “I am proud of you, son. You’ve obviously got a lot of skill with a camera. It’s just not a way to build a life. Pictures can be part of your life always, but they don’t have to be the way you make money.” He rubbed his hands across the counter. “Do you understand that?”

Silence unraveled the pride in Aaron’s face, all sound reduced to his labored breathing, his hand trembling, stroking the cardstock letter on the table. The house trembled, the door slamming into its frame, Aaron striding past the porch and out of sight.

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As winter shortened daylight hours, the weather took an unexpected turn, temperatures soaring to record highs. Dad kept coming home early as often as he could, spending more time ghosting the kitchen with his tall frame, his conversations with Aaron growing more and more terse. My brother was headed to Emory, but my father saw no logic in his art.

The boardwalk continued to draw us, beckoning us towards its brackish expanse with invisible hands. Once, we walked all the way along the shore to Ecor Rouge, to the red bluffs hovering over the shore, purplish pines rimming grassy edges. The bay was calm. Water stretched taut, a liquid tablecloth undulating beneath wheeling gulls, blending sea and sky into one wall of blue. Aaron walked ahead of me, skipping down the boardwalk steps, into the sticky sand. Clay gleamed where the underbrush thinned into the shoreline, little remnants of the creek fanning across the surface streaked red and orange. I walked down the steps slowly, stopping to kneel by a particularly tempting stretch of clay. I stroked my fingers in its grimy smoothness, weighing its density between my fingers.

“Susanna.” Aaron’s voice was muffled. I looked across the sand to the water. “Hey, come look.” He was standing on top of a large rock, tide foaming around its base. The wind blew his hair, swirling spikes across the crown of his head. He had already rolled his pants up to his knees. Wiping sand from my shins, I stood, trudging through the warm grit to where he stood. He offered his hand, grabbing mine, pulling me smoothly onto his rock. “What do you think did that?”

In the center of the rock, curving beneath our feet, a perfect spiral was etched into the dark rock. The rock shone slightly reddish where it had been cut, a strange circling sore.

“I don’t know.” I knelt carefully, keeping my balance. The spiral was rough beneath my fingertips. I traced its path in a smooth loop.

“Must have taken somebody a long time.” Aaron rubbed his toe where my fingers had been. “It’s so precise.”

Grabbing his arm, I pulled myself back up. “That’s strange.” The wind whipped my hair into my mouth as I spoke. I brushed it behind my ear.

Aaron nodded, turning his head to survey the water. His pupils were tiny in the sunlight, color flooding his irises, reflecting the sea and the sky. “I wonder if it’s recent. I’ve never noticed it before.”

I shrugged. “I haven’t either.”

Aaron leapt nimbly from the rock to a sandbar. A bundle of acute angles tumbling through the air, he jumped from the sandbar to another, to a rock, to the shore. I laughed when his feet caught the water, spraying droplets up one leg. He looked over his shoulder, grinning.

I stepped from the rock onto the sand, carefully keeping my feet above the swirling tide. Granules crunched between my toes. The wind was thick and salty, diffusing brackish air into my lungs, expanding in the passageways beneath my skin. I followed Aaron along the meandering tide line. He stayed a few paces ahead of me, his feet kicking sand up in little tufts behind him.

Suddenly, he stopped. His hair eddied across his furrowed brow as he squinted downwards. My eyes followed his.

Bleached bones strung with fibers lay strewn about the sand. Aaron knelt, looking at the skeleton more closely. I stayed where I was. “What is it?”

“Some kind of fish.” Grabbing a stick, Aaron poked at the remains. “I can’t tell what kind. Not enough of it left.”

The wind carried its pungent, putrid memory to my nose. I turned away.

“Was there a jubilee lately?”

I shrugged. “I wouldn’t know.”

Aaron pointed down the beach, to more skeletons scattered along the shore.

“Looks like there must have been.” Tossing his stick aside, he stood up. “I wish we’d have known. I want to see one someday.”

“There’s still time.” Time before August, time before the wind caught him away to Atlanta.

Aaron nodded. “There better be.” He scratched his head. “I just don’t know how to predict it. How to get out here while it’s in full swing.”

“Didn’t Dad say they’re in the almanac?”

Aaron raised a shoulder. “They predict them. But they aren’t always right.”

“They could be.”

“I don’t think they know what causes them, not altogether. It’s hard to predict something you don’t understand.”

“Isn’t it because of the rain? Too much rain in the delta?” I knew our father had told us it was. He had an explanation for jubilees, for the strange phenomenon that crept

through our bay on quiet nights, for the cacophony of jumping fish breaching themselves along the shore, just as he had an explanation for the rest of the world.

“It could be.” Aaron nodded. “Dad’s told me that before. It rains too much in the delta, fresh water floods the bay, and the oxygen concentration changes with less salt water. Too much oxygen maybe, or too little, I don’t really know.” He looked up, his eyes lighting somewhere above the tree line along the bluff. “The fish can’t breathe. So they jump.”

“Up.”

Aaron’s eyes jerked towards me. “Up?”

“They jump up. They suffocate, and they jump up.”

Aaron laughed. “It’s a strange suicide dance, I guess. Dying while defying gravity, or something.” He shook his head. “The whole thing’s bizarre. That’s why I want to see it.”

“Me too.”

Aaron grinned, but his eyes were wistful. They started past me, down the beach, as his lips relaxed, folding his face to match his eyes. He looked tense, expectant, his features waiting to mold into something I couldn’t predict. His eyes were drawn tight, squinting into the sunlight.

The moment passed. Aaron looked back at me, smiling again, raising his eyebrows and dropping them quickly. He turned and walked up the beach.

The bluffs above us gleamed red and orange in the sun. Where the thick clay yielded to softer soils, sand periodically cascaded down, harmlessly avalanching towards the water. Seagulls floated above our heads, cutting the air in circles, wheeling and

calling on the breeze. Sometimes a pelican drifted past, stopping to light on a piling, majestically folding its wings and holding its head high. One pelican dived, seizing a careless mullet hovering too close to the surface. We passed piers that jutted into the smooth water. The dark forms were speckled with barnacles that gurgled as the waves splashed across their crusty shells.

Aaron walked quickly, hunching his shoulders forward. I trailed behind, watching the landscape wheel beneath the clouds.

A pine tree blocked our way. The tides had shifted the shoreline, trickling the sand from between its roots, leaving spindly limbs supporting the hulking tree, little spider's legs crouching beneath its graying trunk. Water eddied through the unsteady base. Aaron stepped nimbly across its roots, holding his hands out for balance, his feet curving around the knobby limbs. I followed less confidently, leaning the palms of my hands against the trunk, the purplish bark rough and peeling beneath my fingers. Aaron stepped easily back onto the sand. Bending my knees, I carefully hopped away from the tree, planning to land gently in the soft sand. My feet missed, catching the edge of a wave, spraying moisture as high as my elbows. I shrieked. Aaron laughed. "You never make it without getting wet somewhere along the way."

"Neither do you."

"Fair enough." He shrugged. "You're not supposed to. Why walk the bay if you don't plan to get at least a little salty?"

"I wouldn't mind staying dry."

"You'll miss it next year, though. You can't walk the shore like this on the Mobile side."

I shook my head, biting my lip. “There is no next year.”

I wasn’t sure if he’d heard me. He was walking faster, staying along the tide line where the sand was moist and firm. I kept close behind, stepping in the traces left by his feet, moving easily next to the seaweed draped along the edge of the tide’s wake in a briny garland.

I stopped suddenly, gasping at the color that flooded the sky as the sun sank towards the water. Aaron didn’t hear me. He kept walking quickly, growing smaller against the sand. I stared at the glittering bay, hardly breathing, careful not to stir as the earth swung in its orbit, content to stay in the waters I knew.

Our father wanted Aaron to come with him one weekend. He was collecting data in the delta, and he wanted company while he canoed the myriad of tributaries and islands branching the divide between bay and pine forest.

Aaron didn’t want to go. Gleaning the delta for scientific evidence had long lost its charm for him. Aaron wanted to photograph mystery instead of dissecting it, and he claimed Dad wanted his camera to document specimens lifelessly, not to illumine moss draperies swelling beneath cypress arms, not to wash snowy egrets in early morning light, not to catch the world twice where the horizon folded and repeated itself in the water. Dad wanted Aaron’s help in investigating the hows of the world, in demystifying its mechanical spine, but Aaron wouldn’t see beauty in respiration and amphibian specimens strewn about the canoe, their swollen bellies waiting for the scalpel, waiting to spill for students in laboratories with gloves and formaldehyde. Maybe Dad was less rigid than Aaron insisted, but Aaron wouldn’t consider Dad as less mechanically minded than the

lifeless components, the arrangement of chemicals, that Dad had spent his livelihood understanding.

Dad began organizing supplies for the weekend, attaching the trailer to the hitch on the back of his truck, loading his canoe onto it, checking the trolling motor to make sure it was whirring smoothly. He untangled stained nets and checked the batteries in huge flashlights, found his tent poles and canvas, made sure his flint was lying in cotton in its metal box. He told Aaron to bring his camera, said they could take pictures of the swamps as the sun faded from the sky and eddied through the current, but Aaron was unyielding.

Dad was waiting in the kitchen on Friday when we walked in, our return from school delayed by a spontaneous trip to give a friend from across town a ride home. Dad's bags were packed and by the door. He sat at the table, one leg stretched out in front of him, drumming his fingers against the wooden top. He looked up as we entered the room. His gaze stopped Aaron in the doorway. I stayed beside my brother, watching.

"You sure you don't want to go?"

Aaron stood up straight, pulling his shoulders forward, his ribcage in. "Yes."

Dad looked at the table, shaking his head. His face was drawn tight. His nails rattled against the table with each roll of his fingers until he tapped them all together against the wood in final cadence. Keeping his head down, he looked up at my brother.

"I didn't buy you a nice camera to keep you away from me."

Aaron swallowed. His jaw was tight.

"I don't understand." Dad's voice was tired. "You can bring your camera. You can take pictures of whatever you want. Asking you to keep art in perspective isn't so..."

He lifted his hand, waving it theatrically. “So terrible. You’re growing up. You have to think about real life, about the adult world, about practical things. You can have your art, but just keep everything in proportion. Is that what this trip is about for you?”

“Sir?”

Dad leaned forward in his chair. “Are you upset with me because I make you look at reality, because I clip your wings, because I want a future for you?” He shook his head. “Aaron, you can have your art, your pictures, whatever. I don’t have a problem with that, that’s just not a way to make a living. You can take your pictures and still help me gather frogs.” He laughed hollowly. “I don’t see the issue, really.”

Aaron’s jawbone pulsed through his cheek as he clenched and unclenched his teeth. His shoulders were tight.

“We don’t have to make this a family conflict.” Dad lowered his voice. “I know you’re growing up. You want to define yourself, find out who Aaron is.” He paused. “And that’s fine. That’s good. That’s normal.” Dad swallowed, thinking. “But you can keep things in balance. In perspective. You still need practical skills, need more than pictures to make a living.”

Beside me, Aaron’s breath was loud, coming faster.

“But this doesn’t even have to be about that.” Dad put his hands together, looking Aaron in the eye. “You’re leaving soon. I want to spend time with my son. Is that enough?” The words were awkward, his lips curling around their syllables with obvious effort. “We can argue about your major later. Can I spend a weekend camping with my son in the delta?”

Aaron's face took on a mysterious look, a wistful look I couldn't identify, as if he were already gone to Atlanta and all of Sibley was slipping out of sight, out of mind, but something else clouded his brow, some color I didn't know, his eyes widening as he looked at our father, his trembling skeleton reverting to the child-Aaron, the helpless, running Aaron, almost in terror. The tension in his coiled body rattled me. I watched his rigid shoulders, waiting for the snap.

"Please." Dad's voice was husky.

Aaron turned his head, looking out the window. I didn't breathe.

"Ok." Dad pushed himself up from the table, its legs creaking beneath the pressure of his hands. "Let's get some stuff together for you."

Aaron shook his head. Dad kept moving, not seeing him.

My brother tried again, licking his lips, softly. "No."

Dad stopped. "No?"

Aaron shook his head.

Dad stared at him, his face taking on an echo of the wistful look I knew in Aaron, but with less mystery, more tangible sadness. He let his breath out, letting it whistle as it flowed past his teeth. Rubbing the back of his neck with one hand, he turned and left the room.

I waited until Dad's truck had disappeared down the street, the brake lights on the trailer dim through the trees, before I said anything.

Aaron was sitting on the porch steps, rubbing a stick along the grout between the bricks. I settled myself next to him, my knees cracking as they bent. He didn't look up.

"Aaron."

He scraped the stick against green mold, scratching the grout clean.

“Do you think that maybe you’re overreacting?”

His jaw trembled. He tossed the stick into the yard. “Sanna, I don’t need this from you.”

“I’m on your side, you know.”

“Yeah.” He put his hands against the steps, pushing himself to his feet. “Sounds like it.”

“Aaron.” I tried to keep my voice pleading, tried to catch his eye. He shook his head.

“You just don’t get it. Neither of you get it.”

“Then explain it to me.”

Aaron opened his mouth, stammering. He turned, jerking the door open, and disappeared inside. I rose quickly, following him. “I mean it, Aaron.”

He moved quickly, striding into the kitchen. Throwing a cabinet open, he grabbed a glass.

“I don’t like watching you argue with him.”

He kept his back to me, throwing the freezer open, ice cubes clinking as he dropped them.

“If this is such a big deal to you, let’s talk about it. I’m not Dad. I won’t tell you you’re wrong.” I stepped closer to him.

He brushed past me, flinging the faucet up, catching his glass under the rush of water. He jerked it off too late, droplets sliding down his hand and wrist.

“Aaron. Talk to me.”

He threw his head back, gulping down the water inside, his Adam's apple jerking along the lines of his throat. Gasping for air, he wiped his mouth against the back of his hand, his fingers lingering against his lips. His other hand shook, lowering the glass to the counter.

"I'm not leaving."

Putting both hands against the counter, he bent at the waist, leaning his weight against his forearms. His shoulders formed a hard line below his ears, his jaw clenched tight.

"I'm serious."

He flexed his jaw, loosening words from inside his throat, but he kept his mouth closed, pursing his lips only to straighten them into a thin line. Tension filled the creases around his eyes.

"What's wrong?"

He inhaled slowly, bringing one hand to trace the bottom of the water glass. Twisting it along the counter, turning it in circles between lanky fingers, he stared at the condensation faintly gathered along its bottom. Leaning his head to one side, he tilted the glass, peering down to its bottom. He lifted the glass up to the light, twisting and turning it in his hand.

"Susanna, have you ever wondered if maybe, under the right set of circumstances, mitosis might be reversible?"

Pictures of cells stretching and dividing, walls rupturing under the pressure of bulging cytoplasm, textbook pages laced with diagrams defining growth and chance flooded the space behind my eyes.

“I know it’s not.” He kept his eyes on the glass, still twisting and turning, droplets splitting into separate selves and melting back into one across the bottom. “It’s not fluid like water, cells don’t separate and then join back together. Some changes are more permanent.”

“Like what?”

“Some states are just... static.” His voice was distant, melodic. “There are some things I just don’t know how to change.”

I ran my hand along the edge of the counter, waiting.

“I can’t be what he wants me to be.” He put the glass down, looking away.

“Maybe you could just talk to him differently. You know, make a plan. Show him a way that you can take care of yourself and still do whatever you want to with your life.”

He shook his head. “That wouldn’t be enough.”

“Did you ever think about just trying?”

He sighed, shook his head slowly.

“Then prove yourself. Go to Emory, do well, show him that this can work for you.”

Aaron swallowed, leaned back against the counter. He narrowed his eyes, turning his head to look at me. “Susanna, do you ever think about how things would have been different if Mom were alive?”

My chest hurt. Suffocating tendrils tried to creep upwards, from my lungs into my throat, but I swallowed them down. There was water around my eyes, sliding across my vision. I stretched my eyes wide, keeping the tears inside them.

“If maybe the other car had pulled out just a second later? If maybe she had come home earlier?”

I clenched my teeth, halfway raising one shoulder. “Sure.” My voice cracked. “Of course.”

He looked at his hands, rubbing his thumb along the thin bones in his other hand. “I think about it a lot.” He nodded, his voice low. “I think things would be a lot different if she were here now.”

Coldness spread through my stomach, stretching through places I couldn’t touch. I wanted him to keep talking, wanted him to stop. My face was damp.

Aaron’s shoulders sagged. “Susanna, I’ll never be what Dad wanted.” He tilted his head to one side, kept rubbing his fingers against each other. “I’ll never be the man that he wanted out of a son. I can’t be.”

I breathed, deep, swallowed. “Aaron, maybe you’re putting too much pressure on yourself.”

“Maybe.” He sighed, his face lengthening. Closing his eyes, he spoke softly. “Maybe you’re right, maybe I should talk to him. I’ve kind of been meaning to. I just...” He licked his lips, squinting his eyes. “I guess I don’t know how to. Or maybe I’m too scared.”

I nodded.

“Susanna.” Aaron turned his head towards me, his eyes wide and blue. “It’s not even really a question of Emory or not, of photography or not. Sanna, do you know?” He closed his eyes tightly, his brows knotted between them. “What I...” He looked down at the counter. “Do you know what I’m talking about? At all?”

Narrowing my eyes, I looked at my brother, his thin frame all angles and tension against the counter.

He dug onto the hard surface with one finger, scratching intently. “Sanna, he wants me to make something of myself because he wants me to be able to take care of myself, but really, he wants me to be able to support my family,”

Aaron and I had always been loners, he’d never had many close friends, wasn’t like the other boys, but we were just loners, that’s why he was different, but he’d never had a girlfriend, never been interested in one, but he was just shy, we were just loners, two peas in a pod, two halves of the same fractured egg, battered by the bay and the absence of a mother,

“but Sanna, I’ll never have that, I’ll never be that, I won’t have that responsibility, I won’t have a family, I won’t have a wife, I can’t, it’s not how I work,”

When he was a little boy, Aaron had a friend over to play, and they wouldn’t let me join, he and Justin left me, but I followed them, found them sitting on the edge of the driveway, they didn’t see me, Aaron leaned closer, pressing his lips against Justin’s cheek, Justin screamed, ran away from my brother, I told our father, he punished Aaron, told him that wasn’t what friends did,

“I can’t make sense to him, he wouldn’t understand, but I can’t keep acting,”

Aaron had too many college applications, I helped him fill out paperwork, helped him address envelopes, but he didn’t want me to, said my handwriting was too girly, but I argued that it wasn’t, it was too sloppy to be girly, but he pointed to the subtleties, to the slight curves, little wisps of ink trailing away before my pen left the paper, making it feminine,

“and I don’t want to always be lonely, always be afraid that I’ll always be lonely, that there will never be anyone there for me,”

He’d always been obsessed with gender, with differentiating himself from me, but I thought it was because the fractured egg was splitting, we were two different people, breaking away into separate spheres, I didn’t understand,

His face was wet, little balls of light flickering as they slid down his cheeks, “but I can’t have a wife, it wouldn’t work, it could never work, that will never be my life, but how can I tell him that,” Aaron was shaking, his fingers rattling against the counter, “how can I tell him that I’ll never be the son he wanted,” his breath was torn, rent into pieces, shuddering out of his lungs, “how can I tell him that I’ll never make sense, that I’ll never fit his order,” he was yelling, “that I’ll always be different, Sanna,” my face was salty, newly damp, Aaron’s voice was softening, “Josie was different, look at what people in the South did to her, would it be the same for me?” he was gulping air, “would I always know that people thought I was a bad person, that I was a screw up, that Dad thought so,” his shoulders were rattling like magnolia leaves, shivering in the throes of a storm, “that I even thought so, that...” his voice was trailing away, air ripping from his chest in sobbing gusts.

I wrapped my arms around my brother’s shoulders, absorbing the trembling radiating from his waist, his turmoil churning in my stomach, two halves of a fractured egg joined by a cracking exterior.

Aaron wasn’t in the house when Dad came home on Sunday afternoon, lugging coolers full of frogs swathed in ice. He parked the canoe trailer under a water oak by the

driveway, pulling his truck closer to the house before unloading his supplies. I watched from the kitchen window as he emptied the bed of his truck.

Dad was cheerful that night, careful to ask how things had been around the house while he was gone, quick to relate how many frogs he'd gathered, how he'd managed to coax a fire out of damp wood with his flint and cotton. Aaron was quiet over supper. I mediated, balanced between secrecy and convention, answering my father's questions and distracting him from the tense lines carved in my brother's face.

Over the next few days, the warm delta glow faded from my father's eye, circling college and planning back into the center of conversation. My acceptance letter came from South, and Dad put it on the refrigerator, taking a picture of its red and blue header to send to his brother's family in Montgomery. Aaron signed his letter of consent for Emory, but left it on his desk, his wobbly signature hiding beneath piles of books without an envelope, without stamps, without direction.

He kept his camera on top of his dresser, but he stopped asking me to pause before its lens. He started staying late after school, lingering in Mrs. Coleman's room, sketching wavering images of the bay, or a dusty room bulging beneath the weight of three pianos, or harsh self portraits that were all angles and apprehension. I caught rides home with Kristin more and more often, letting him have the car, silently affirming whatever outlet he needed. My stomach churned when he came through the kitchen doorway after dark, knowing what tension ate away at his throat, understanding the brittle thinness in his arms and neck. His smile was hollow, his eyes heavy, potent with the weight of a thousand unspoken fears.

On days when Kristin was running late, I'd wander into Mrs. Coleman's room and sit beside him, watching his fingers mold graphite forms into being. Other students would stay, too, hunched together at tables in the back of the room, eyes intently focused on swirls and shadows nascent on rough paper. Aaron usually shared a table with a boy we'd known growing up, who'd been on our swim team, and Colton would switch seats when I came in so I could sit with my brother, letting me watch a red-eyed frog with splayed feet glistening beneath Aaron's timid brush.

Dad kept rushing home from work. When Kristin would drop me off, he would already be behind the house, up to his elbows in loam, pruning hydrangeas and azaleas, repotting begonias and fertilizing the loquat tree. As winter deepened, our backyard surged with rows of carefully tended sticks waiting for the spring.

I spent my afternoons in silence, books and papers spread across our kitchen table, trudging through layers of homework, finishing piles of assignments only to cover other blank sheets of paper with more words, with a thousand curving characters giving shape to the myriad of branching thoughts stretched across my mind. Aaron used images to speak beyond words, while I took characters and settings and manipulated them within a framework of word on word to communicate something behind them all. My brother became an artist while I struggled to become a poet.

I wrote about my brother, changing his name, his features, his voice, making him a fisherman's son in Maine or a waiter in New Orleans, entrapped by city walls, taking his rigid shoulders and transposing them against foreign backdrops. I wrote about my father, masking him as a leading researcher in Cape Canaveral, or a biologist camping in the Amazon, giving him free reign for his observations and the sense they made of the

world. I wrote about my mother sometimes, making her alive, placing her beneath pearls and perfume in our living room, giving her a smile and a voice. I left myself out of my stories, welding my eyes into the scenery, hiding behind the narrator in third person, without assigning myself a face, a tone, only giving myself away in what nonexistent readers could glean from the lens through which I saw the rest.

I began sneaking into my mother's closet, still untouched after a decade, quietly opening dusty boxes of photographs and jewelry. Her dresses were silky, her shoes too small for me, but her rings slid loosely across my knuckles. I found one without stones, an unobtrusive silver swirl that echoed in my memory, a thin band topped with a decorative ornament hammered from slender metal. I hoped it had been her mother's, or that some other forgotten story hid in its whorls. I kept it on my finger, rubbing it against my thumb in class, pressing it against my lips while I wrote.

Before winter relaxed its intermittent grip on the coast, a frost graced the fields stretched along the road on our way to school. Aaron scraped thin crystals off the windshield before we climbed into the car, our breaths visible outside our mouths. The cold drove us into warmer jackets, burrowed between layers of cotton, huddled our hands into our pockets, kept us away from the icy breezes that swept across the water.

My mother's ring was loose on my finger, the cold shrinking the skin along my bones. I squeezed it tight against the joint where my finger met my palm, pressing its form into my fist, etching its memory into the lines scratched across my cracking skin.

Aaron and I both grew quieter, adrift in our separate minds, lines and shapes filling the space behind his eyes while words floated in mine. Silence stretched across

our car in the early mornings, no sound disrupting thin air, two fish gasping to satisfy aching gills in shallow water.

Kristin's white Honda stood starkly against a spray of weeds and cane that flourished along the pipeline jutting from the far corner of the parking lot. She perched on the hood, her knees pressed together, her feet spread against the bumper. My legs ached striding towards her. The speckled asphalt dotted with puddles, scars from a week of freezing rain, melted too slowly between us.

My bookbag pressed into the small of my back, bouncing with each step. "Hey, I'm sorry."

She waved her hand. "Don't worry about it. I'm not in a hurry." Cold air fanned blond waves around her face.

I pulled the passenger door open, tossing my bag onto the floorboard as she stepped down from the hood. "I spilled my binder all over the hallway. It took me awhile to get the pages all together again."

"That sucks." She opened her door, slipping behind the wheel. "I hate it when that happens."

"Yeah." I sighed, kicking the lumps in my bag, wiggling room for my feet below the seat. Shivering, I crossed my arms across my chest, tucking my fingers into tight fists. Kristin turned her key in the ignition, rolling slowly out of her parking spot. No cars blocked our view of the turn lane leading out to the highway.

"Are you and Aaron still pretty close?"

"I mean, we're twins."

“But do y’all talk a lot?”

“Yeah.” Brown hedges rolled past, surging above dried grass, stretching on either side of the highway. “I guess.”

“Mm.” Kristin nodded, fingering the gearshift.

I watched the temperature gauge on the dashboard, waiting for the needle to slide upwards, signaling the chance to open warm vents upon my chilled hands. Pressing them deeper into my elbows, I tucked my thumbs tightly against my fingers, skin against skin.

“Kristin.” My voice was tight. “I have to go back.”

I couldn’t remember when I’d last had it around my finger. I could’ve taken it off to wash my hands, or maybe I rested it along the edge of my desk during one of my classes. The pavement blurred beneath my feet, my heart throbbing along my neck. What if it was scattered somewhere along the asphalt? I slowed, scanning the pebbly sea for a sparkle that was more than mica. Layers of gray echoed across the blacktop, shades broken by too many glints of dying sunlight.

My forehead pulsed in time with my throat, hammering panicked fractures along the rim of my skull. How could I spot a circle of silver against so much pavement?

The hallway was quiet. Heavy double doors slammed shut behind me, rattling the stillness, reverberating along the walls. No jewelry shone against the floor. There wasn’t enough room to breathe.

My fingers shook against my locker, trembling through the combination. Only textbooks and crumpled paper scattered across its bottom, no sheen cutting the dust.

Her fingers were fuller than mine, knuckles swollen with age, rings expanded to fit. Why had I taken the risk of wearing it?

The bathroom was empty, pungent from disinfectant. The sinks were damp, ringed with stray droplets, their porcelain faces dingy white, the only silver gleaming from streaked faucets, no metal band gracing a rim. The floor was blank, gray tile brimmed with dark grout, grimy in places, damp beneath dripping sinks, floor sticky from half-hearted mopping, no slender curve breaking the angled pattern stretched to the walls.

Her ring was gone. Could someone have spotted it, picked it up, fingered its swirls, taken it to the office, to some lost and found? But who would bother? Would anyone notice a thin band in shadowed corners, would anyone turn in a ring without stones, without ornamentation, without obvious worth?

I dug my teeth against my lip, tasting salt. The mirrors were streaked, ever-widening circles tracing gray across my face, reflecting the silver gleam trembling along my cheeks. My eyes were wide, hollow in tired sockets, quivering behind a damp sheen spilling to my mouth. My frame was too skinny beneath my sweater, my skeleton too tightly wound. Wiping my face with shaking hands, I turned away.

The door to the art room gaped halfway open. Pressing my cheeks into the sleeves of my sweater, I soaked the moisture away, breathing slowly. I pushed the door with my palms, peeking into the studio.

Aaron was standing beside a table, shuffling a binder into his open bookbag. Waving, I pressed my lips together firmly, distrusting my voice. Nodding in my direction, he pulled the zipper across the top of his bag. I swallowed thickly.

He didn't move towards me. I raised my eyebrows, widening my eyes to keep them dry, gesturing with my fingers for him to come. But he wasn't looking. His eyes were on his hands, grasping dense paper from the tabletop.

"Aaron." I kept my voice steady, kept from looking at other students standing around other tables.

He looked up. "Yeah, Sanna?"

"Are you leaving?"

He shrugged, turning his head, tossing his bag above his shoulder. His voice was too low for my ears, his words directed to Colton, not me.

I exhaled, air shuddering through my nose. Kristin was probably still in the parking lot, engine running, waiting for me. But I needed my brother.

"Aaron." My voice wasn't loud enough. "Aaron."

"Yeah." He shifted his weight to one hip, glancing towards the door. "Just a minute."

The strings around my throat tightened, squeezing the air out of my chest, dampening the trails along my cheeks. I stepped into the hallway, rubbing my lips together, pressing my sleeves against my eyes.

Dampness spread around my wrists, tears soaking into my jacket. I breathed slowly, biting my lip. Gray tiles stretched away from my feet, alternating light and dark squares to the wall, joining the baseboard below a row of rusty colored lockers. Nine tiles in a horizontal line beneath the lockers, another five running towards my shoes. Forty-five in all. Aaron was taking too long.

Clenching my jaw to keep emotion behind my eyes, I peeked around the door into the art room, across the scattered bent heads. My brother was gone. Was there a back door leading outside from the studio? There must be.

A shudder choked against my vocal chords, my whimpering small in my throat. Wiping new tears from my cheeks, I strode down the hall, the double doors at the end growing quickly larger, caught the handle against my hip, slinging it open, a gray expanse stretched in a dizzying, lengthening square beyond the sidewalk, Kristin's car nowhere in sight.

Two small, skinny figures broke the monotony of speckled gray, thin forms moving toward a car several rows back, one tall and blonde, familiar in its angled posture, the other close beside, two profiles casting a joint shadow, Colton's face towards my brother, his hand moving to rest on the small of Aaron's back,

and the fractured egg was splitting, severed with sparkling mica peppered across dark rocks and missing bands of silver, the stipple of pied asphalt rolling in turbulent waves between my brother and me, no stable weathered boards bridging the distance to drip castles and pelicans, only gray rock stretching to meet a gray sky as my brother's life diverged from mine. Aaron was wrong, mitosis was irreversible, my breath rattled from my lungs, rent from my body in cloudy gusts, his angled posture curving in the blur streaming from my eyes, my thumbs tucked tightly inside my fists, skin against skin.

My father was already back at the house. He answered my call on the second ring.

"Hey, Sanna." He cleared his throat. "Aaron leave already?"

“Yes sir.”

“Kristin?”

“She had somewhere to be.”

“Well, you’re just out of options, aren’t you? Calling me?”

I didn’t respond.

“Alright, Sanna. Give me just a minute more.”

He didn’t ask about the puffiness around my eyes, or maybe he didn’t see.

Surprisingly, he didn’t ask where Aaron had gone. He was in a good mood. He told me about his day, some story about another chemist I was expected to know, but I didn’t hear. My eyes were on the pavement around the car, wondering if a tiny circle of silver could have blown over here, my skull aching with the void left by an absent mother, my ribs shaking as the extension of myself broke away, leaving me to fill a tender hole alone.

I faced brown hedges and dried grass, stale life stretched away to the horizon, as my father steered the car inside the lines. He kept talking, requiring only minimal input from me, an occasional guttural assent or a nod of my turned head. I couldn’t keep my jaw from quivering, my eyes from filling and spilling over.

“Sanna?”

I grunted, keeping my lips tightly together.

“I asked where Aaron went.”

“I don’t know.” I couldn’t keep my words even.

“Susanna, are you... you crying?”

My throat tightened, chords squeezing a sob in reply.

“Susanna?” Dad’s voice was frightened.

I heard a small sound, not feeling it leave my lips, a murmured whimper coming from outside my lungs.

“Sanna? What’s wrong?”

I tightened my fingers into fists, rubbing my thumbs along cracked skin.

Aaron had come flying down the hill, his butterfly net a white blur behind him, his legs skinny in large boots, his feet leaving a damp trail evaporating skywards. I found the path through the woods, circling the huge dog, “two are always stronger than one, you know,”

It was our birthday, I couldn’t find Aaron, he wasn’t in the house, but I crept through the back, found him huddled in her closet, hidden in shadows, his face pressed in her smell, I curled up beside him, sharing his grief, two peas in a pod,

Dad was scared, but I couldn’t speak, tears hardening my throat,

She was our mother, leaving a hole that we shared, breaking separate halves into the same pieces, brittle fragments of a person that leaned together for support, for completion, “keep looking out for each other, you hear?”

The piece of her was gone, scattered somewhere in shadows, leaving my thumbs pressed into tight fists, skin against skin, no circle linking her memory onto my finger, and the void left behind was widening, cutting deeper through my stomach, my brother with someone else, Colton’s hand more important than mine, “and your brother, he’ll take care of you,”

Dad was pulling into the driveway, sliding the gearshift into park, he was looking at me, he was concerned, “Susanna, what’s wrong, talk to me, baby,”

My brother didn't wait for me, Mama was scattered somewhere along the ground and he wouldn't wait for me, Colton's hand pressing into the small of his back,

"Susanna, where's your brother? What's going on?"

Words bubbled out. "He left me, he's with someone else—"

"Who's he with?"

I gasped for air.

"Doesn't he stay in the art room after school?"

"He left."

"With..." Understanding relaxed the furrow across my father's brow. "With a girl? Is that it, Susanna?"

"No." My voice was too loud, shaking, tones splitting with each word. "Of course not, that's not how he works, that's the source of everything, of all these problems—"

"What is, Sanna? What problems?"

"Between you two, all the arguments, it's not about Emory, it's not about photography, Dad—"

"Then what is it?"

"He left with Colton, he left me, I needed him—"

"Colton Pearson?"

"Yes sir."

"Where was he going with Colton?"

“I don’t know.” The bricks outlining our house melted in my vision. “How would I know? Where would you take a boy in Sibley?” My chest rattled, a laugh breaking through my trachea. “Home to meet your family?”

I saw Dad’s knuckles first, ashen against the steering wheel, the blood drained from his strained grip. I wasn’t sure if he was breathing. His lips hung open, trembling, his head swinging ever so slightly back and forth. Heaviness gnawed in my stomach, a dense space expanding, stretching, clamoring upwards against my ribs,

“No, Daddy, I’m sorry, don’t listen to me,”

But he was outside, the car was rocking, door slamming, his figure warped by my tears, the fractured egg shattered against the driveway.

Winter comes slowly to southern trees, leaves clinging to shivering branches, holding their hue until green withers to brown. Only a few brave souls glow out in a dash of color before smoldering and drifting to earth. The hickory tree on the edge of our yard glimmered yellow long after days shortened to chilly dusks, keeping cadence to its own circadian rhythm, apart from the season and the South.

I didn’t go inside the house, wandering instead beneath trembling limbs, watching gold drip from branches like honey, tired salt trails crusty on my face. The hickory’s trunk was scarred, pockmarked with childish initials etched by Aaron’s pocketknife.

Magnolia leaves shuddered ahead, glossy and dark behind the yellow. I stepped towards their shiny faces, stretching my hand to brush against smooth tops, reddish bottoms leaving a rusty powder across my fingers.

The woods beside our house swelled as I stepped within their bounds, retracing a path we hadn't walked in years. On days when the bay seemed two blocks too far away, Aaron and I had burrowed into the shallow forest, hiding in mottled shadow. Dried leaves crunched beneath my feet, now, my presence amplified in a soft world.

Curling across the knots of a holly tree, I let water spill from behind my eyes, brought quivering hands to my face, emotion wrenched from my belly, shoulders shivering in the cold, the quiet struggle of my other self gracelessly stripped bare.

I woke minutes, maybe hours, later to a brittle darkness settled over the trees, dusky quiet chilling their trunks. Scrambling to my feet, I stumbled through the underbrush, thin branches needling my face, jerking over uneven ground toward the lights of our house.

Our car was in the driveway. Aaron was home. Heart throbbing in my temples, I ran up the steps.

Dad was in the kitchen, his limbs folded to fit behind the table.

"Dad? Where is he?"

My father stared blankly ahead, his breath steady and loud. His hands trembled, his broad fingers ringed with protruding veins, outlining the structures holding him together. He closed his eyes, rubbing his fingers across aging lids. "It doesn't make sense, it just doesn't make any sense,"

and the door was slamming behind me, I was running over gleaming pavement, faintly solidifying in the moonlight, the distance between home and bay melting beneath desperate feet.

* * *

Brown seeps into fragile leaves, pines bend beneath winter winds, and the sky chills into a steely hue. Clouds churn between sky and water, and the bay rolls gray foam across mother-of-pearl sand. Traveling geese line the stratosphere in silent V's, and deer raise silent heads in dusky gloom. My father understood this order, and my brother found another.

Moonlight glimmered on the blacktop, illuminating the lane stretched to the bay. My breath wisped in front of me, silver in the night, swirling behind me as I ran.

The boardwalk was deserted, my footsteps echoing above the creek, its weathered face expanding towards open water. Briny air floated cool, silent, between dark magnolia limbs and purplish pine trunks. Nature held its breath as starlight trickled into the forest, the wooden pathway dissolving behind me, soft echoes of sea-sound rippling into the woods.

And the horizon was opening up, gleaming sand stretched before me, brackish cries drowning the sea in a jubilee's song as hundreds, thousands, of leaping fish breached themselves on the gasping shore. Their gills slathered with too little oxygen, their scaly bodies glistened in the moonlight, waves gurgling in eerie accompaniment. Aaron's silhouette was stark against the sand, his head raised, feet planted firmly on the shore, hair eddying in the mysterious tide that spun across the water, fish and boy bound in an enigmatic dance between order and truth.

A “Sea of Broken Things:” Finding a Rhythm All my Own

Twelve notes. From organum to sonatas to jazz, the rich development of composition and music theory can be summarized in the technical application of twelve notes arranged in the structures of various scales. Every musician must study how different composers have manipulated these basic components. While the breakdown of the elements of literature is less concise than a listing of the notes forming Western tonality, writers are wise to follow the pattern of musicians in learning the techniques that provide the structure behind their art. An exploration of these structures is contingent on an understanding of the canon of literature into which an author is entering; to understand the components of writing, a writer must understand how other authors have utilized the tools of language. Before I began writing my thesis, I researched my craft by reading collections of short stories by Jhumpa Lahiri and Raymond Carver. As I started writing, I read works by F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and J. D. Salinger. In drafting the works in my thesis, I turned to the examples of these celebrated authors for guidance.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s debut collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, earned her a Pulitzer Prize for its colorful scenarios and intriguing characters. Her rich style and poignant characterization are thrown against a complex backdrop of merging cultures. She handles literary devices adeptly and has influenced my writing; in particular, I emulated

the techniques she employs in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,” “Interpreter of Maladies,” and “Mrs. Sen’s” in my thesis collection.

In “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,” Lahiri initially discusses Mr. Pirzada’s presence in her narrator’s home as an ongoing, habitual event. The story opens by establishing that “in the autumn of 1971 a man used to come to our house” (Lahiri 23). The opening paragraphs describe repeated interactions, informing the reader of the nature of Mr. Pirzada’s relationship with the narrator’s family and of the importance of Indian and Pakistani culture within the characters’ lives. The focus soon shifts from the habitual to the specific: in successive scenes, Lahiri opens with time-specific phrases. Her narration progresses from a depiction of recurring exchanges to “one day in October” when Mr. Pirzada’s behavior changes, driving the action of the story and moving from the general into the present (Lahiri 34).

“Of Camellias and Kudzu” is structured similarly. The initial exposition alerts the reader to the routine experiences of Pinky’s life. While this exposition is necessary, it is the shift from general to specific that provides an aberration from normal behaviors, moving the story from flat characterization into conflict and action. Following Lahiri’s example, I strove to open with a scene containing motion in and of itself but conveying a sense of habit before slipping into an account of more immediately occurring actions that differ from the established normal order. Though Mr. Pirzada and Pinky inhabit different worlds, their stories are told through a common formula.

Lahiri’s Indian heritage is apparent in each of the stories in her collection. Many of her pieces approach issues connected to assimilation and isolation in a foreign country. Others explore the values of a culture that may be unfamiliar to her English-speaking

audience. To accomplish her consistent connection to India, Lahiri relies heavily on the importance of the impact her setting has on her characters.

In “Interpreter of Maladies,” Lahiri uses India as a rich backdrop against which the Das family is contrasted. Their Indian roots have been relatively unexplored as they have settled into their life in America, and when they travel to India and find themselves guided by Mr. Kapasi, Mr. Das confides in him that the cultural differences are startling for his children, that it “confuses them” (Lahiri 48). As Mr. Kapasi leads the family through the countryside, Lahiri uses the surroundings to accentuate characteristics of the Das family, drawing a clear connection between their thoughtless behaviors and the monkeys that grace the treetops. Though the central conflict of the story is an internal one experienced by Mr. Kapasi, Lahiri utilizes her setting to enrich her depiction of the Das family.

In “Mrs. Sen’s,” Lahiri applies a similar technique. The objects used as repeated images throughout the story give the audience insight into Mrs. Sen’s struggles and desires. The story is filled with imagery connecting bright, colorful descriptions to India, and more colorless, disconnected entities to assimilation in the United States. The “column of vermilion fresh in her part” becomes a recurring image loaded with implications when cast against the colorless walls of Mrs. Sen’s American apartment (Lahiri 119). Lahiri uses Mrs. Sen’s surroundings to accentuate her homesickness and feelings of displacement. The setting against which the characters move in both “Interpreter of Maladies” and “Mrs. Sen’s” becomes an important explaining feature, offering a deeper understanding of the characters’ problems, experiences, and selves.

In “Sea of Broken Things,” I worked consistently to create images and motifs embedded in the setting that sharpen the reader’s understanding of Aaron and Susanna. The emphasis on the father’s worldview versus that of his children is depicted through their shared dependence on the natural world around them and through the views of nature they each express. The father finds order and structure along the bay, explaining his surroundings formulaically. Aaron and Susanna find anomalies, different orders, a rock with an unexplained etching and fish that don’t swim. The members of this family are all tied to the same backdrop, bound by connections they can’t quite define and the order inherent in their setting. The differing forms this backdrop takes contrasts and supports the qualities they embody as individuals.

Though Raymond Carver’s minimalist style provides obvious contrast to Lahiri’s rich use of language, his techniques were also highly relevant to the construction of my portfolio. Carver handles subtle stories chronicling the passage of an individual with finesse. His characters’ dilemmas are largely internal, and he uses commonplace actions to drive them to view their dilemmas differently. “A Small, Good Thing” provides an excellent example of Carver’s ability to mold a believable passage story subtly and through the exploration of everyday events.

“A Small, Good Thing” follows a couple as they face the death of their only son. The plot progresses through a depiction of the boy’s death into the numbing grief of the couple. Tension is built through their interaction with a baker who doesn’t realize a death has occurred. The conflict reaches its climax when the parents personally visit the baker and the ensuing conversation eases them into a position where their grief is temporarily lessened. The intense grief incurred by the death of their child has not been erased, but

the connection established between the parents and the baker provides enough of a distraction through their lengthening conversation to support Carver's hand in his closing line: "and they did not think of leaving" (89).

In "Bursting," I transposed Carver's approach to grief and its subtle easing onto a vastly different setting portrayed through a different voice. Adam is dealing with grief, the sources of which are less blatantly depicted. Tension builds through Adam's inner turmoil and memories rather than through an external force. The diction is more ornate than Carver's minimalism, and the setting is heavily Southern and nature-oriented. However, the resolution provided by Nee's stories is similar to that reached by Carver's characters. Adam becomes distracted, his grief momentarily lessened as he reaches a moment where he can live in the present instead of looking back to his grief, his pain eased as the story concludes, "and he didn't think of going inside."

F. Scott Fitzgerald's lavish prose differs vastly from Carver's sparse diction, but the influence of his strategy in the plotting of *The Great Gatsby* is evident in my work within "Sea of Broken Things." The plot of *Gatsby* is influenced by revelation but driven by action. Gatsby's profession of his love for Daisy to Tom is a pivotal moment in the narrative; Gatsby says, "both of us loved each other all that time, old sport, and you didn't know" (Fitzgerald 138). Though Gatsby's suggestion that Tom's wife has been in love with Gatsby and not Tom for years is a critical scene, it is a mechanism providing momentum to the plot rather than the climactic scene itself. The plot is affected by Gatsby's assertion to Tom about his obsession with Daisy, but the climactic moment is found when Daisy strikes and kills Myrtle in Gatsby's car. The novel hinges on action rather than on revelation alone.

In early drafts of “Sea of Broken Things,” I wanted to use Aaron’s admittance to Susanna of his homosexuality as the climactic moment of the plot. However, in revision, I chose to emulate Fitzgerald’s approach and to utilize that scene as a piece of revelation driving the action of the story rather than exalting it as the climax of the plot. Aaron’s admission is an important piece of character development, intensifying the development of the story as it clarifies the interactions of the family members, but it is Susanna’s breakdown that constitutes the apex of the rising action. Her mother’s ring functions much as does Gatsby’s car in *Gatsby*: it is an object creating a loss for a character, eliciting an emotional response that results in climactic action. Gatsby’s car kills Myrtle, creating a loss for Wilson and spurring him to kill Gatsby; the loss of her mother’s ring gives Susanna a renewed sense of grief and isolation, pushing her to a point of emotional vulnerability that drives her to confide information in her father that she would not have under different circumstances. Though admissions play important roles in both stories, those admissions are not the critical moments in the rising action; rather, they further entangle the characters’ movement throughout the stories and provide an avenue for building actions to have deeper significance in the context of the characters in play. Admissions, whether of love or of identity, influence the stories, but they each remain driven by action and not revelation alone.

Ernest Hemingway is another twentieth-century expatriate whose influence is apparent in my thesis. Hemingway’s terse, journalistic style is in stark contrast to the ornate style I usually employ. His use of short, direct phrases and frequent conjunctions is dissimilar to my sentences with multiple clauses and more circular descriptions, as in

“Sea of Broken Things.” However, I thought of his technical example in “In Another Country” as I constructed “Of Camellias and Kudzu.”

Repetition is a key technique of Hemingway’s. The first paragraph of “In Another Country” is laden with repeated words: “fall,” “cold,” “dark,” and “wind” are each used more than once throughout the paragraph (Hemingway 109). Hemingway uses repetition without making it immediately apparent that he is doing so; a careful reader will notice the technique, but a less analytical reading results in the reader absorbing the atmosphere the repeated words create without necessarily focusing on the repetition itself. The first two paragraphs in “Of Camellias and Kudzu” attempt to employ a similar technique: “sand,” “bay,” “water,” and “sometimes” are repeated to depict the coastal setting while emphasizing the habitual nature of Pinky’s actions.

Hemingway structures his sentences with short, declarative statements joined by frequent conjunctions. The word “and” appears nine times in the first paragraph of “In Another Country” (Hemingway 109). In “Of Camellias and Kudzu,” I altered my usual syntax to imitate Hemingway’s structural technique: the clauses are direct and simple, and the linking word “along” is used five times in the first paragraph. Hemingway’s journalistic style downplays extreme emotions and situations, making them more dramatic by what the reader infers into the scene. “In Another Country” focuses on the inferred grief of a major whose young wife has died unexpectedly from pneumonia. The straightforward syntax and simple style do not overdramatize the setting, allowing the major’s words about his situation to resonate poignantly with the reader: the closing line, “The photographs did not make much difference to the major because he only looked out of the window,” reports simple observed facts that let the reader powerfully infer the

major's grief (Hemingway 113). "Of Camellias and Kudzu" emulates this approach. The plot of this story is the most dramatic of any in my portfolio: it climaxes in a fire. However, the simpler writing style in this piece, as opposed to the other stories in my thesis, allows the reader to infer Pinky's emotions into her tragedy. Her emotional reaction is addressed but not expanded upon, leaving that to the reader's imagination. In "Of Camellias and Kudzu," the simple style serves another purpose as it creates an ironic contrast to Pinky's character. The reader sees the distinction between the voice of Pinky's narrator and the voice in Pinky's writing, between her real life and her imagined, writing life. The reader is alerted to truths about Pinky that she cannot recognize about herself. The simple, direct style is utilized to sharpen the characterization of Pinky through irony, a facet that is unnecessary in Hemingway's character. Though Hemingway's story depicts a very different tragedy affecting very different characters than the one presented in "Of Camellias and Kudzu," both stories use a direct syntactical style in order to achieve a similar effect, as they leave emotion to the reader to infer into the setting.

J. D. Salinger approaches characterization differently than does Hemingway; Salinger relies heavily on dialogue to further his plots and his characterization, especially within *Franny and Zooey*. The majority of the development in *Zooey* occurs during conversation between the two siblings. Salinger inserts exposition in between the lines of dialogue within a conversation to alert us to his characters' body language and habitual movements, using these opportunities to give us a deeper knowledge of the characters. Other important pieces of insight are given to us through what the characters say. Very little action occurs within the story; the conflict and internal confusion of the characters

are explored within the confines of their living room through conversation sprinkled with exposition. We learn who Franny and Zooey are based on what they say to and about each other, as when Zooey tells Franny, “you even looked like somebody who’d just been *shattered* because all the ushers hadn’t been geniuses” (Salinger 198). Franny’s condescension and confusion are developed through reflective conversation rather than through action.

In “Down Wildwood Lane,” Pop is characterized largely through his conversations with Michael, which are scattered with brief exposition explaining the actions of these two characters. Michael’s development throughout the story is also built through these conversations. The dialogue depicts the clashing perspectives that Pop and Michael hold about Pop’s ability to take care of himself, and it also gives the reader an impression of Michael’s growing shame at his initial reluctance to connect with his parents. The brief sections of exposition inserted between the lines of dialogue describe Pop’s motions and his surprising level of independence as he has adapted to his disability. The symbol of wisdom accompanying death or old age, provided by the owl, is also introduced through dialogue. Though the story contains little actual action, the verbal exchanges enacted by the characters make Michael’s internal transition subtle but believable when, at the end of the story, he comes to see the mass of tent worms differently than he did upon his arrival. Dialogue is an integral, driving force behind the plots and characterization of both “Down Wildwood Lane” and Salinger’s *Franny and Zooey*.

In addition to borrowing from the example of celebrated authors, the pieces in my portfolio benefited from the advice presented by David Madden in his handbook,

Revising Fiction. Madden defines point-of-view as falling within one of three categories: omniscient; first-person; or third-person, central-intelligence. The three short stories in my collection are each written in third-person, central-intelligence, but in the novella, “Sea of Broken Things,” I deviated from my normal narration into a first-person story. Madden cautions authors against creating a first-person narrator whose voice fails to match with the style of the writing in a piece (20). Susanna’s voice in “Sea of Broken Things” is refined, intelligent, and highly observant. This is in keeping with Susanna’s character, an introverted girl with a propensity for writing and observing the actions of others. Though such an elaborate style would be inappropriate for some narrators, Susanna’s voice is consistent with her character. Though the other stories are written in third-person, central-intelligence rather than first-person, I attempted to “[adjust my] style and vocabulary to the age, mentality, and social situation of the point-of-view character” (Madden 21). The narration in “Of Camellias and Kudzu” imitates the highly structured tendencies of Pinky’s mind; the heavy prose in “Bursting” is appropriate for Adam’s grief; and the observations provided in “Down Wildwood Lane” are believable coming from what Michael “sees, hears, feels thinks, [and] knows” (Madden 20).

Madden also advises writers to strive for a “sense of immediacy” in the actions developed in their writing (45). In revision, I deliberately worked to cut from the stories words and phrases that slowed the action of individual sentences. Vague pronouns and phrases were replaced with more specific, concrete references, and unnecessary words and phrases were deleted altogether. The resulting drafts are much more direct in the action they convey than were my earlier attempts.

Another stylistic consideration Madden poses is that of rhythm. He defines rhythm as “the alternation of stressed and unstressed phrases and long and short units of expression... to achieve variety and combat monotony” (Madden 67). In each of the works in my portfolio, I endeavored to do that through the variation of clause, sentence, and paragraph length. In “Sea of Broken Things,” though I worked to create variety in the sentence lengths, I also found a rhythm specific to Susanna’s voice dependent on sets of three. The sentences are constructed of varying numbers of clauses, but the most common sentence structure involves three clauses, one independent and two dependent. Susanna’s descriptions are often connected with three images, one initial image followed by two appositive phrases. The consistent structure based on units of three, one stressed and two unstressed, creates an intentional rhythm unique to Susanna’s voice.

Though the works in my thesis collection are pieces of original creativity, they seek to learn from the example of greater authors who have attempted and achieved similar thematic effects. Lahiri’s influence is apparent in the plot construction of “Of Camellias and Kudzu” and in the importance of setting in my novella. Carver’s emotional subtlety is transposed against a different backdrop in “Bursting.” Fitzgerald’s use of revelation provided a parallel example to guide the construction of “Sea of Broken Things.” Hemingway’s techniques are utilized in “Of Camellias and Kudzu,” Salinger’s memorable dialogue is imitated in “Down Wildwood Lane,” and David Madden’s guiding words became manifest through the revision of each piece. The techniques of literature are not as easily mapped as the twelve notes outlining Western tonality. However, the study of the masters who studied and controlled the tools of their separate

arts, whether they be music or literature, points to the same goal in application: that of the apprentice artist finding a rhythm all her own.

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