

I Hate Everyone But You

by

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ABSTRACT

I Hate Everyone But You bears witness to the quiet moments that force us to confront ourselves. In these stories, people in search of connection--to lovers, to family, to strangers--instead discover their own secrets: truths both haunting and empowering.

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A Writer's Practice:
From Reading and Yoga to Writing

At this stage in our writing lives—third year in our MFA, a semester away from graduating—it's a given that we can't be a successful (relevant, affective, insightful...) writers without also being mindful readers. "Can I be blunt on this subject?" Stephen King asks us in his memoir *On Writing: A Memoir of Craft*. "If you don't have time to read, you don't have time (or the tools) to write. Simple as that."

And he's right. Of course writing has helped me grow as a writer. Reading mindfully during my MFA has helped me fine tune my prose, nip and tuck my narrative structures and craft real souls on the page. And I could spend this essay articulating just how—from a "craft" stand-point it has done so. But I'd like to do something more worthwhile, for myself, here in this space. That is, I'd like to explore how reading has helped me through periods of writer's block and propelled me through periods of writer's spurts in the last three years.

I don't know the typical writer's experience goes in the MFA, but I have not experienced three years of non-stop creative-juice-flowing. When I arrived here I was stalled by my own expectations, and perhaps from what I perceived to be the expectations of those around me. During the spring of my second year all the energy that had mounted over the first year and a half dried up, seemingly out of nowhere.

It's hard to explain just how anxious and depressed these droughts made me. But in retrospect, I'm glad I experienced a microcosm of the ebbs and flows of a writer's life within the span of this program. While one may argue the MFA should be a time of non-

stop production and crafting, I know that for me it has been just as worthwhile that I learn how to help myself through this inevitable creative cycle and not let it permanently halt my writing.

This self-analysis is not easy and to help me make meaning of the experience I will draw parallels throughout this essay between my writing and my yoga practice. Yoga became a very important part of my life—especially during the stalls in my writing. It’s a practice that has helped me ground myself, that has helped me breathe through life’s growing pains. Within the last year, I’ve found that transferring the language and understanding of my yoga practice to my writing practice has been very formative.

Here goes.

I. EXPLORATION

The first writer’s drought I experienced in the MFA hit me upon arrival. I had the date to turn in my first story to workshop circled on my calendar.... and yet it approached without me doing anything about it. I didn’t write. I didn’t know what to write. I felt like I forgot how to write something that would be good enough to turn in. Most importantly, I felt no need to tell a story.

During this stage reading outside of my comfort zone helped me explore and encouraged me to try on new forms and structures as educative guises. Arguably, anything I read during my first year in the program would and did help motor me into writing if only through imitation, but I want to focus on two reading experiences. In

particular, Thomas Bernhard's *Correction* and Kelly Link's collection *Stranger Things Happen* encouraged creativity... I'll call it an uncomfortable creativity, by broadening my understanding of story and form.

The first time I picked up Bernhard's 271-page, 2-paragraph novel, I hated it. The first person prose—long, circuitous, rambling, stacks of clauses—trapped me in the narrator's agonized consciousness. I felt in need of a compass and a notebook just to follow his thoughts:

It was in Hoeller's garret, where I had now moved with Roithamer's papers, most of them relating to the building of the Cone, and I regard my work on Roithamer's papers as the ideal occupational therapy for myself after my long illness and *also feel it is ideal*, it was here that Rothamer had conceived the idea of the cone and drawn up the basic plans for it, and the fact that even now, some months after Roithamer's death and half a year after his sister's death, his sister for whom he had built the Cone which is already abandoned to natural decay, Hoeller's garret still contains all the plans, all the books and articles, most of the never used but all of them collected by Roithamer in his last years with a view to building the Cone, all those books and articles in every possible language, including languages unknown to him by translated for him by his brother Johann who spoke many languages and in fact had a gift for languages like no other man I ever knew... (7-8)

But eventually, reading Bernhard helped me realize that I arrived at the program with a very narrow understanding of what story means and what forms "story" could take.

As I progressed throughout the novel, I came to understand that the sentences themselves were the novel's compass and direction guide. Every clause is a correction, a refining of the last. Thoughts are not distinct: they lead seamlessly and catapult uncontrollably into the next. And it is by learning to understand this pattern of thought that we come to understand the narrator and his turmoil.

Transcribing even just this *portion* of one sentence I feel the manic energy of this narrator's thoughts, and although the novel continued to frustrate and confuse me it inspired me. I closed Bernhard's novel wanting to write my own story with such proximity to a narrator, something I had never conceived of doing on my own. *Correction* inspired me to discard my rigid understanding of story structure and dive completely into a character's thoughts. How could I imitate this story? What story would I want to tell that this structure would suit? How would this story unlock one of my characters?

Writing a Bernhard-esque story was a formative experience in and of itself. Living within a narrator's thoughts throughout every sentence of the story—every circuitous, anxious thought—certainly unlocked something for me and pushed my empathy and storytelling skills to a new place. But the lesson here was bigger. Taking on Bernhard's prose encouraged me to strap on any writer's styles during times of writer's draught. How can I use this style as a storytelling tool? How can this form be useful to me?

Reading Kelly Link was a similar experience: I also hated her work at first. When I arrived at this program, I'd never written anything outside of realism. What I'm drawn to are the every-day situations that push us to a greater understanding of ourselves—whether that's good or bad. Situations that encourage us to look at our own pain. Situations that happen to us everyday that take on more meaning because of the way we experience them. As a writer, what I love is investigating the subtle and the real, and the first time I read Kelly Link's story "Water Off a Black Dog's Back", where a girl takes

her boyfriend home to meet her father who has fake noses I nearly put the story down for good.

What offended me exactly? I think partially it was being asked to suspend my disbelief for something that was obviously implausible and unreal. Now, I understand that for some readers this is the type of thing they read for—that melding of the real and the unreal. But for my first experience with any sort of surrealism or magical realism chafed with my tastes. And yet, still lost in this period of unproduction, I forced myself to explore the territory in my own prose. While I don't think I'll seek out magical realism in my future reading or my own writing, when I read Link as a detective I learned from the moments of emotional growth and honesty she unlocked in a story with so much incredibility. Reading Link, I asked myself as a writer: how can I make something emotionally credible in an incredible world?

Attempting to write my own surreal story encouraged me to blatantly confront these questions. How could I write a story that explores the very real emotional territory of the relief in ending a relationship while simultaneously presenting the reader with a very unreal context: the fracturing of a town via earthquake. And more importantly, how could the unreal moments of the story serve to make the emotional moments *more* real? How could the magical moments of this story make my story even more honest?

While I don't believe I'll dabble often in the magical realism realm, I think this is a lesson that every story should explore: how can the imagined parts of a story (whether it's that a story is taking place in a two-story off of Central Ave. or an igloo on Mars) serve to reveal the honesty and emotional journey of the characters.

These are just two of the moments of growth I experienced my first year while reading stories so blatantly out of my taste. In yoga, we call this practice stretching to find space. In every pose, there is a shape we take that is just at the edge of our comfort zone: a lift of the hips, a reach of an arm, a bend to the leg. We hold that pose for a breath or two and then we are asked to reach for a greater expression—to lift higher, reach or bend just an inch further—and when you do there is discomfort you feel, perhaps at the newness of it all, but there is also an expansion. A very physical growth, if only in that moment. Reading outside of my comfort zone during moments of writer’s block operates the same way.

II. CONNECTION

At the beginning of each yoga class, the instructor coaches us in fostering a connection between our movements and our breath. Yoga, our instructor tells us, means to yolk or to union, and the goal throughout practice is to maintain this body breath connection. Prior to beginning practice, I lie on my mat: my left hand on my hear, my right on my gut and I become more in tune with my breath filling and leaving my body. Maintaining this connection, I feel the postures in my gut: there is a rhythm and a pace you achieve. A flow. You feel in sync with your movements. Whereas, without this union of breath and movement, yoga is simply exercise.

This is how I feel about writing too: writing a story is just an intellectual story if I don’t feel that kick in my gut, that connection between my soul and the soul on the page.

As cheesy as that sounds. And the same can be said for reading, in fact tracking stories where I felt this connection, this gut check, has helped me understand how to better breathe life and spirit into my own prose. While reading stories that stretched my comfort zone and reading writers that handled prose in ways I'd never considered helped me jumpstart my writing momentum, finding work that more closely aligned with my interests and ambitions helped me hone that momentum. Finding stories that I felt helped my writing become more than just an exercise in storytelling.

My central concern in my short stories is to write honest, perceptive people. As the writer I want to feel their struggles. I want to admire their moments of honesty and the weight of their choices. I want to write characters who readers want to follow because of their honest and fresh perspective on the world. Reading (and re-reading) Karen Brown, Pam Houston and Junot Diaz have been of the utmost importance in helping me create this union between story and soul in my prose. Specifically, I found guidance in their first person narrators whose fresh, honest voices rose off their page as not just characters but full-fleshed people.

When I read Karen Brown's collection *Pins and Needles*, I wanted to spend time with all of her narrators, not because they were particularly heroic people, but because of the perceptiveness with which they experienced the world. All of Brown's narrators confront that central discrepancy in the human experience: that there is the world and everything going on in it, and at the same time there is each person's experience. When I read Brown I'm reminded that the tension between these two realities is what allows for compelling fiction as well as compelling people on the page.

In *Breach*, a woman spends what is meant to be a romantic weekend on the beach with her boyfriend but the weekend takes a turn when a neighbor boy goes missing. In this story I'm particularly affected by Brown's ability to show the narrator's understanding of the sea of life around her and her simultaneous inability to engage:

The breeze shifts and twists. Sand forms small spouts. I need to change from my suit into warmer clothes. I realize this concern for myself is not normal in the middle of all this—you on the porch with your bag packed, the family next door with a boy lost. Still, I find nothing to stop you. You will not listen to any more stories and my body is tired, dulled from its use as a lure. I hear your footsteps cross the porch and recede into the house. I think I heard the back screen door close, the sound of the cab you must have called pulling away. I feel the cottage behind me, its familiar rooms ringing with your absence. (38-9)

I respect the narrator and I am drawn to her because of her perceptiveness and her ability to articulate her actions and feelings even if she doesn't understand them. In fact I think it is this combination of honesty without an over explanation or reasoning that allows for the power in these prose. In that space the reader is able to experience the emotions and participate in the meaning making.

In *Breach*, the story is affective because of the narrator's emotional journey. The narrator's experience—and her ability to articulate this experience—punches the reader in the gut rather than any flourishes or impressive leaps in the prose on behalf of the writer.

Similarly, throughout Junot Diaz's collection *This is How You Lose Her* I am also impressed by how affective his stories are despite his simple prose and language. As I returned to his stories throughout my time in this program, I've realized that his stories in

fact are affective *because* of his simple prose and stripped down language. The power instead resides in the space between a character's experience and processing of that experience. In other words, the focus of the story becomes the characters and not the writer's ability to dazzle. Take for example the final scene in *Nilda* in which a young male narrator watches his brother mistreat and eventually break up with his girlfriend, Nilda, while dying of cancer. Some time after his brother has died, the narrator runs into Nilda, whom he has always loved:

Nilda is watching the ground as though she's afraid she might fall.
My heart is beating and I think, We could do anything. We could marry.
We could drive off to the West Coast. We could start over. It's all possible
but neither of us speaks for a long time and the moment closes and we're
back in the world we've always known.

Remember the day we met? She asks.

I nod.

You wanted to play baseball.

It was summer, I say. You were wearing a tank top.

You made me put on a shirt before you'd let me be on your team.

Do you remember.

I remember, I say.

We never spoke again. A couple of years later I went away to
college and I don't know where the fuck she went. (42)

The scene is stripped of flowery language: there are no striking metaphors, there is barely any description. Perhaps because of this there is a stillness in the scene. We experience the interaction as the narrator does without a spruced up retelling.

Diaz also creates a poignant, heartbreaking tension in the contrast between the narrator's sensitive perception and the coarse language. He understands and allows us to experience the moment of possibility that their relationship could bloom into something important: "We could do anything...", followed quickly with the almost brutishly blunt

understanding that nothing does: “We never spoke again. A couple of years later I went away to college and I don’t know where the fuck she went.”

From Diaz I’ve learned the importance of affecting readers through a character’s honest, raw experience rather than through a more decorative descriptive retelling. Let the characters—their struggle, their ability to perceive but inability to perhaps fully articulate or understand—let that impact the reader.

In Pam Houston’s *Cowboys are My Weakness*, I am equally impressed with her narrator’s self-perception and honesty. Her narrators, specifically her female narrator in *Selway*, are a lesson in the power of delicate and precise self-reflection. There is certainly a balance to be found with self-reflective narrators. We don’t want to read narrators who look back on their younger selves with a feeling of infinite wisdom—that would be preachy. We don’t want to read narrators who look back and scorn their younger selves—that would be insensitive and alienating. But we also don’t want to read narrators who look back on their experiences and have no greater understanding and nothing to impart.

What is the balance to strike?

In *Selway*, we follow the thrill-seeking narrator and her boyfriend on a dangerous rafting trip. At the end of the story, the couple has narrowly survived a near death experience and are driving quietly to their campsite. The narrator tells us:

The road stretched out in front of us, dry and even and smooth. We found a long dirt road, turned, and pulled down to where it ended at a chimney that stood tall amid the rubble of an old stone house. We didn’t build a fire and Jack didn’t propose; we rolled out our sleeping bags and lay down next to the truck. I could see the light behind the mountains in the place where the moon would soon rise, and I thought about all the

years I'd spent saying love and freedom were mutually exclusive and living my life as though they were exactly the same thing.

The wind carried the smell of the mountains, high and sweet. It was so still I could imagine peace without boredom. (41)

There are two lessons I learn from this final scene. First, I think we follow and stay with the narrator during her moment of self-analysis— “I thought about all the years I'd spent saying love and freedom were mutually exclusive and living my life as though they were exactly the same thing”—because we are simultaneously grounded in the scene with sensorial, tactile details. With the character we see the “light behind the mountains in the place where the moon would soon rise” and we smell the scent of the mountains “high and sweet” that is carried in the wind. Our firm grasp of her reality allows us to follow her reverie without getting lost.

I also think this honest yet slightly reverential moment of self-analysis works because throughout the story we have watched her thrill seek. We have watched her need to chase danger, both in her actions, and in her moments of honesty shared throughout the story. “I wanted to feel the turbulence underneath me,” she tells us when they are first getting on the river. “I wanted to run a rapid that could flip a boat. I hadn't taken anything like a risk in months. I wanted to think about dying.” To impact a reader, a narrator's honesty should be consistent. That's not to say that a character must be equally honest throughout an entire story because there's definitely something to be said for a narrator coming to terms with an experience and building up to an ability to share, but I do think for a character's “epiphany” to come off as an honest realization and not an artificial... well, epiphany, the reader has to understand the character and that character's emotional experience throughout the story.

Reading has been at its most powerful and most influential during this program when I find first person narrators who tell their stories with a raw delicacy. Nothing makes me want to write and nothing has made me keep writing or get lost in my own stories like reading these narrators. They make me itch to want to write my own first person narrators who are perceptive and honestly working to understand their place in that experience.

III. DISCONNECTION

Somewhere in the winter of my second year of the program, I lost a handle on that excitement and that enthusiasm. It's hard to know why that happened, and it's also difficult to explain how lost and ungrounded I felt being in a writing program and not knowing how to get back into the flow of writing, especially when for a year I had found such a groove.

During the experience, I don't think I had enough distance to think that anything I was doing was helpful to my writing or that I could become a better writer even while not writing full stories or actively revising. My relationship to yoga and my understanding of my yoga practice has helped me make a little meaning of this experience and, hopefully, prepared me for how to handle this when it happens again.

As with any practice, there are days when I just can't go to yoga. I'm bummed out. Driving through rush-hour traffic seems unbearable. The idea of being in a room with a group of people seems too overwhelming. On those days, I think it's important not to give up on yoga even if I can't bring myself to take on the whole practice. Those afternoons I let myself focus on just one pose that brings me joy. Maybe it's the thrill of practicing a handstand and so, even if it's just for a few minutes, I kick up against the living room wall. Even if I'm not benefitting from a whole practice, there is still something I can learn, some room for growth even if it's just me thinking about how my finger placement could help this one position.

Thinking about yoga in this way, I think this is something I did subconsciously with my writing. During this period of time where I wrote basically nothing, I read both poetry and prose that really excited me on the sentence level. I found myself reading Brenda Shaughnessy's collection *Our Andromada* over and over. I read her poems aloud because I liked the sound of her prose. Specifically I was drawn to the way she created and established space and place in her sentences.

Throughout the collection, Shaughnessy created a continuity in her settings by orienting her characters in a space described in one long sentence.

In her poem *Visitor* she writes:

I made too much pie in expectation. I was
hoping to sit with you in a treehouse in a
nightgown in a real way. (33)

If I were to describe this situation in my own fiction, my inclination would be to separate the image of her in the tree house and her in the nightgown into two sentences. But I was so enchanted by the flow that Shaughnessy created by rendering the image in one long winding sentence, emphasized by the line breaks.

Similarly, later in the collection, in the poem *To My Twenty-Five-Year-Old Self*:

...I won't forget it:

The way you laughed
At some mean joke, at some

Ugly truth, into the wind,
So it blew back into our happy,

Stupid faces on a ferry made me understand,
This is love the way poets know it. (97)

This is another long, winding sentence that makes its way through the geography of a setting and a situation: a couple standing at the rail of a boat, laughing into the wind. The sentence contains a lot of elements: what they're doing, the weather, where they are, how they are feeling. Again my impulse may have been to capture this in several staccato sentences that would be equally informative. But I wonder if linking these elements into one sentence allows the reader to see all the parts in motion, to see where the characters are in relation to the setting and each other in a way that short, staccato sentences make difficult.

Point blank: I like how these sentences sounded. How they felt when I said them aloud, or when I transcribed them myself.

And my advice to myself now, when I'm in these writing ruts is to just read what feels good on the sentence level—whether it's a short poem, just a paragraph or a chapter. Read and re-write it or read it aloud and think about why it feels good, just that small sentence. Write a paragraph that emulates just that moment where writing was exciting. Don't get overwhelmed. Stay grounded. Enjoy writing just the sentence.

Even though I wasn't consciously taking this approach, I realized how helpful reading Shaughnessy was when I finally was able to gather momentum and write an entire story. In the first story I wrote after this writer's draught, the excitement I'd found while reading Shaughnessy stayed with me. Here is an excerpt from my story "Adult Children":

The engine cut and there was the sound of this guy's stereo, throbbing and muffled and I realized then how late it was, how quiet. The road was empty under the streetlights. Houses were dark except the window where

before we had watched the woman in the gray dress with the loose hair at her mirror.

Even if it didn't feel like I was reading in a productive way—and certainly it didn't feel like I was writing in a productive way—reading with an ear to what excited me on the sentence level certainly impacted my writing. As I wrote this scene Shaughnessy's prose were at my fingertips just as in my yoga, when I returned to the studio the concentration I found in just the one pose I'd practiced in my off day came with me to my mat.

For the future, I think it's important to note which prose will be beneficial to me in this way so I have writers to return to and lines to mull over. First on the list is Susan Minot's short story "Lust." I love how vivid and immediate her prose are—how she so economically captures scene and experience on the sentence level.

She writes:

We started off sitting at one end of the couch and then our feet were squished against the armrest and then he went over to turn off the TV and came back after he had taken off his shirt and then we slid onto the floor and he got up again to close the door, then came back to me, a body waiting on the rug. (4)

There is an energy and momentum to her prose that is intoxicating in its looseness: it's as if the narrator can't stop reliving the experience long enough to even explain what happened. When I am next in one of my writer's draughts I am going to seek out prose that similarly create this energy at the sentence level. I will retype them and feel that energy in my fingertips. Even if it doesn't get me writing that day, they are movements in sentence structure that will stay with me when I do eventually return to the page to write new stories.

IV. RESURFACING

Accepting the Piper Fellowship position in the Port Townsend Writers' Conference was invaluable in helping me through this funk. In Port Townsend I worked with Dan Chaon who structured his workshop around a model of generation rather than nit picking revision. Chaon encouraged us to embrace the structures of other stories to propel our own work.

The first story I worked on using this approach was based off of Alice Munro's "Prayer Circle." Throughout my time in the MFA program I've admired the structure of Munro's stories, how non-linear they are, how often the climactic scene of the story is what we're given right off the bat, the remainder of the story becoming a map between the moments of time that help us make meaning of that emotional crescendo. But despite my admiration, I'd never considered completely dissecting the story to its structural bones.

"Circle of Prayer" is a story that takes place after the dissolution of the protagonist Trudy's marriage. The story is incredibly non-linear. In the most immediate past, Trudy and her daughter fight following the death of a local girl in a car accident. But the story is very unfixed in time and throughout the piece, we shift as Trudy makes meaning of her relationship with her ex-husband and her daughter and the precarious happiness of those around her.

The story opens with a dramatic fight between Trudy and her daughter Robin—as readers we are aware of the obvious tension, the passion between these two people and

the buildup that must have occurred to lead to this fight. But we are simultaneously left with questions. What happened to spark this? How did these characters' emotions come to such full broil?

Opening with the stories' climactic scene as Munro does here shifts the purpose of this story from "What will happen next?"—the more traditional Hollywood trajectory—to what has happened to the characters to bring them to this point emotionally and what will it mean to their futures? The story becomes not so much about plot but about the characters' emotional journey.

In Chaon's workshop we mapped out the remainder of Munro's story to investigate how she propelled the readers' meaning making in such a way.

Specifically, we broke down the story as a model to emulate in our own work. If "Circle of Prayer" were a writers' guide it would break down as follows:

1. Write the climactic scene of the story
2. Write the scene that happens a few days or weeks before the climax, which shows the main character going about their ordinary day.
3. Write a scene from the main character's past, a memory of a time before the present—a previous life, before they became the person they are now.
4. Write a scene that shows some event that leads towards the climax.
5. Write a memory that will come suddenly to the main character during the climax.
6. Write a scene that shows some event before the climax.
7. Write a scene that happens after the climax—perhaps directly after, perhaps far in the future.
8. Write a scene that happens directly before the climactic scene—which shows the main character dreading or hoping for something.

Adopting Munro's structure in this way was incredibly helpful in kicking me back into my own fiction. As a writer primarily concerned with characters', with peoples', emotional journeys, this structure in and of itself helped propel me through the story

because it asked me to unravel a protagonist's emotional tension. The map asks for scenes that necessitated that I make meaning of my protagonist's pain and emotional confusion and create tension out of a central emotional concern.

Point blank: approaching a blank word document with this structure under my belt helped me dive into my character's psychology. It shifted my attention from "What happens next in this story?" to "What happened to get my character to this point?" It shifted my attention from an overwhelming question of plot to a more human question: Who is my character?

Following Munro in this way is also a lesson in how we can use structure to fuel our stories: to create suspense, tension, emotional drama. In many ways structure is what allows for the everyday situations to take on power and it is our job as writers to figure out how to structure and layer a story to give it its best emotional weight.

Dissecting Ethan Canin's "The Year Of Getting to Know Us" was equally instructive as I looked for guidance in writing a powerful retrospective narrator. The "Year of Getting to Know Us" is a story built with two braided story lines. In the most immediate past the narrator comes to terms with his father's abrupt decline in health and his ailing marriage. Woven throughout this narrative is the story of the narrator as a sixteen year old the summer he catches his father cheating on his mother.

I find this story incredibly powerful and affective and I wanted to investigate this story as a model for how one narrative plot line can become more powerful when interwoven with a second. How does the narrator's current relationship with his father

become more meaningful and complicated when we understand their past? And vice versa?

And so, just as with Munro's story, I broke down "The Year of Getting to Know Us" to track the dissecting plotlines. Here is his story broken down section by section:

- 1) Present: Narrator is in the hospital room with his father who is unconscious after having a heart attack
- 2) Past: When the narrator was growing up, his father was obsessed with golf
- 3) Present: Narrator teaches English, he's married to a woman who has a theory that something's wrong with their marriage. They decide to visit his parents so the narrator can become closer with his father
- 4) Past: In high school narrator started getting into trouble with his friend Nick
- 5) Present: Narrator visits dad in hospital, narrator's wife prompts him to have an emotional reconciliation
- 6) Recent past: Anne and narrator have been seeing a marriage counselor, Anne claims the narrator is unemotional
- 7) Past: In high school narrator gets arrested, cops dive him home to his parents
- 8) Recent past: When narrator and his wife go to California they meet the father's girlfriend for the first time who is the same age as narrator's wife
- 9) Past: After the narrator is arrested, mom suggests he and his parents spend a year of getting to know each other better, his father should take him golfing
- 10) Recent past: Anne had an affair, narrator knows but doesn't confront her
- 11) Past: Narrator hides in father's car to surprise him and go golfing, instead he overhears his father having an affair (Longest scene, highest drama)
- 12) Past: In college, narrator's father leaves his mother, mother asks if he knew this was happening
- 13) Past: Narrator goes golfing with father during the Year of Getting to Know Us
- 14) Present: In the hospital, doctor tells the narrator his father is not doing well
- 15) Past: After he found his father cheating, he has the opportunity to tell his mom about the affair, but instead he keeps his father's secret
- 16) Recent past: Anne tells narrator about the affair, narrator tells her he already knows
- 17) Present: The narrators father dies, the narrator tells his wife stories of his father then goes out on a drive, goes golfing
- 18) Past: narrator at sixteen, dad says: "You're going to grow up to be me."

What I am most inspired by in Canin's story is how the layering of the two narratives allows a non-confrontational narrator to confront his own painful truths.

Throughout the story, the narrator avoids confrontation and emotion both in his marriage and in his role in the dissolution of his parents lives. If we were to read one plot-lined story in a workshop setting with such a non-confrontational character, I guarantee that one of the first things we'd discuss is how passive the narrator is. How everything happens to him and he doesn't incite anything. How he's boring. But I do not feel that in this story, and partially I think that's because of the agency he has as the storyteller.

As the storyteller he is weaving together his current situation—the death of his father, the strife in his marriage—with experiences in his past. As the reader, we map the connections—his father's affair, the secret he carries from his mother, his guilt, the fear at becoming his father. Because of this, the storytelling in and of itself becomes an action. The narrator's weaving together of his past and his present is his meaning making process and so the narrator becomes an active character.

Again, structure is more than just the sequencing of events. Here we see a story's structure not only lend the story momentum, tension and suspense, but we also see it activate a narrator. By breaking down Canin's "The Year of Getting to Know Us" I found another tool to pull me back into my writing.

When I think of it this way, the advice seems easy: when you're in a rut, just make yourself do it. Just write. Find a story that engages you, find out why and emulate its structure. And in a way, it is that easy. In a lot of yoga classes, the class opens with the yoga teacher praising her students that the hardest part is over: "You're here," she tells us. "You made it to your mat." And that's true, for me at least.

Nothing is more intimidating to me than the blank computer screen and that blinking cursor without anything before or after it. And so even if I change everything about the structure of my story in the second or third draft, even if nothing stays the same, having structures of stories there beside me are an incredible tool if only for simply getting me to the page.

V. CONCLUSION

My favorite line that my yoga instructor says is cheesy. And I don't care.

Say we're in Dancer's Pose—a challenge even on a good day—a pose that requires balance, strength, flexibility. Determination, which some days I just can't muster. And naturally in yoga there's a difference in the practice you have today and the one you had yesterday: some days you feel like you could stretch forever and some days you feel that fire shooting up your hamstring from the get go. So there we are in Dancer's Pose and it's one of those days where you're counting every second, waiting for the pose to end.

“Remember,” the instructor says then. “They call it a yoga practice and not a yoga perfect.”

I don't care how cheesy it is, how predictable. I love the message, and for me in particular it's an incredibly important reminder in every area of my life. Yoga, writing, anything...: it's not going to be perfect, especially not at the beginning of a story or when you're just beginning to work yourself out of a rut.

Reading the works on my comp list, writing this digestion of that experience, has been helpful as I consider how my reading can help me with this writing practice. How can I raise myself up through what I read? How can I use stories and novels I admire as instructors? As footholds? As tools? How can I take what I love to read and foster my love for writing?

Write what I want to read, that's the goal.

Lives in Rupture

When the earthquake hit in the early morning of July the second, it split the town in half. The ground cracked right through downtown as if Mother Nature adhered to Main Street's dotted yellow line. Town Hall and Kennebec Savings Bank and a smattering of homes split right in two, but besides that there was an eerie feeling that the town's East and West Ends had the prescience to pick teams. The West End got the best deli around while the East End got the grocery and a gas station notorious for the county's cheapest price per gallon. Each End retained a school (although the West End had a better auditorium and an arts program). The East End took Lookin' Good Laundromat, but everyone in the West End probably owned their own appliances anyway (it was common knowledge that the wealthy lived along the Western Promenade). And, of course, the East End had the ocean, the split nudging that half of town right out into the bay, an island on its own, severed from the mainland.

That summer followed the spring when both Kayla and Waldo felt everything they would become was hovering just above their heads. This was true in a sense; they were seniors in high school. Kayla had started to taste something fierce and electric from life. It was like the first seconds of the Atomic Fireballs she used to smuggle out of her mother's purse and then unwrap and hold in the fleshy insides of her cheeks. She would let them spread through her a burning that woke her up from the inside out. It was a similar swelling sensation she felt that spring as well, but this time the fire was her singing and

she held it in her gut and her lungs, although she would say it was in her soul. But that was because she was a romantic. Kayla was going to become a singer. There was a part of her that had always known this, but that spring it was what consumed her. It was all she thought of while across town her boyfriend, Waldo, the boy she had always loved, spent the spring filling notebooks with stories of the explorers he wanted to become: Marco Polo, Amerigo Vespucci, Sir Edmund Hillary, Jacques Cartier. Earlier that winter, on the weekends when the season's bitter winds rolled into town with the waves and kept everyone indoors, Kayla sat on her knees in her bedroom recording herself over and over on her computer and then sending her voice out into the world on CDs in plastic cases swaddled in bubble wrap and manila folders. Meanwhile, across town, three antique woodstoves pumped heat through Waldo's West End brickstone where he read library books on early explorations. He'd mountained these books in haphazard piles around his room and what he always loved were the beginnings of these stories. They were usually similar versions of the same tale: a hungriness men felt in their blood, a yearning in their cores, an aching to be out in the world. Kayla and Waldo would not have been able to explain what had shifted that winter, but a separation pulsed between them. It was a rift that crept in delicately with the winter thaw, radiating with the steady warmth of summer, until both Waldo and Kayla could sense the distance tingling at the bases of their spines.

Rabbit, rabbit, was how Kayla greeted the first of July, the last day before the quake. This was a tradition that meant a lot to her and nothing to many others. The otherness, both the tradition's and her own, was a comfort to Kayla; one of the things she wished to be when she grew up was unique. That morning, after untangling herself from the bedsheets and freeing the windows from their blinds, she sat Indian style on her bedroom floor and looked out across the sea. The ocean stretched around the town's East End peninsula, spreading out from beneath Kayla's bedroom window like her very own backyard. Her mother and stepfather had been nice enough to convert their home's old cupola into her bedroom. The part of her that was still a young girl liked to think of sea captains who she felt must, at one time, have lived in this home before her. They too, she felt, must have used the cupola to look out and try to see the future. The water was volatile that morning, craggy indigo with frothy wave caps, but no one in town took that to be a sign of anything other than the sea's typical tempestuousness. Kayla looked at the water and smiled. She held, unfolded in her palms, her acceptance letter to the University of Dramatic Arts, which had arrived the previous afternoon and she'd read until the words had become euphoric gibberish clattering between her temples. She pressed the letter to her chest where it crinkled beneath her fingertips. She imagined her voice spreading over the world like water. Filling people. For reasons she couldn't quite explain, she didn't tell her mother. She didn't even tell Waldo. It was a moment of enchantment and all she wanted was to be alone, dressed in promises of the future. That night, while Kayla was sleeping, the earthquake split the world in two.

For Waldo, the first of July began as most mornings had of recent; he awoke precisely in that pregnant minute just before his alarm clattered to life. He rose with a start, his pulse sprinting through him, throbbing to the tips of his body as if he'd overslept or forgotten something of worth. But as he sat on the lip of his bed, his hands pressed to his knees, Waldo's breath slowed with the knowledge that there was nothing so exciting ripping him awake. The rush slid away, leaving in Waldo a sore, clot of angst; he felt he was wasting his life, which was an uneasiness that had nipped hungrily at him all spring, chiding the cush mundanity of his life on the West End. Waldo let his alarm sound until his ears rang. He made his bed. He pulled on slacks and a matching button down and cardigan for his father's approval. And then he set off down the stairs for breakfast. According to his father, the day started as soon as one left his bedroom, and one should always dress for a day of expectations. Downstairs, on the breakfast table, his father had lined up bulky white envelopes like bingo pieces that turned out to be letters from the colleges to which his father had insisted he apply. They're all big ones, son, wonderfully bulky envelopes, his father said, beaming, setting down his silverware. He pulled out the napkin that hung over his shirt collar and pressed at his mouth. He waved out over the envelopes. Well?, he said, after swallowing. Waldo got in everywhere he applied because he was brilliant and diligent and, more importantly, because his father had strings everywhere he loved pulling. While Waldo's father stood at the phone in the kitchen spreading the news, Waldo took the letters up to his desk where he stacked them in an immaculate pile before walking to the map of the world he'd had pinned to his bedroom wall since he was a boy. What Waldo wanted was to be an explorer, which sounded childish to admit even to

himself, but it was something he knew now with a certainty he couldn't shake. On the map were pins marking the spray of destinations to which his parents had taken him over their years of school vacation travels. His parents were wealthy and he knew he was lucky to have already, for example, floated in the Dead Sea and visited the Fernandine churches and the Cliffs of Moher and the Charles Bridge, but what he wanted was to do these things and others like them on his own. He wanted to be on his own completely and see the world in a way that cracked it open before him. He felt this very acutely but there was no easy way to determine what to do about it. The biggest pin on the map was attached to a blue marble that jutted out from where, he approximated, his parents' brick colonial home sat along the town's Western Promenade. Recently, in his dreams, he floated on the marble through time and space. He didn't admit these dreams to anyone, even Kayla (especially Kayla, because he knew the marble was only big enough for one). Somehow he never slipped off, and he didn't feel lonely even though he was far from home. In fact, he felt lucky: cradling the experience, living the world all by himself. That night, while Waldo was sleeping, the earthquake split the world in two.

Since it was night when the earthquake broke apart the town, it depends, really, on the teller regarding whether the quake hit on the night of July first or the morning of July second. But either way, the town was dormant. Kayla and Waldo had each been sleeping for hours and so the initial jolt was translated to both through dream: Kayla stood on the tip-top of her cupola wearing a ball gown that was silk, a rich shade of eggplant. She sang a note that rose up from her toes. It untethered her from the town and rocketed her out

into the universe. When she woke the next morning she'd remember most viscerally collecting stars; she plucked them from the sky like fruit and tucked them in the smooth folds of her dress. In his own bed across town, Waldo climbed a previously uncharted volcano with his eye on its apex. He clung to the mountainside, perspiring with expectancy. His fingers tore at rocks and clung to brush, which was when he felt the mountain come to life beneath him. When Kayla and Waldo awoke, both still bleary with sleep, their bedrooms shook. Neither could at once differentiate this from their dream. The quake occurred at 3:42 a.m. Eastern Standard Time and so the accounts that have been chronicled and historicized are from drunks and heart-sore, insomniac artists. This, it turns out, is perfectly fine, because it seems the drunks and the artists are the most capable of colorful deliverance. Take, for example, what street crooner Jen Swallows told the small crowd at the Dew Drop Inn: The tear, it made us realize what could not, in fact, could be. The universe is beautiful, somehow. Isn't it?

The newscasters called the split the North-South Hypocenter. What this meant was the crack that separated the East End from the West End was the earthquake's initial point of rupture. The crack, to be precise, was not a crack--although this is what the townspeople started off calling it. The crack was in fact a monstrous 1.13 mile-wide gap. A mouth, some called it. A wound. The door to the underworld. Whatever the terminology, the quake rumbled land on either side of the divide, peeling back pavement like a battered layer of skin, belching out the earth's contents. Coughed-up rock and dust and tree root fell to the water below, peppering the fresh strip of ocean that poured into the break

between the East and West Ends. It was, as Matthew's Tavern regular Mike McReary drawled out between sips of whiskey, a fresh face to the same old helluva world.

The morning following the quake was beautiful and calm. Dawn swelled around town in ribbons of pink and yellow, which braided themselves first across wave caps before drifting through storefront windows and warming front lawns. Power lines dipped loosely to the ground. TV stations glowed with static. Radios buzzed as they reached for signals. The town had been halved and left without power, and so, from their respective homes, Kayla and Waldo and their families each walked to the split. They edged themselves as close as the caution tape permitted. Waldo bumped shoulders with a family of redheads. The mother wore leather gloves and held each of her young sons' hands in her own. Waldo recognized her--the mother--from school, where she was a librarian. On the other side, Kayla wiggled her way between the shoulders of two flannel-shirted men: the Weary Brothers, fishermen who sold their catch at a stand not far from her house. Neither Waldo nor Kayla knew these people well, nor the fact that these had always been their neighbors. They exchanged smiles; they felt a sheepish camaraderie rear inside them. Waldo looked out across the rupture. He saw a fuzzy smudge of what he imagined could be people across the way looking out, too. He felt one of them must be Kayla and when he reached in his pocket for his phone it was Kayla who was calling. Are you out there? he asked and she said yes and they both squinted. They knew each other so well it was almost like they could see each other just by hearing a voice and a short gust of breath. But they did sound far away. You sound far away, she said and he said he was and then

they both said a mile and laughed as if they were nervous. Kayla walked to a bench not far from the crack where she sat and tucked her knees to her chest. Waldo held his breath and wiggled under the caution tape. He looked into the world's insides. Waldo asked, What's going to happen?, and Kayla shook her head until she remembered he couldn't see her. I don't know, she said and then they both listened to the background noise of each other's side of town over the phone.

It's important to note that no one had ever asked either Kayla or Waldo what love meant to them. But, if they had been asked, undoubtedly they would both have said that love was what had happened to them when they were young. They had been together since the fourth grade, which sounded too foolish to claim aloud, but that was when Waldo found Kayla reading on top of the school's Dome Climber--that rickety piece of playground equipment, a metal-barred half-circle arching high out of the mulch. Aren't you scared you'll fall reading up there like that?, he'd asked, looking up at her from down below. He was, after all, scared of everything when he was that age--getting his pants dirty and disappointing his father to be just two of many fears. No silly, she said. She lay her book on a bar to hold her place before slipping herself down between them, keeping her legs braided, somehow, around one of the metal pipes. Her dangling braids seemed to tickle the air. See?, she said and Waldo flushed dizzy. I'll help you, she said, and she hoisted him across the scaffolding, guiding his hands and legs up the bars until he was up sitting beside her and it was the both of them purveying the playground below. That first afternoon, the other children ran and cluttered the schoolyard like moths while Waldo and

Kayla perched at the tip of the Dome Climber. They stayed past the trill of the bell, until it was just the two of them swinging their feet against the comforting tug of gravity. In the quiet of the cleared playground, Waldo listened to Kayla hum while she watched the height make his eyes glitter. Even though they had been kids, they would have still called this love. When they were older, Kayla would sneak Waldo up into the cupola. He was a master at sliding through Maisy's dog door down on the first floor where he pried off his boots and skied across the wooden floorboards in only his stocking feet. She was proud of his wily athleticism and tact and she kissed him extra hard on the mouth when he made it up to her third-floor look out. She liked that she could smell the sweat he'd worked up during the endeavor and he liked that he could feel her nervousness pulsing in her neck. In her bed they would huddle under her comforter with a flashlight whose light carved their faces into garish yellow and shadow patterns. They explored each other with their eyes closed and then, when they were ready and older, with their eyes open. When they thought of their lives, then, all they thought of was each other.

Every summer, by July the town was hungry for celebration. Despite the recent quake, or perhaps because of it, this July Fourth was no exception. The day before, Town Manager Saul Mead had sat in his office on one of the Balance Exercise Ball Chairs he was told would be good for his lower lumbar. Luckily, his office was in a far corner of the town hall and so the split, which split the building in two, was safely intact on the West End side. Saul Mead's secretary, a woman named Dolores Clay, tittered around the office plugging in cables and setting up the computers. She wept in a fashion that devoured her

whole body--hunching her shoulders, ruddying her face, shaking her hands and loosening sheafs of hair from the bun she'd fastened at the back of her neck. She had lived her whole life in this town. Her mother had lived her whole life in this town as had her mother before her and now their town was split in two. But mostly Dolores Clay cried because she hated change. Saul Mead cracked his knuckles and cleared his throat and stared at Dolores until she hushed, slightly, and then he smiled into his office computer screen, readying himself for the broadcast. Throughout town--on both sides of the hypocenter--families huddled around their own desktops; couples held laptops, cuddling on living room couches; others cradled tablets or simply tuned in on their phones. However they managed it, they all stared at the aging--but dignified--face of Saul Mead. For many this was the first time they'd ever bothered to notice who their town manager was and they searched his wrinkled visage for signs of nervousness. But Saul Mead was composed. He was unsettled by the quake, certainly. But this was, after all, a quiet town and there was an excitement in the air now that loosened his joints. He felt enervated, younger than he had in many years. Out of sight beneath his desk, Saul Mead cracked his knuckles, and then he leaned towards the microphone. July Fourth will commence as planned, he said. He was unable to take his eyes off his own miniaturized-face on the screen. He said, This is still America, after all, is it not? This is still our town.

It had been tradition for Kayla and Waldo on July Fourth to arrange a blanket on the second-story deck of Kayla's house and together watch the fireworks bloom over the ocean and across the East End Beach. Neither truly realized this was tradition until the

evening of the Fourth when (because the Town Manager made sense after all) both sides of town persevered with their festivities--the West End Parade, which sprouted from the firehouse, and the East End Fireworks. The fireworks erupted over Kayla's porch where she lay spread over a blanket staring up towards the sky. Waldo was of course nowhere to be seen. He was, in fact, sitting on the front stoop of his house across town watching remnants of the West End Parade--street jugglers, the baton twirling dance team, Shriners--dance in the street. Kayla held her phone against her chest and felt the wood decking vibrate beneath her as electric-red exploded in the sky. She was breathing deeply. Her spit had turned hot and thin, but it seemed stupid to her to cry at a time like this. She had held her phone all day; she'd even stuck only to the areas in her house of best reception. Waldo couldn't be there of course, she knew that, but wasn't he at least wondering? She held her breath. She counted firework explosions to five and then she called him. She waited with the phone pressed to her ear and when his voice came it came to her in swells of street music. Kay?, he said and without pause Kayla heard herself say, Waldo you didn't call, and then in the pause that followed, both realized they didn't know what they wanted to talk about. I'm sorry, he said while at the same time she said, It's not your fault, and then both exhaled, which neither heard, swallowed as they were by the fireworks and a Shriner's botched rendition of the Star Spangled Banner. Kayla reached out an arm and felt the wool sharply beneath her fingers. The blanket was bare save for her body and for a moment it seemed she was swimming through the cool breeze that had snuck in off the ocean. It licked every inch of her skin. She felt the night on her and she realized what she didn't feel was alone. I was angry because I thought I

felt alone, she said into the phone. You are alone, though, aren't you?, he said and she said Yea, I guess, I know that. I guess what I meant was lonely. I guess I was angry because I thought I felt lonely and you didn't call so it seemed like *you* weren't. That you weren't lonely and I was. I'm not making any sense, she said and she shook her head. No, I get it, Waldo said and, on his side of town, he watched a pudgy Boy Scout wander by his stoop. The boy stopped. He leaned on Waldo's mailbox and offered forward the small cooler he'd been toting on his hip. Waldo reached into its insides and grabbed from it a Fudgesicle, which he unwrapped and took between his lips. This is delicious, he said and Kayla said, What? Oh, he said and he laughed. They're handing out these Fudgesicles, the Boy Scouts are, he said. Never mind. It's too hard to explain. But I do know what you mean. The thing is, though, I don't feel lonely, do you? For some reason it feels nice like this. Like we're being brave without trying. Do you know what I mean? Kayla ran her fingers once more against the wool and then she pulled the blanket across her body, cocooning herself in. I do, she said. She said, I guess, but she felt a tightening in her chest that seemed somewhere between frustration and sadness. She couldn't tell the difference and she felt her breathing turn to short bursts as if to usher in laughter or tears. What, Kay?, Waldo said and Kayla hugged herself. It's nothing really, she said. I just, I don't really understand it either. Kayla felt the silence between them. What she started to say was: It's like I want you to be lonely. Like I want you to *feel* alone without me, but that didn't seem like something people were supposed to say to out loud. Instead she listened to Waldo breathe. She heard him say again, We're being brave, Kay, and she nodded, even though he couldn't see. She nodded until he continued. And maybe, he said, maybe

I'm just more suited for lonelines than you are. Waldo scratched his head. He'd never thought of that before but it seemed true. Kayla squeezed shut her eyes. Her mouth crowded for a moment with the news of her acceptance, of her move to the city, of the stage she felt begging for her and her for it. But instead she swallowed. She wondered if that was what bravery really was: facing the fact that all she needed, all she wanted--truly--was to be the center of her own life. Waldo bit into the Fudgesicle before staring down at its frayed tip, torn and jagged. It reminded him of the earth and its new incision and he felt a clench, in his belly, a yearning to be there at its edge with the tips of his sneakers reaching out for something new. Neither of them said anything. They listened to the fireworks. Kayla watched the finale shoot and spread over the water and Waldo heard it echo, on the phone and somewhere more distant across the divide.

Everyday that week after the quake Kayla walked the split. It looked big enough to have spread the earth in half completely. One morning, she took a handful of marbles from the container she'd kept beneath her bed since she was a girl. She walked the crack and then stood with her belly against the caution tape. Massaging the marbles in her palm, Kayla looked down her edge of town. She studied the others who had also drawn themselves up to the edge: a scruffy man who stood with his eyes closed, the wind dancing with his shirt-tails; two girls, pigtails and a messy pony-tail, who held the tape taut in their fists; a woman, scribbling in a notebook. Kayla gathered herself up against the tape, she looked down at the marbles huddled in her palm and then she dropped one and kicked it out across the pavement toward the crack where it rolled until it fell out of sight. She never

heard a noise. This excited her and she remembered the newscasters who said the crack went hundreds of yards deep and was now newly swallowed in sea. In the silence, Kayla started singing. It was a song her mom used to sing in the car--one she'd heard again, earlier that day on the radio. Back then she would sing while she strained against her seatbelt to stick her head out the window just to feel the wind dry her eyes and squiggle her skin. Standing along the crack Kayla remembered how thrilling it felt, driving like that, to feel herself rush through time. Kayla sang and hugged her arms around her chest where the notes welled up inside her in deep gusts of breath. Her notes rattled down through the town's new cavity, echoing her verses as soft whispers that sounded to her like her own backup singers. The woman with the notebook turned and smiled. She tapped the cover of her journal with her palm as if to clap. Meanwhile, on the West End, Waldo of course was ecstatic. He felt about what lay down beneath the surface of town the way he knew his explorers must have felt about their own new worlds. He scoured mountaineering blogs and watched YouTube videos of ascents that made him dizzy with anticipation. He purchased army caliber repelling rope and a harness and mechanical descenders with the Amazon.com gift cards he'd been sequestering for years. He studied belaying videos until hand placements and climbing routes invaded his sleep and when the packages finally arrived, he practiced the maneuvers on the old Dome Climber at the Elementary near his house. Around Kayla and Waldo, town-life went back to normal or, well, a new normal. There was no way to ford across the divide and both East Enders and West Enders accepted this truth with a calmness that, in retrospect, you'd call surreal. They shopped at their local markets and worked from home if they had to. They managed

their gardens. Backyard farmers gathered their eggs and tended their livestock with a new tenacity. They shared their produce around town with a benevolence Town Manager Saul Mead had never previously dreamed of cultivating. Maybe it was because it was summer, many postulated. Summertime and the living, *even here*, is easy, was a joke that somehow took off on both sides of the divide. Within two weeks, Saul Mead revealed through the local paper the architectural renderings he'd commissioned for a bridge that would eventually reunite East and West. In the drawings, hyacinth bushes and hydrangeas decorated the sides of the hypocenter and lined the bridge that sprouted from one edge of the crack to the other. But it would be a big project--The biggest bridge yet!, Saul Mead said with undisguised pride. It's still in the planning stages, he said. This is the recession after all. Budgets are tight. But rest assured, he noted in a mailing that filled mailboxes on both sides of town, this is what we will look like in the future.

That week, in the secrecy of their own bedrooms, alone and without at first even using the word, both Waldo and Kayla began to think about breakups. When they were younger, what breakup meant to them was anger, inflamed and cantankerous. They had both witnessed this with their own parents. Kayla's mother had smashed a mirror over her father who had received twenty-three stitches and still had a scar. Waldo's father drove his car into a telephone pole to prove a point. What Kayla and Waldo felt now was nothing like that. They had never said anything that they later retracted. They had never cried about each other behind the other's back. They never yelled. When they pictured a breakup they pictured a festering wound that tore them each apart from their centers. But

this was not the case. Kayla tried to put it to words, sometimes, for example when she stood in the shower rubbing conditioner into the dry ends of her hair. What she'd begun to feel, she thought, was an itching. A giddiness to unwrap herself from everything she was in the world and become something new. To become something great. In his own room, Waldo was seduced by the passages he wrote down from his explorers who reached with their whole hearts for what lay behind hazy horizons. *One does not discover new lands without consenting to lose sight of the shore for a very long time*, wrote Andre Gide, which made Waldo certain he was meant to face a life of exploration, too. But neither Kayla nor Waldo said anything about this aloud. Waldo contemplated the depths of the world and Kayla could only think of the stage, of herself washed in spotlight. All they could imagine when they stopped to try and think of each other was a gulf that had spread between them, something striking and mysterious. They were both quietly embarrassed at the work the earthquake had done for them. They loved each other, yes, but they had started to love more something about the people they wanted to become and so, even before they admitted anything to each other, they started packing.

For the city:

Five pairs of jeans.

Ten sweaters

Underwear/bras

Eleven long sleeved shirts/sweaters

Dresses (All!!)

Boots

CD collection

Breakfast at Tiffany's (*Find! Where is it???*)

Blow-dryer

Grandma's old earrings

It was two weeks after the quake that Kayla broke her news. Late July had brought with it a thick heat--at least through her part of town. Her mother and stepfather lay immobile as barnacles on the front porch, pink from white wine and the sun. Kayla brought out the news with a fresh round of drinks and cut-fruit. Our big city girl, her mom said, squeezing Kayla in a hug that lifted her off the ground. Later that afternoon, Kayla held her phone between her palms, her hands pressed together and held to the tips of her lips. She paced her bedroom floor. She couldn't keep her shoulder blades from tightening together, even when she rolled them. She knew that, in making the call, she'd be redrawing with her own hand the fissure that had carved the town in two. Kayla bit down on the edge of a cheek until she felt it heat and begin to bleed and then she dialed. Waldo listened to Kayla's news, which came from her in halting spurts and made him grin. I knew you'd be famous, was what he said. This made her smile and then she listened as he told her about the piles of rappelling gear and the skyscrapers of books that had overtaken his room. She laughed because she could picture exactly how the books would be teetering against his bedroom's glossy floorboards. How the rope and headlamps and other new paraphernalia would be feathered across it all like foliage. Kayla felt relief, that

exciting cluster of butterflies deep in her gut. Waldo looked around his room at the tools and research. They seemed real for the first time: uncovered and allowed to exist. I remember the first time I ever heard you sing, Waldo said then as he flopped back against his bed. They were in middle school at the time and Kayla was trying out for a lead in the school musical. She stood alone on stage while he sat out in the auditorium. She squinted through the stage lights and he heard his heart beating at the way the light made a halo of her outlandish red hair. It was the first time he'd ever seen it not in braids. He'd never heard anyone sing like that in real life and he'd had it trapped in his head for weeks. He'd blushed when he realized he was singing her through the halls at school. Waldo, she said then from her bedroom to his. It's happening. I'm going to be a singer. And you're going to explore the world. Kayla reached to the crescents of her lips. She wanted to touch the smile there. Waldo pulled out one of the notebooks that had been jutting into his scalp from beneath a pillow. He flipped through the pages where he'd drawn cross-sections of the world. Can I read you something, he asked and he cleared his throat. *From birth, man carried the weight of gravity on his shoulders. He is bolted to earth. But man has only to sink beneath the surface and he is free.* Waldo loved this one. He heard rustling over the phone. Kayla?, he said and he heard her say, I'm listening. She said, I love that one. Who is it? And he told her, Jacques Cousteau. Waldo folded closed the notebook. He's a French--I know, she said. I remember. It's perfect isn't it? Kayla walked to her closet and worked out two old suitcases from its depths. She imagined her whole life filling them. What are you thinking about?, she said, listening to him rustle on the other end. Nothing, he said. Packing, I guess. How much I'm going to need. I'm going to be all alone, Kay.

It's crazy. Kayla tried to imagine him picking from between the heaps of gear in his room. Are you sad about this?, she asked. Sad?, he asked and she swallowed. You don't seem that sad about this, Waldo. About us, I mean. Waldo sat himself among his preparations. You want me to be sad? Kayla sighed. I don't *want* you to be sad, Waldo. I'm not a jerk. I just. I don't know. It just would seem sad if we weren't sad this was over. Like it didn't mean a thing. Outside there was the jingle of the ice cream truck making its way down Kayla's street. She wondered if Waldo could hear it through the phone. I don't know what those have to do with each other, Kay, Waldo said. Being sad. Meaning something. I just... I know, Kayla said. Their worlds trailed off and they listened to each other's silence. That jingle made me hungry just then, Waldo said. No seriously, my stomach just rumbled. Kayla grinned. You heard that?, she said and he said, Of course. In her closet, Kayla had pulled from between her dresses the first costume she'd ever worn on stage: a wonderfully gaudy lace number with a tight satin bodice. She took the fabric between her fingers. She smiled at the memory and then swallowed and while the dress swished back in line with the others she said, Waldo, Do you think we'll talk? Will we stay in touch I mean? she added quickly. Waldo coiled bi-color climbing rope around his hand. The colors swirled as the rope piled in on itself, swallowing his wrist completely. Well, he said. It's whatever we want, isn't it? There aren't really rules or anything, are there?, he asked and she shook her head. Before they hung up, they held the phones to their ears. The both of them held their phones with a shoulder and an uncomfortable bend to the neck, just listening to each other pack.

What I'll need down there:

BlueWater Assaultline Static Rope

rappel anchor materials

(2) Black Diamond Storm Headlamps

8 white and 8 red LEDs

Backpack

10 water bottles

Chapter 3 from "The Silent World"

Mountaineering Moves Vol. I & III

300 energy bars and gel packs

The rest of the summer eased through with a warm, reassuring heat. Slowly townspeople on either side gathered the broken pieces from the torn town hall building and Kennebec Savings Bank. They sawed off the jagged edges, smoothed them back. They rebuilt new structures that. And, while they at first appeared to rear haphazardly from the lip of the crack, eventually they seemed just normal. Town Manager Saul Mead sat in his office, which had been renovated regally with a view out across the divide. Saul Mead pressed himself to the window and peered through a pair of Compact Zoom Binoculars he'd purchased online (counting it as a business expense) and, while he couldn't be certain, he guessed what he saw as blurry and orange in the distance was a construction crew finalizing repairs to the East End's half of town hall. He knew completion was slated for today and while he felt a warm loosening of his chest at the prospect that repairs were

finally complete, he couldn't ignore that there was something catching in his throat, too. At what he couldn't quite be certain. Anita Hughes, a Selectman who'd been on the town board for you'd never guess how long would be stepping up as East End Interim Town Manager. *Interim*, they all said with emphasis, but Saul Mead knew how these things worked. They'd eventually build the bridge, of course, but things never went back to normal, not completely. If there was one thing he'd learned in his sixty-seven years it was that. The phone on his desk buzzed and there was his secretary, Dolores Clay. Mr. Mead, she said--shouted really because she never did understand the intercom--Mr. Mead it's Mrs. Hughes. Line 1. No, Line 2. Line 2, Mr. Mead. Saul Mead lay down the binoculars and leaned towards the mouthpiece. Thank you, Dolores, he said, and then he picked up the phone. Anita, he said and he tried smiling extra wide just to show himself he could and he listened to her describe the finishing touches: sea green trim, double-pane windows, a third-floor, 360-degree aerial view of the bay.

Kayla and Waldo spoke once more on the phone and by then it was late August--fall was in the air, teasing them. It was the day before Kayla left for school. She wanted to get there early, to organize her life before school started. I don't want to be *that* girl from up north without a clue, was actually what she told her mom. Waldo smiled over the phone imagining Kayla looking up at the tips of skyscrapers burying their heads in the clouds. The city, he said. I know, she said, and they both thought of the ferry docked in the harbor that would take her across the bay to a train she would board and ride south for

hours. He imagined how straight she'd sit on the ride, her hair smoothed back tight, her sloppy and erratic posture aligned, how ready she was to become someone new. When are you leaving? she asked. Over the phone she couldn't know that he was sitting with his feet dangling over the crack. If she had she would have thought of them all those years ago on the Dome Climber. She would have liked the poetry of that. The symmetry. At the crack, where Waldo sat, his blood rocketed through him not at the height, well yes at the height but not out of fear. The caution tape had long since blown away and Waldo sat right at its edge, feeling the depths pull at the soles of his hiking boots. Waldo? Kayla said and Waldo reached at his headlamp, which was in place, rope coiled over his shoulder, the essentials in his backpack. Soon, he said, I'm leaving soon, and then he laughed when she asked him what he was going to find down there. I have no idea, he said and she said, I knew you'd say that. She imagined him slinking to new places beneath her feet. Waldo?, she asked then and he said, Yeah, and she said, Waldo, what're we supposed to say here? And then neither of them said anything. Waldo? He said, I'm listening, it's just... I don't know. Do you? She said, I don't know either. Waldo swung his feet over what felt like the edge of the world and Kayla looked out to sea. She wondered, if she looked hard enough, if she'd see skyscrapers. She imagined all the people filling those buildings in the sky and how whether, beneath the city, there were other men like Waldo filling that space too. Waldo cleared his throat and Kayla said, Yeah?, and he said, I think what you're supposed to say here is, I think you'll be great, which he said expecting her to laugh and she did. That sounds stupid, she said and he said, Oh, I know. It's just, can you think of anything better? And neither of them could.

That night Kayla knew, somehow, that Waldo had already entered the earth. She sat on her floor, and smiled not knowing if she'd ever be up in the cupola again waiting for the future. She withdrew from her desk the stack of photographs she had of herself and Waldo over the years. She didn't want to hold the universe accountable for splitting the two of them apart. The earthquake was massive and brutal and she somehow admired its decisiveness. She wanted to feel that, too, and so she took a breath and tore the photographs in two so that one by one they no longer contained both she and Waldo together. The first was a banal picture of the two of them from a picnic several summers ago. She and Waldo on a wrinkled plaid blanket. He had his arm around her shoulders. She had braces. They both looked happy. She went through all of them, one by one and after the tearing she lay the pictures in two stacks--one of hers and one of Waldo's--with the papery torn edges facing each other in between. In the dim light of her bedroom she pulled on a loose turquoise dress and then she reached for her corduroy coat because summer was already racing away from both sides of town. With only the streetlights to guide her, Kayla walked to the crack, beyond where the caution tape used to bar her, until her toe-tips were at its edge. She looked down into the earth. In the dark she thought she could hear Waldo's breath and she said his name softly, not expecting to hear anything in return. She stood a moment in the crisp silence before tossing both halves of the photographs. They fluttered up, nearly stalling in the air, and then spiraled and disappeared beneath the ground. Goodbye, she whispered and then she turned around to

walk home and in the morning her mother and stepfather drove her down to the harbor where she said goodbye again.

During his first night underground, Waldo felt right in the world. He sat in his harness, tethered to the earthen underworld and gazed up to a sky that seemed certain and important. It was what he imagined looking up from the depths of the Grand Canyon to be like. His favorite passage was written on one of the pages he'd tucked in his backpack pocket, but he didn't need the words anymore. He could hear them on his own. *From birth, man carried the weight of gravity on his shoulders. He is bolted to earth. But man has only to sink beneath the surface and he is free.* He said that aloud and his words ricocheted against their echoes in the underground. There was a rustling above him and then in the darkness he felt sheets of paper graze his face. Blindly, he reached out and snatched one between his fingertips. A photograph, he realized, and when he snapped on his headlamp there was Kayla as a young girl: bushy hair, gap-toothed, gleeful. He whispered her name. He traced his thumb across the softness of the torn edge and then he let go and the photograph spun away beneath him. That night, Waldo fell asleep to the tittering of squirrels and night owls from the world above and in the morning he set off further into what was unexplored.

Months eased by, months that spilled into years, during which, somewhere along the way both East and West End dropped End from their titles. This happened without anyone

really accounting for the change; at some point the Ends had simply become their own towns. New businesses cropped up on either side of the hypocenter: Betty Jones started shearing her sheep, spinning their coats into yarn that she sold from an empty storefront on the eastern edge of the crack. And over on the western side Bobby Gil renovated an old home damaged by the quake and started a speakeasy that became a Friday night tradition. Townspeople on either side faced their calendars. They crossed off appointments and lunch dates for good. They chose new hairdressers. They picked new school mascots--the Bobcats, the Great Whites, to be specific. Not to say this was all easy, of course. There was the autumn, for example, when Gilda Harris, the oldest resident in town history, passed away in her sleep. The news of her death traveled the airwaves to both sides of town. Townspeople in the west flocked to the promenade's sprawling cemetery to see her off, laying gladiolas--her favorite--on the fresh face of her gravestone. All the while, townspeople in the east felt a tear in their insides--a deep ache--that a woman they'd loved so dearly would for the rest of time only be a memory. They crowded at the edge of the crack, warmed by each other's body heat, and listened for the slow dirge of funeral music many claimed to hear emanating from the west. In the city, there were times Kayla felt the pain, too. There was the day, for example, when she woke up to her first rejection from a theatrical bit part--*Don't take it personally. Really, don't. You can't begin to understand how competitive it is out here*--and she wondered if it would all be better if she were back home. If she could reach out and trace the familiarity of Waldo's face. She holed herself in bed, scaring herself because she couldn't exactly remember the sound of his laugh. She couldn't remember if, really, he rubbed his palms

together when he chuckled or if that was a misplaced memory, something she'd seen recently on TV. It was times like that she felt her whole past, her hometown, was from a dream or another life. But really, she knew, she was happy. She'd pull herself from bed and walk to the kitchen window overlooking the city and watch all the life milling down beneath her. She'd see all the potential. And Waldo had his days, too. Mostly the days when he was sick of his own voice being the only one he heard. Or, when he was frightened by the fact that sunlight was something he hadn't seen in a very long time. Sometimes he carved Kayla's name into the side of the earth just so he could read it back to himself. But most days, most days all he needed was to see something new. Something he'd never seen before, of which he'd take a sample, filling tiny test tubes he slid into his backpack, drawing the specimens on thick cream-colored artist paper. On most days he didn't think of his town at all and eventually when he thought of home, all he thought of was himself voyaging underneath.

It was three years before the cross-town bridge was finally raised. And, because it was truly a magnificent feat, Town Manager Saul Mead did not feel badly about this delay. It was October when Saul Mead stood at the bridge's western entrance and cut the ribbon with an unwieldy pair of oversized scissors. In the city, Kayla was preparing for her first starring role while back beneath town Waldo charted undiscovered minerals. Kayla read about the bridge in a newspaper backstage where she powdered her cheeks pink and Waldo heard the cheers from up above. He heard the rumble as the first car passed from East to West. Kayla squinted at the paper and without thinking she searched for Waldo

before she realized where he was was beneath the photo. Kayla, someone said behind her in the dressing room, Let's go. Kayla set down the paper, which, later that night after the show, would be picked up by the janitor and recycled in the bin outside. Waldo scraped at a wall of stone. He remembered a day that seemed forever ago: he and Kayla standing on either side of the crack, hugging their cellphones to their ears, trying to find each other's voice across the rupture. That night, they both thought of each other and when they did it was like looking at photographs of themselves as children. Waldo scraped and Kayla shook hands with a reporter outside of the theater after the show. Both felt whole.

All Acts, By Heroes and Villains

The flames—how they curtsied across the desert grass, curling up from Juniper bushes and thick-armed Saguaros—they reminded Neal of Crista’s hair. Penny-colored curls he could never get his fingers through completely.

They were gone now, the flames. All that was left was a thick, dry smoke that colored the stretch of desert between Highway 20 and the housing units on the edge of town. The air: stained like a sleeping ghost at the feet of the Pinal Mountains. Neal felt the smoke in his lungs, and it was somehow pleasing that he couldn’t swallow it away. He felt permanently scarred and battered.

Neal stood at the curb beside the fleet of fire and brush engines called in from Gila county and its neighbors. He studied the cheap white siding of the low-income housing units, glazed with soot and ash. Their open front doors swung in a breeze that had kicked down from the mountains. The door closest to Neal whipped against its frame and back out onto a patch of stiff, dry shrubbery. It clacked back and forth like a loose, metal tongue and when it gaped, Neal saw firefighters—*real* firefighters, he told himself—mount a staircase before disappearing upstairs. He and the other un-certified volunteers stood outside waiting.

“Greenbee,” the Chief had said looking at Neal when he’d waved the rest of the crew towards the apartments. “Babysit the pumps.”

Neal watched the apartments and cracked open a Gatorade. The fire, he’d heard, had jumped down from the Ponderosa Pines, skipping across the juniper and creosote bushes, rolling across the desert to lick hungrily at the outskirts of town. But when Neal

and the rest of his crew arrived, the battle that had raged throughout yesterday and into this morning had largely been bled dry. Neal had sprung off the engine as soon as they'd pulled up in front of the apartments, but by then it had only been spare tendrils of flame kicking out into the sky. Out beyond the complex, the desert flexed copper and tan in the memory of heat.

Neal and the rest of the crew from Claypool had been called in to prevent rekindling. Indian Fire Pumps had been handed out like candy and, watching the others, Neal had strapped one to his back and followed them to the outcroppings of groundcover that glowed a weak red in breaths of fresh breeze.

They'd beaten the fire and now the certified fighters—the ones, Neal told himself, who knew what they were doing—had invaded the apartment complex, checking the soundness of the structure, assessing damage. They'd been inside a great while, or maybe it just seemed that way to Neal who stood on the curb realizing the day was over. He felt himself begin to deflate: a slow extinguishing of rush and excitement. He wanted to stay like this forever: his skin pinched and raw from the heat, his lungs stinging at the smoke, his body alive. But the firefight already felt like a relic of the past: reporters and TV crews had flocked to the scene; a fleet of families pressed themselves against the caution tape. All that was left was aftermath.

Neal didn't wipe away the drink that spilled down his chin and neck. The coolness of it made his skin surge. He imagined the streaks carving wet tracks through the soot on his neck. It was his first fire and he wondered, if he looked in the mirror, if he'd recognize himself? Were his eyelashes charred? His eyebrows gone? How

blackened was his skin? What he really wanted was a picture: the smoke, his gear, the trucks, the flames—when they'd been there—beating the sky. For a week he'd been trying to piece together a response for Crista. He imagined himself lit up against the smoke and the desert. He imagined writing: I told you. Or maybe not saying anything at all. Just the picture.

Last week, she had sent him a message on Facebook. It had been a picture of the baby—their baby—and Crista had written, Hope you're well. Their daughter was two weeks old—days he'd kept track of with green Sharpie on the calendar taped to his fridge. When he told the guys at work over their lunch break at the warehouse he'd left out the bit about Facebook. He said she sent an email. He said she sent her picture, their baby's picture, and in it she was smiling like she wanted to get to know him. Her eyes reminded him of those wet black rocks whorled perfect and smooth by the ocean. She reached out towards the camera, towards *him* it felt like, with scrawny curled fingers the tips of which were already sharp and alive with fingernails. Sitting with the guys in the warehouse, Neal had rubbed his hands together at the memory of the photo. He spoke softly, urgently into the tips of his fingers, asking them what it meant and what they had said was: Neal, it's just an email. It's *just* an email. Slow down.

But it was something. He felt very certain about this because at the bottom she'd written: How are you, Neal? We hope you're well.

For a week her question had burned at the edges of his mind. Always there. What could he say to show just how back on track he was? He'd thought about the new apartment. How the first light at dawn spread a purple hue, a shade the color of the

curtains, out across his bed sheets. He wanted to tell her how he imagined her there against him, the way she liked to cocoon herself, drawing her knees into his gut. How he imagined their baby asleep between them, the light painting all their skin lilac. And he'd written that, at least he'd started to but then there was also the electricity. How it only worked sometimes. And the nights when, until dawn, the sounds of crinkling beer cans and the jangle of voices shook up from the terraces. It wasn't a place for a father. He didn't need Crista to tell him that.

So it had felt like fate that there was that message—his response looming overhead—and today was the fire. His first fire. Because what he'd said three months ago—before the baby, back when Crista had kicked him out, back when she'd said they needed a break—what he'd said was, Crista, I'm getting it together. It had been while he packed up his boxes, hauling them to the one-bedroom at the cheap complex across town that he'd seen the sign—the call for reinforcements at the fire department. That night, his first in the new apartment, he'd stood out on the deck and left a message on Crista's phone: I'm doing something, he'd told her. For you. For the baby.

He hadn't heard back.

He hadn't told her it was volunteer. That it wouldn't be paid. That he would still just be getting by on his warehouse wages. That he was learning on the go. That until he was certified he wouldn't be allowed, for example, inside structures or with the heavy machinery. Or, that the warehouse had officially revoked his operator's license after the drug test. That all he was permitted to do now was pack and unpack boxes in the

warehouse basement. He hadn't said any of that because it wasn't important. What was important was that, like he told her, he was getting it together.

On the curb, if Neal squinted, he could see shadows moving in the second floor apartments through the uncurtained windows. He watched a heard of the guys jostle down the stairs and soon a stream of them filed back out the front door. In the lead was Kelt who looked like a firefighter for real. He had the kind of look you found in movies: big broad-shouldered, tattoos snaking up his arms like they were eating each other alive.

I'm a firefighter now, Neal wrote this to Crista in his head. But he couldn't *not* think about how, when he'd jumped off the truck this morning, when he'd strapped on the Indian Fire Pump, how he'd held the hose and he hadn't known what to do. He'd watched the others encircle the bushes, the gusts of water that shot from their hands, while he'd stood, immobile. It had been Kelt who'd come up behind him.

"You lost, buddy?" He'd waved Neal towards the patches of Juniper.

Kelt walked towards Neal now across the parking lot and then he took a seat beside him on the curb. He grabbed the spare Gatorade at Neal's feet. Neal heard him gulp and he remembered how when Kelt had waved him out with the others he'd grinned. He'd said "Just put the wet stuff on the red stuff," and Neal watched him trot off into the heat.

The memory made Neal's head itch. He clamped and unclamped his hands. How could he write that to Crista? His hands: clamping, unclamping. Breathe, he told himself. The breaths that came out were long and shaky.

“It’s hot as balls. Am I right?” Kelt said. He brought his mouth from the lip of the bottle. Neal smelled a human cocktail of sweat and smoke and something else. He wondered if that’s what he smelled like, too.

Neal nodded. He said, “Hot” and felt like a child.

“And you think you’re hot,” Kelt said. He took a piece of Neal’s coat between his fingers. “It’s just *you* under that, right?”

Neal nodded. He shook his arms and felt his turnout gear bend stiffly against his skin.

Kelt loosened the top button of his coat. He spread apart the lapels so Neal was staring at Kelt’s thick, orange t-shirt soaked all the way through with sweat.

“I’ve got on the pants, too,” Kelt said. The bottoms were orange also and thick like canvas. Neal knew this because last week, his first week with the department, while he and the crew cut back dead weeds at the base of Brook Mountain he’d had the impulse to reach out and touch the orange fabric of Kelt’s prison issued pants. To feel its weight and the stiffness, he imagined, of the seam running up their sides. He’d touched the fabric with a finger and Kelt had never known. On the pants it was printed ADC down the leg—Arizona Department of Corrections. The letters on the rest of the inmates’ pants were coal-black and reminded Neal of the crisp letters of an eye exam. Kelt’s, though, the letters on Kelt’s pants, were greyed and sun faded. They looked like fossils and Neal didn’t know what to make of that.

Sitting on the curb, Neal sipped the Gatorade and looked away. He hadn’t figured out yet what to say to them—to the inmates like Kelt who shipped in from Florence State

Prison to join and fight the fires. He didn't know if he was scared of them or what it was. He didn't ask what they were in for and they didn't tell him. The closest he got was when he met Kelt. When he said, "Kelt—That your first name?" and Kelt had laughed. "Look me up on-line, buddy," he said. "You'll see everything you wanna know." Neal's face had burned. He'd looked away then, too, but when he got home he'd searched online until he'd found Kelt's mugshot and the five years he was serving for aggravated assault. He'd been relieved it wasn't drugs—*Something really wrong*, was what he thought, *Something I'd never do*—and this had made him ashamed and he'd closed the tab and then his laptop.

"This uniform, man," Kelt said, buttoning back up his jacket. "You think you'll feel like Superman in this thing, right? That's what you thought when you put it on for the first time, wasn't it?"

Neal didn't say that that was exactly it; that was exactly what he wanted to feel like.

The breeze, which Neal felt reaching down the neck of his gear, played with Kelt's loose, sweat streaked hair. He looked towards the crowds hemming the CAUTION tape by the apartments. After a moment he leaned in closer as if he'd been called and was straining to catch all of what had been said to him. Then he rubbed his hands together and looked back to Neal.

"You see those kids? That reporter?"

Neal looked to where Kelt was pointing. A reporter in a tight skirt and blazer had crossed the tape and stood by the lead engine. Her heels dug into the dirt and, from time

to time, she unburied them, looking for solid footing. She held out a microphone to the Chief. They'd be on the news for this fire. Neal had already thought of this. He'd already had the fantasies: 5 o'clock news. Crista sitting on that old turquoise corduroy couch. *That's your daddy.* Their baby, in the bend of Crista's arms, reaching those pink, puckered hands out towards the TV. Behind the reporter, a group of kids—mostly young boys—and their mothers huddled excitedly against the CAUTION tape. A father, too, Neal saw.

“You see those kids?” Kelt said again and Neal said yeah and Kelt stood up and cupped his hands to his mouth.

“Hey, kid,” he shouted, and one at the front, a small, bowl-cutted kid in glasses, stood on tiptoes. He pointed at himself and Neal watched his eyes go wide. Kelt yelled, “You want a picture with a real, live fireman?” They watched the kid look up at his mom and tug on her sweater. “Is it ok, mom?” Kelt said, his voice floating over the crowd, and the mom smiled the way they do when they know they're in a game that will make their kid feel great. “Duck right under that tape,” Kelt said. “Let's get a photo. You'll take it, right, Neal?”

Neal felt his heart jump. He hadn't thought of Kelt knowing his name.

“Yeah, sure,” he said and he cleared his throat when his voice wouldn't come. He watched the mom and her kid duck under the tape. Kelt walked over to a spot of bare pavement not far from Neal. Kelt looked behind him towards the lead engine and made a square of his fingers, trapping the truck in the space. He gave Neal the thumbs up.

He gave the kid a high five when the mom walked him over before coming to Neal, fishing in her purse.

The breeze washed a sheet of the woman's blonde hair across her face. Neal watched the strands cling to her lipstick before she swiped them away. When she made it over to him, she smelled clean like soap. It felt like stealing when Neal inhaled her and his face warmed.

"It's just this button here," she said to Neal. Her eyes smiled, thanking him, and then she turned back to look at Kelt and her kid.

"Let's get mom in the picture, too," Kelt yelled, waving her back. The woman giggled. Her sandals swooshed against the sand on the pavement as she made her way to Kelt, who held out his arms and the mom snuck under one and the kid under the other, hugged right up to Kelt's side. Neal watched the kid hold onto Kelt's belt and then Neal found all three of them in the cell phone screen.

"Smile," Neal said and he heard Kelt shout, "That's not what you say, man. The kid here," Neal heard him whisper. "Joey here, he wants you to ask him to say cheese."

Neal saw, behind the three of them, the dusty white van that had brought the inmates over from Florence that morning. A correctional officer sat in the passenger seat, facing off towards the desert. Kelt ruffled the kid's bowl-cut between his fingers. Something danced nervously in Kelt's chest.

"Say cheese," Neal said and the three of them shouted like it was a card for Christmas.

“Take a few,” Kelt said and so Neal did. He tapped on the screen and froze them in time and then he lowered the camera and the three of them uncurled from each other before the woman took Kelt’s hands in her own and Neal imagined the smoothness of her skin, the pale china of it laid delicately across Kelt’s callouses.

When the mom walked back and took the camera she smiled at Neal. There was a space between her front teeth and Neal thought what she must be was a really good woman. He thought she must be nice and he hoped she was happy and that her kid knew what a good woman his mom was.

“Goodbye,” he said to the woman, “Thank you,” which didn’t seem like the right thing to say but she just smiled again. “No,” she said. “Thank you.” Neal felt his smile match hers. He felt them smiling at each other like simple, happy people, and then she took the phone. She held her kid’s hand and they walked away and ducked back under the tape.

Kelt walked to Neal and clapped him on the shoulder. They watched the kid stand on tiptoes to look into the cell phone screen.

“You made his day,” Neal said.

“Yeah,” said Kelt, but he said it like it was a joke only he was in on. He turned to Neal. “You hear what he said?” he asked, and Neal shook his head.

“He said, ‘I want to be *you* when I grow up.’ You. Like not just any fire fighter but *me* fire fighter and that mom laughed and said what you just said. She said, ‘You made his day, you know that?’ And I said ‘Well, lady. I’ve made a lot of people’s days today.’”

Neal didn't know what to say. What he had the urge to say was, "I just had a baby. I have a kid now." But he didn't because he knew what would come next. "Yeah man, that's great man," Kelt would say. "What's your kid like?" And Neal didn't know. Crista had moved out when she was seven months pregnant, after they'd had an ultrasound and it had been a hard day and Neal'd been higher than he thought and he'd fallen asleep against the exam room wall while the doctor spread jelly across Crista's belly. Later, when they'd gotten home, she'd said, "You need to grow up before you can help *her* grow up." She'd pressed her hands to her belly and then he'd watched Crista swallow. "We'll be in touch, Neal," is what she said but then she'd said "Don't call, Neal."

"You *did* make his day," Neal said then to Kelt and Kelt laughed.

"I made his day for a whole ten minutes."

"What?"

"Here's what'll happen," Kelt leaned in close so Neal smelt the sourness of his breath. "They're over there showing that picture. Talking about how he'll wanna bring it to school. How he'll wanna print it out and hang it up and that mom'll wanna make a family photo out of it. But I'm gonna stand here and in a minute I'm gonna unzip this coat and pull off these turnout pants and I'm gonna be in my orange and that mom's gonna look at me like she wants to kill me."

Kelt smiled so big that Neal could see the caps on his molars. They were silver and old looking and the smile was full of things Neal couldn't quite place. There was

anger and bitterness and truth, like what he knew was an end that everyone else felt coming.

Kelt reached to his zipper..

“Don’t,” Neal said. “Jesus. You’re some kind of asshole, aren’t you?”

Kelt laughed. “That’s life man,” Kelt said. “If you’re the good guy, you’re probably the bad one too.” Kelt rubbed at his forehead and Neal watched the dirt and debris rub off until there were bare finger streaks of pale skin. “And anyways, look,” he said. “They’re ready to go.”

Kelt pointed across the lot where, behind the interview and behind the kids, the correctional officer had jumped down from the passenger seat. He waved and pointed to the ADC van and Neal heard Kelt unzip his coat. Kelt pulled off his uniform and then Neal watched him fold the coat and pants and stack them on top of each other. Kelt stood up, all in orange, and he tugged at his sweat-soaked shirt and Neal knew that the wet had cooled and that the shirt was chilled through.

“You wanna hear a joke?” Kelt said. “You know what my buddy says, my buddy back in Florence? He says we wear orange like it’s a hobby. That’s what he says.” He chuckled and Neal listened to him do this. “You’ve gotta laugh at that one, man. If you can’t laugh at that...” He shook his head and then he juttled his chin behind Neal and when Neal turned he watched men, scattered around the lot, unzip their uniforms. He felt the lot fill with orange like an electric fire that swarmed and spilled to the lead engine where the fire gear was left in one neat, orderly stack.

“Well,” Kelt said. “Till the next one.” When Neal turned back to him, Kelt stuck his hand to his brow and saluted and laughed and then he and Neal looked at each other before Kelt walked away.

Neal watched him walk and he heard his blood racketing behind his temples. He waited for the mom to notice, to turn and for the moment to hit her. Neal watched her until she did turn and she saw Kelt and amid the wave of orange, Neal saw Kelt turn back to them, too, to Neal and to the woman, and nod. The mom hugged her kid to her front. The kid didn't even know, Neal knew that, but the mom hugged him anyway. Neal watched her and the kid and then he watched Kelt and the other men climb into the truck and when he looked back the mom was looking at Neal and he saw the way she didn't blink, the way her chest heaved slowly in and out while she put together the pieces. Neal's face burned. He felt small inside his turnout gear. He looked her in the eyes and then he reached up for his hat and brought it down over his face so all he saw was its sweaty insides before he turned away. But he felt her watching, still, remembering how, like a trick, he'd said: “Say cheese.” How the whole time she had clung to Kelt's turnout gear when beneath it was his sweated orange t-shirt cooled against his body. There was a part of Neal that wanted to turn back to her. To say: Maybe you just don't know the story. Maybe it's not his fault. Maybe he got roped in.

This is something he had said to Crista once. He had been working at the warehouse a year when he'd felt something pull in his back. Something just gave out, and really the only thing that made it better—the only thing that made him forget how everything hurt like hell—that was the Oxy. And so he took it and he kept taking it and

how was he supposed to know when the switch happened, when he started needing the stuff just to get out of bed.

“Baby,” he’d said that morning in the bathroom. “It’s not my fault.” He’d smoothed at the crow’s feet fluttering out by her eyes with the flats of his thumbs and she bent herself into his chest. She held the pill bottle and it rattled between them. She was dressed for work at the nursing home and Neal smelled the sour scent of old people on her nursing aid outfit. He wanted to wipe them clean. To take them back to when it was easy and they were young.

“Neal,” she had said, her lips against his chest. “I can’t take care of anymore people.”

Neal scuffed a foot across the parking lot. He studied the small, lost rocks solidified in the pavement between his feet. He wanted to face that mom and her kid, to turn back and tell them maybe he got in over his head. Maybe he hadn’t known what to do. Maybe he couldn’t figure any way out.

But he didn’t.

Instead he walked over to the lead engine. He stood against its siding and looked back out across the desert where the wind had swirled smoke across the mountains.

“Not bad, kiddo.”

It was Bruno, one of the older guys, a man who’d told Neal on his first day that he’d fought fires in every county in Arizona. He reached for Neal’s hand and jostled Neal’s whole body when they shook. “You didn’t fuck up too bad today, did you?” He laughed before Neal could even answer. Neal offered up a grin.

“If no one saw, it doesn’t count,” Neal said. “Right?” And Bruno laughed with his whole belly.

“That’s the spirit, kiddo. Well, alright then. It’s about time for us to head back to the station. Ready to hit the road?”

Neal nodded while around him the rest of the crew drew back to the engines they’d brought over from Claypool. Neal gathered his things—his helmet, his gloves, the empty Gatorade bottle. He settled himself in the back of the truck.

As the engine headed east on Route 60, Neal felt the sharp light of the afternoon filter in through the truck windows. The men jostled against each other, shooting memories of the afternoon back and forth and Neal felt their stories as a stinging in his chest.

Back at the station, Neal loosened his turnout gear and it puddled on the concrete floor, the legs of his crumpled pants hollow like the man inside had vanished, turned to smoke, and then together with the crew he helped wash the day from the engines.

On his drive home, across town from the station, Neal thought of heroes. What Crista had said when he’d moved out, what she’d said, actually, when he packed his things in all the boxes he could find around the house, was “We’re not expecting you to be a hero, Neal. We’re just expecting you to try.” Neal had wondered if the *we* she was talking about was her and her mom or her and her girlfriends or her and their baby or her and him. It had seemed important but too big a question to ask. He hadn’t said anything because he knew whatever he said she would point to the bottle of Oxy she’d found by the sink and no matter what he said she’d say “Trying, Neal? That’s not trying.” He’d say

he was, that this was him *trying*, but that would just make it worse. She'd purse her lips and he would say, "You don't know how hard it is, to stop, Crista." And she would say, "I don't know how hard it is?"

This had all happened before.

The afternoon was just starting to give way to evening, the sky turning grey around him and Neal switched on his headlights. They swam without meaning or effect in the light. He thought again of the photo—of their baby, her wet rock eyes and how in his dreams she blinked as her gaping mouth smiled when he held his face to the smooth swell of her cheek. She was just a baby who didn't think anything yet. Who didn't know anything of anyone. Who didn't know him at all.

Neal pulled off the exit. He parked up alongside their street sign where he turned off the car and off the headlights. He sat and down the street there was the small one-story ranch. It was still light enough outside to see it: hunter green, the peeling yellow door. The kitchen light was on as well as one upstairs, which he knew was the bedroom. He imagined Crista peeling Saran wrap off of leftover lasagna in the fridge for dinner. Sliding the pan in the oven and then padding upstairs—skipping the creaky third step—and leaning over the crib where their baby was asleep. He imagined her touching their baby's cheek just to remember exactly what it felt like and then he realized he'd never even asked Kelt if he had a kid of his own. He rested in a thought of the two of them standing by flames, safe in their uniforms, swapping baby pictures like dads on the first day of school.

Neal squeezed the steering wheel. He inhaled. He took in the residue of smoke and sweat. He brought his elbow to his nose and closed his eyes to smell it all stronger: the woods, the fire, the afternoon, the strength he'd—they'd—all had, to wipe it out. Neal imagined walking to Crista's doorstep. Ringing the bell. Letting her smell him. Letting Crista bring his face down to hers where the soot and the sweat and the hard work would rub off on her and leave its trace.

The thing was, he wanted to tell her, the thing was: even when he was on the pills, even when he was in the thick of it, she had loved him then, too. What he wanted to say was there were times those pills made him better than he ever could've been on his own. There's a bike ride he remembers, one he and Crista took up towards Lost Dutchman. He remembers them biking and him making her laugh and her laughing so hard she almost fell off right there on Route 88. Who could've said that wasn't perfect?

Behind him a car honked. It pulled up beside him and when the window rolled down the voice was hoarse and throaty: "Try taking up more of the road." And then "Ass hole," before the car croaked off down the street. It had gotten dark, Neal realized, and he turned the car back on. His headlights reached out towards the house.

Neal drove home and in the bathroom he sat on the lip of the tub. The lights hummed around him. He felt his muscles loosen and exhale. He was tired—*You'll feel exhausted*. The doctor had said this, *Exhausted and ansty. But, I'll tell you, if you don't take it the withdrawal'd be worse*. Neal twisted the watch at his wrist. It had been twelve hours, almost exactly, and so Neal stood and fumbled for the orange of the pill bottle in

the shelf above the sink. He thumbed out one of the boxy orange Suboxone's and drowned the pill in a sloppy handful of tap water. He brought the cocktail to his mouth.

“Suboxone? Sounds serious.” It sounded like any other drug, he'd said that to the doctor who'd folded his hands across one of his long, crossed legs and together they'd gone over the dosage, how Neal could be on the drug for years, forever maybe.

The doctor's office had been stuffy. On the way to the appointment Neal'd driven past the OB/GYN entrance he remembered having gone to with Crista. Neal was distracted; he wondered if Crista could be there for a check up. Or, it was early, but what if the contractions came early. She'd call him, wouldn't she? She'd call him, he thought. She would.

In the bathroom, Neal sensed his empty stomach and the pill there inside it. He'd imagined writing Crista about the apartment. And then about the bike he'd gotten to take to and from the warehouse. About how he felt his body growing younger. But mostly he thought about telling her how it had been three weeks since he last used, how he shook sometimes at night trying to go to bed. How there were the shakes and sometimes the sweats, too.

And wasn't that something? He wanted to ask her this. Didn't that mean he was doing something? And if he was really brave, he knew, what he really wanted to know was: No matter what, could you ever really love me as much as you did back in the beginning?

In the bathroom Neal pulled off his clothes and let them slump, uselessly, on the floor. He twisted on the shower and let it turn the air around him hot and thick until he

stepped into the stream. The soot coiled down the drain and he watched it while he thought of tomorrow at the warehouse. Unpacking boxes, repacking boxes, unpacking boxes, watching his phone for another fire. His phone would ring, it would be the chief and there would be a fire that would loosen him from real life and lift him up and recast him. He remembered the flames rearing from the ground. How he'd felt himself swell and reach upwards, too.

The shower branded red streaks down Neal's body and he stood there, in the water, until all his skin was raw. Until he was raw and red and clean. He stood there until the water turned cold.

My Folder of Heartbreaking Departures

What I used to be was a really standup guy and, before that, the boy everyone wanted to be. I was the It-kid. I'm not trying to sound like an asshole, it's just true. But you know who I used to be. If you remember hard enough, you know because that's who I was when we met. That part we remember the same way.

I remember that summer, the first one, when you'd climb up the chainlink with me and we'd set ourselves at the top of the fence that separated the basketball court from the rest of Hull, nudging the tips of our sneakers under the folds of rusted metal, securing our spot over it all. Beneath us, the rest of the world fried on Nantasket Beach, everyone splayed out, their fluorescent towels like napkins, edging themselves up and down the shore with the tides.

You had smooth hands then, smoother than now, or maybe it was just the first time I thought of skin ever feeling like that. The first time I held your palm in my own I remember the shock of it, the whole way through. To my gut. And my throat. Rattling inside me like something alive, something just getting started.

Behind us, I could hear Johnny and Bingo shitting around on the court. Shooting with their eyes closed or something like that. That summer it was the us from way back when, when Johnny was the tallest kid we ever thought we'd see and Bingo could do pull-ups until the muscles in his back mountained and I was still the basketball kid that people thought would go places. I could hear the ball pulsing on the court behind us and with each bounce I knew exactly where it was, how high it would leap just from the

sound. That's how well I knew that court and those guys, but when I think back to that night all I can see is you.

These dimples you had, for example. When I remember that night I remember how you smiled at me, holding the smooth of your hand in my own: your cheeks cracked just so, slices of the sun dancing across your skin, your curls, sand-colored, flying wherever they wanted. It scared me to think of what I'd do again to see you like that, to see that smile and what it did to your face.

There are glimpses I get sometimes, when I see what I look like to the rest of the world. I got them a lot then, back when I was that kid who could be someone special, and they buoyed me up, inflated my bones. Like that night on the fence, with the tips of ourselves curled under the chainlink when you put a hand across your forehead, shielding yourself from the sun. I could see you looking at me, knowing that you would do things for me, too.

□

I have a roommate now, which is what you told me to do the last time you decided to pick up my phone call.

Get a *roommate*, you said. *Room-mate*, you said, like that. Like it was two, thick words that would stop my problems. Or at least stop me from trying to make my problems your problems. You hung up and what I heard was the echo from the other phone calls, the ones that ended with things like this: *Stop calling, Rick. This is what happens when someone leaves. When things fall apart, people stop calling. It's been months.*

I got myself a roommate that would make me feel better. I mined Craigslist for someone who would make me feel like less of a fuck-up and I found Tim. He stacks Budweiser in the fridge in pyramids, edging my gallon of milk and bagged sandwich bread to the outskirts.

He wears shirts that say things like THIS IS ME HUNGOVER.

Whines from his pornos snake through my bedroom wall and I think of college. Of waiting to fall asleep in a 10-by-10, undecorated dorm room that was coated in last weekend's spilt beer. Lying there on the top bunk, ignoring the tremors from down below and that eventual, haggard exhalation from a guy named Ralpho who gave himself pep talks in the bathroom mirror and liked to jackoff before bed. This is what's replaced you here. Doesn't that make you sad?

□

During nights, which are the hardest now, when I can't sleep I research basketball. I have a folder on my desktop I've called "Heartbreaking Departures," which is where it all goes.

Lebron. That was the first one. It's in the news now, splattered across the sports page. When you see basketball do you think of me?

He broke his hometown's heart. He quit on Cleveland, that's what they say in the papers, in the *New York Daily News*. He was their once-in-a-lifetime talent, a local boy. He had the city in his blood. Seven years and then he's gone. Seven years ago is when we graduated high school and you chose the school upstate to be near me.

This is the part I highlighted from sportswriter Terry Pluto: “Lebron caused unnecessary pain on a city that raised him.” I underlined it in a bright green Sharpie that bled through the page, staining the desk you bought me one birthday. I pinned it to the corkboard on the wall.

There are videos I found, too. Videos I watched and rewatched and downloaded and dragged to the folder: In Lakewood, Ohio, cops swarm on crowds of fans who hold crisp, red #23 jerseys and dangle matches beneath their hems. Flames swirl and wave from the fabric, crumpling on the pavement. One man arrested, forced facedown on a cop car with his hands behind his back.

“Another blow to the psyche,” said the sportscaster, shuffling his pages into a stack, thwacking them crisply on his desk. Calling it a wrap.

□

I’m into making lists now. It’s what I do at work when I’m waiting for assignments from the big guy, waiting to see which high school sports game to idolize. You know you’re the one that got me into writing? You’re the one that pulled me up after everything fell apart in college. *It’s still your life*, you said, and you made me love the words in the sports page.

Anyways, at work I make lists. If I don’t, I feel myself rattle: my finger pulsing against the mouse pad, my foot jingling, knocking the house keys together in my pocket. I have ticks now, so I make lists. Top three favorite moments we had. Moments I laughed the hardest. Moments *you* laughed the hardest (remember when you snorted Sprite out your nose at the movies? How we watched it spray the high school date in front of us?)

This is the best moment, I decided. And I wrote it out as slowly as I could on the top of one of my back issues of *The Hull Times*.

It's the summer after college and we tour the country in your old Subaru. We've seen the land split into canyons and unfold in desert and flourish in forest and spill out into the sea. We make our way home through the vacant, endless prairies of Montana and South Dakota. Subdued by the beige flatness of it all, we drive in one of those silences that have settled over us warmly and comfortably like water. You drive, drumming the wheel with your thumbs, and I lie with the side of my forehead against the window watching life outside, stripped of color, blur. I let myself sleep and it is your hand in my own, squeezing my fingers, that wakes me.

"Ricky look," you say. You rip up on the parking break and leave us facing a world of life-sized sandcastles. "Badlands."

The sun has drifted low in the sky, shedding its hazy pink crown at the horizon, spilling rosy light across these peaks of sand, a footprint of an earlier era.

You've leaned into me, your breath muggy at my ear. "I wanted you to see this with me," you say and then your lips are against my skin. You unclip your seat belt and climb onto me, circle me in your legs. You fiddle with my belt.

"Dina," I say between your lips.

"I want you," you say and as you sink into me, holding my face in your hands, the rose in the sky sinks lower, the pinks intensify, burn red, shadows stretch from the peaks into the prairies. You rise and fall with my breath and I want to feel every part of you with my hands.

There is a sharp rap against our back windshield. A muffled yell outside, and when I turn there is a security officer squinting in at us, looking through the window.

“Shit,” I say and I hear you giggle. I hear you rearrange yourself into the driver’s seat. You lean your head back and full out laugh, flipping down the emergency break you rev the gas. You’d never even turned the car off.

“Jesus,” I say, rebuttoning my pants, taking a breath, the world settling back around me. I sink into the seat and you reach out a hand. I feel you find my pulse. You smile, still.

“I wanted him to come.”

I squint at you in the dusk that has fallen around us. “What?”

“Your heart. It’s racing. I wanted you to be scared,” you say. “You know why? You remember things better that way. It’s about the adrenaline, or something. It’s a science.”

Your hand falls from my neck to my leg and it rests there, at ease, against me. You were right, you know. My heart was knocking through me, carving you to memory.

That is what I wrote in my cramped, all-caps on the newspaper and then I shuffled the old issue into my desk, beneath my ledger and my mileage tracker and I rubbed the sore, soft of my eyes with the butts of my hands until they stung.

□

Shaq’s also in there, number two in my folder of Heartbreaking Departures. Shaquille O’Neal. We used to watch his tapes—this is pre-college—all four of us (you, me, Johnny, Bingo) in Bingo’s basement, trying to get Johnny to see. *See* the game. Post-

up like that. Why can't you do *that*, we'd laugh, because we knew even though he was tall he was useless. You'd roll your eyes, losing them up behind your bangs, watching us watch the same clips over and over. But you'd curl against me, wriggle your hand up my sleeve, encircle my arm the way you liked, trace the muscle there.

Shaq caused some heartbreak, too. Last night, not even trying to sleep, I pulled up old *Orlando Sentinel* articles from '96. Copy, paste, drag to folder. He was the Magic's first round pick, you know that? They were his first team. They brought each other to the playoffs, to the brink, and what happens when he leaves? When he moves to LA? They watch it all slip away. They wander aimlessly for a decade. They watch him win nearly a full hand of championship rings.

And you know what he said? You know what he did? Looking in the camera, all primed and unblinking, "I really felt like a big fish in a small, dried-up pond," he said. "No matter what I did."

Do you know what you said? One of those times when we looked at each other until it hurt, until I used every word I knew, until I wrung them all out trying to get you to stay.

"No matter what you do," you said, "there's nothing you can do."

□

The last picture I have of you is one of those moments that you'd never even remember existed. But I had my phone out for some reason, shitting around, wasting time before work. You're eating toast, sitting at the table, pulling off the crusts the way you like, wearing that old Amherst shirt you look so good in even though it always smells like

hamper. You're just about to bring a piece to your mouth, I can tell that. There's a yearning in your lips, a spreading open, an eagerness for the taste. You're looking at me—looking through the camera *at me*, and that's what gets me.

That night all hell first broke loose, we lay in bed with the lights off because, I think, you were scared. I hugged a pillow to my chest and found myself chewing, stupidly, at the hem of its case. Beside me, you were only a silhouette.

"It's just, it's not working for me anymore," you said.

"What's not?" I pushed off sleep, yanked myself back to the real world. I was supposed to be up in four hours for a deadline. "Working?" I repeated. We'd never said that word and it felt heavy and ambiguous.

"I don't know. Something. This. Us. I don't really know how to say it." Even in the dark I knew what you were doing: twirling one of your curls around your finger, pulling it straight, twisting out the loose hairs, tossing them to the floor at the side of the bed. It was a bad habit of yours I stopped caring about years ago.

"I just," you paused and the weight in the bed shifted. "I just don't see you the same way." You let out your breath and it wavered before spreading out between us. "Something's happened."

That's how it started. You stopped *seeing* me some way, which is why I can't stop looking at this photo. The Last Photo. "The Last Photo." This one of you eating a piece of fucking toast and you're looking at me and I want to know, how the hell are you seeing me then?

I look at this photo at breakfast, and when I'm brushing my teeth, and when I'm trying to write a lede. Even when I'm driving, you're tucked into the dash by the speedometer. Tim walked into the kitchen last night while I ate dinner, sitting, staring at your eyes in that photo—blue and open, content.

“Dude,” he said, yanking open the fridge so loose yellow light slid into the room. “You gotta stop,” he said. “Look at you. Ughhhh,” he leaned back from the fridge. “Women.”

Fridge sound surrounded us and in that light Tim jutted his chin to the photo and we both looked at it again: your face, your bubbled-open mouth, the freshness of your eyes.

I looked up at Tim and he cracked open a beer, shoved the fridge closed with his foot.

“She's hot, don't get me wrong,” he said. “But, *Dude*.” He walked over, leaning in. The scent of his room emptied out of his pores: stale air, socks, jizz.

“Want me to take it?” He asked. “New inspiration?” He grabbed for his crotch in his sweatpants and before I even thought about it I turned on him, knocking back the kitchen table chair. I swung and just like that I punched someone for the first time in my life.

My knuckles burned. I watched Tim, his eyes widened but unblinking. He sipped from his Budweiser and I heard beer pool in his mouth. The can cracked beneath his hand and when he pulled it away a small trickle of blood snaked down his face from his nose.

Even in the pale darkness of the kitchen it was red and he just let it sit there. I imagined it starting to dry.

“You’re fucking crazy,” he said. Another sip and then he turned and wandered back to his room. “Bat shit.”

□

The folder keeps growing:

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, highest scorer in the history of the world, grows up and out of the Midwest. JABAR HOLDS BUCKS’ FUTURE IN ONE HAND, said the *Hartford Courant*. He deserts Milwaukee.

Wilt Chamberlain forces the ‘76ers to let him go in ‘68: he’d given up on Philly, he said, he needed LA.

Five years after Vince Carter shakily leaves Toronto, the fans still haven’t forgiven him. A Sunday night game, his first time back as a member of the Magic, they boo him. Every time he touches the ball.

Len Bias drugs himself to death in ‘86. He leaves the world as one of the best players never to play at the professional level.

□

I’ve started seeing you everywhere: the grocery store, the gym, that Cumbies on Nantasket Ave. It’s a smell sometimes that does it. This sharp, fake coconut that you used to bring with you out of the shower. Or, that bright pink t-shirt you liked to wear those mornings when you got up but never got out. Or, just an explosion of curls. It’s like I’m

wandering through life now collecting these pieces of you, trying to reassemble what I knew.

I think I remember every piece of you. Every single piece. That constellation of freckles, for example, that fanned across your right shoulder blade. I would hold you there with the soft of my palm tracing your design. I can't tell if I want to forget the or if I'm too scared to, if I need to see you everywhere for that reason: to remember that you happened to me.

And so I see you on the highway, flipping through radio stations on the way into the city. At that State Street parking garage. Picking out bras in that shop on Newbury, I sit at the Starbucks across the street, giving myself a brain freeze, quizzing myself while I watch you: what did your hands feel like? In mine or holding the small of my neck or pushing my back against the pillows. How did your neck curve when you laughed? What was the sound of your sneeze? I want all these things back and so I watch because if I didn't know—if I couldn't remember—I think I might just lose it.

And I've seen you with him, too.

□

Reggie Lewis, he's a big one in my folder. I was eleven when he dropped dead. It was summer, I remember, a thick, immobile July heat held us all and it was hell to bike home from basketball camp across town, even at six o'clock at night.

Dad had lost his job that summer, or it was the summer when he wasn't trying yet to put all his pieces back together. I would leave for camp and he'd be sitting there, watching the news or the sports channel on the living room TV, spread out in the arm

chair in just his boxers, eating things without utensils—cereal from the bowl, shelled peanuts, leftovers. He'd be sitting there when I came home, too, and it was like time was messing with you. Did a day go by or were you making it all up?

That day, I peeled off my jersey and my shorts, heavy with sweat, and left them on the clothesline out back. When I walked into the living room, he was sitting there, picking through a bag of Chex mix, disregarding the pretzels.

“Ricky,” he said. “Ricky you gotta see this,” and he jabbed at the TV with the clicker until Mike Lynch was practically screaming through the living room: *Lewis had been in the gym about an hour shooting baskets this afternoon when at around five he slumped to the floor...*

“He was at Brandeis, Ricky,” Dad mumbled.

You've gotta understand this about Reggie. He was going to be our savior. He was going to keep the Celtics going, keep us sane. We'd just let go of Bird last year, taking with him the Big Three, his countless MVP and NBA all-star titles and his three championships for Beantown. Bird was the closest thing I knew to God, but they told us Reggie would take away the pain. LEWIS READY TO EXPLOIT ANY CHANCE, they said, I remember that headline from *The Globe*.

Full cardiac arrest. No pulse. No respiration...

Dad and I froze there, both of us in our boxers. We watched fuzzy images of Brandeis' gym flash across the screen. That's where it happened, in Waltham, 35.5 miles from my house.

Dad let out a long, slow breath. His hand slumped in the mix bag, his mouth hanging open, eyes blank, head wavering slightly, side to side. It was his I-Give-Up look. His That's-It look. It's what he did instead of yelling. When I fucked up a buzzer shot, for example, or when any of his girlfriends threw in the towel and kicked themselves out of the house.

You know I never thought I looked like Dad until this newspaper photo in college I saw of the team after we won the region in March Madness. This was post knee, so in the photo the bench has already exploded onto the floor to hug Frosty and the rest of the guys who've just played their asses off and really creamed Baylor, and there I am easing myself off the bench, all in my warm-ups that would never come off again, and I've got that look: open mouth, vacant eyes, watching my team move on without me. It scares you when you look like someone you never wanted to be.

Anyways, the article I can't stop reading, the one I dragged to the desktop with the others, is from August 3rd, 1993: ALL OF BOSTON SAYS GOODBYE TO LEWIS.

The crowd moved by the thousands, they said, and the part I can't stop reading: "They had grown to identify with him for reasons that transcended athletic skill and professional achievement. Men and women carried flowers. Children held signs... They gathered to celebrate the things Lewis had done and grieve for what there was no time left to do."

□

I know you've moved in with him, haven't you? How can you already have moved in with someone? From the corner bench at the park I saw the unloading truck and

watched things that had felt at home at my place ease down the gangplank and into his: your desk and dresser, that earring rack, the floor lamp from your grandmother's.

I sat there watching until the truck was purged and the outline of you, I saw, shuffled through your wallet. I imagined the crisp twenties you must have just gotten from the ATM. I felt you press them into the mover's hand.

I sat until the sunset came and went, bringing color and then taking it all away, leaving me and this new street of yours in soupy shadows. Something about the darkness, I didn't feel like me anymore, and when I walked towards this house—towards you and him, I wasn't even really thinking, nothing made sense except how hurt I was, this raw, physical sore in my gut.

I don't even know what it was I grabbed: a hoe maybe from your new garden out front, or maybe just a piece of wood. A baseball bat? But his glossy SUV was there in the driveway and when I brought this *thing* down across the dash it felt just the way I thought it would. Relief. A splintering, I knew, even in the dark.

I ran home and it was the first time I've run in months. I almost couldn't feel it, that imbalance in my knee, that tightening in my whole left side. It felt good, I felt almost human, almost like you'd never know that I've had the ligaments of three dead men in my knee, trying to put me all back together.

At home there was a message from you, a you I'd never heard before. Shaky and withered.

“I *loved* you, you said,” whispering almost. “Why are you doing this to me?”

Which is funny, really, because that's what I've been saying all along.

□

It was actually Johnny's little brother Phil who brought over the paperwork—he became a cop right after high school mostly, we think, because he always wanted to hold a gun and he was sick of being that little, zitty kid. So it was Friday morning before work when he came and rang the doorbell and when I looked through the peephole there he was, standing on my doorstep, rubbing his hands together, warming himself against the unfriendly chill of late November. The wind that rolls itself off the ocean this time of year is brutal, it really will cut right through you and make you feel your lungs and your bones and how fragile you are.

Phil rang the doorbell twice and when I opened it I could see in his eyes just how superior he thought he was: *This is the kid I wanted to be?* I saw him thinking. *This is the kid we thought was going places?*

I cleared my throat just so he'd stop looking at me like that, which was when he pulled the letter out.

“We usually call folks in for something like this, Ricky, but, you know...” he paused and we were probably both thinking about those summers Johnny and I cut lawns together, or the Monday-night-meatloaf I shared at their house when my dad kicked me out for his date nights. There are a lot of memories like that he could be thinking of. I swallowed.

“What is it, Phil?”

“Dina filed a petition last night. We’ve given her a temporary restraining order,” he unfolded the paper and lay it in my hands where it hovered above, almost, wavering bird-like in my palms. All I looked at was your name, Dina Clew.

“What’s going on, Ricky? You need to talk to someone?” He scratched at the cop cap, flicking at the shininess of the badge. He laughed almost. “I couldn’t believe it when the guys told me. Dina Clew. Ricky Baker. Are you serious? I thought you two were gonna make it. Gonna go all the way.”

Phil’s eyes were wide then and in the sharp, morning sun you could still see the pocks from high school, the crater wounds from ancient zits. Looking at those was the only way to get through.

I folded up the paper and slipped it in my pants. I reached for his hand and shook, hard, just so we both stopped talking.

“Well, I’ve got work, Phil. But thanks. Thanks for coming in person. That means a lot.”

He nodded.

“You’ve got a hearing in ten days,” he added, stepping away. “You’ll work this out.”

When I got to work, I had a meeting with the big guy, as I’d expected. When you work at a paper their eyes and ears are everywhere. On the drive in, the letter hot in my back pocket, I imagined Angela—peppy, just out of undergrad, our new police beat reporter—scouring the police log, squeaking when she saw my name. Jesus.

In his office I sat in the most miserably uncomfortable chair and stared at his wife and aging bichon frise, who beamed back at me through the picture frame on his desk. He pushed a print-out of this log across to me and I faced the coarse, black hairs sprouting out of his fingers.

“Do we need to talk about this, Ricky?”

I shook my head. “I’ve got it,” I said, and then again because I couldn’t for the life of me figure out if the first time was out loud or just rattling around inside.

“Get it together, Ricky. We need you.”

I nodded and rubbed at the soreness of my eyes, digging my fingers through the greasy creases of my hair. He came around and I heard him open the door. He capped a manly, Pull-Your-Shit-Together hand to my shoulder and I rested a minute under the warmth of his palm. How long has it been since I’ve been touched by someone?

“You can do it, son,” he said and that was my cue to pick up my balls and get back to work.

□

I felt those ten days burning on me, slipping away. You feel like shit when you think about your life like that, and so at home I tried to patch things over with Tim. I bought him an icepack at Target—Corona-themed, which I knew he appreciated. He pressed it to his face while he played videogames in the living room—your old studio—and the skin there, beneath his eye, on the crooked bridge of his nose, slowly returned to skin color.

I let him let his belongings seep throughout the house—his own toothbrush holder, a second TV in the den, his shoes puddling by the door. I'm trying here.

□

Night 9. Night 8. Night 7. Nothing helped with the sleep. I wanted my life back together by Day 0, this court date where I'd be there and you'd be there and you'd be looking at me—really looking at me—without me even asking. I couldn't sleep thinking about this and so the folder on my desktop grew thick, electronically buldging, with these stories that made my athlete's heart swell and clutch. I watched a YouTube video of a four-year-old blonde girl, balling when Kevin Garnett left the Timberwolves.

And now it's tonight and I can't keep them anymore, keep looking at them—it's too much—and so I select all and press enter and then print. My Epson shoots out newspaper articles and outdated sports photos and I gather them in a folder for real this time and with that same green Sharpie I scrawl: *Heartbreaking Departures*. I want to give this to you, I want you to know what I'm thinking and so I don't unfold the letter in my pocket, I don't reread what it is I'm not supposed to do. I slip on my coat.

Outside the air is tight and thin with storm. Moonlight washes across me and this neighborhood I've known my whole life and I walk to where he lives, a path I've gotten to know by heart. All I want is to give you this. To make you read it. Don't you want to know?

At his house, the SUV is sitting there with a spread-open trash bag duct-taped across the windshield. I walk to the car and touch the fractured glass that is sharp, still, beneath the drape. I draw my fingers across the cavern where glass should be and break

off a cracked shard, ripping it through the plastic. I squeeze it in my hand and it feels good to see myself bleed. I walk up the front steps.

Music is playing inside, I hear its shadows slipping out into the night beneath the door and through the foggy glass window I see you and him moving in the kitchen.

□

The final story that I added to the folder last night was my own. What the hell, that one was in the papers too, right? There's even that clip on the Internet of that last game I ever played, February 12, 2004: sleet iced the roads; snow heaped outside the doors of the gym; people came just to be around other people, to stay warm; you were there, visiting for the weekend.

We played Wake Forest and in that clip, there I am, young, lithe, muscular, athletic, everything I ever wanted to be. Mel Clippis, Wake Forest's young gun at the time (he rides the bench now for the Lakers but you can feel his day coming) dribbled at the top of the key and I remember feeling that ball become mine before it did: adopting its rhythm, feeling its heartbeat against the floor. I reached it with the tips of my fingers and before anyone knew what was happening, I had him on a straightaway down the court. I had everyone and then I was in the air, my fingers curled around the rim, pulling myself up, feeling my arms bulge, watching the ball slink through the net. Every time I see that clip I feel those things—my arm, that sweet net sound, a collective holding of breath throughout the gym—but not as precisely as what follows. How small a correction of the legs would I have needed? How flat should my feet have been to make this next part never happen?

But I come down and my left ankle is crooked somehow and that's all it took. A tweaking. A random, intense lash of pressure and it was torn for the third time. The doctors tried to make me feel better, they said it would have happened at some point no matter what. If not then, another time. My knee was shot. It couldn't take the pressure anymore—that was it. But it was then, that's when it happened, when I had to let go. In the last seconds of the video I writhe on the floor as the bench spills around me.

That night, after the game and the doctors and the celebratory fervor (we killed Wake Forest, we didn't even need me, we made the Sweet 16) you sat with me in the bleachers, watching the janitors clean away the night. You held me, curling your small arms around my shoulders, pulling me and my sweat and my damage against you, into the swell of your hair. You held me. You let me shake. We sat there until the lights went off and as my knee throbbed you held your hand there with an icepack. You let go with me. You got me to become someone else.

BAKER'S NBA DREAMS SHATTERED: my biggest headline in *The Globe*. In the photo I'm lying on the floor beside the bench, the doctors flutter around. Blurred faces in the crowd curtain me in, I've always known you're there somewhere, looking out, watching me, but it seems foolish now to try to find you in the pixelated masses.

□

When I walk back from you and him in that house, the storm has broken and become violent. Trees lash against their neighbors. Echoes from the ocean swell accompany the bruised clouds that drool through the sky. The world is angry and I am

dripping, seeping and exhausted. I can't get dry, I can't get clean of this and I am beyond trying.

In my apartment, the lights are off and I don't bother turning them on. I sit in the kitchen waiting for something or someone. Waiting for the change to come. As I sit, shards of car light shoot through the kitchen highlighting my face and my hands. Tim's Ford Explorer rattles into the driveway.

I wait for him to come in, for him to see me, and I think about what wasn't in that newspaper article. About that pulsing moment of letting go, of giving up everything, of moving on. Everything felt different then: my name, my hands, my feet, the way I breathed, the way I thought. I was emptied.

There is the jangling of keys and then Tim walks in, flipping on the light, bathing me in inspection.

"Jesus Christ, man," Tim says, letting down on the counter a paper bag heavy with groceries. "You look like shit. You're literally dripping."

Tim takes off his own raincoat and pools of water spill from the nylon.

"Fuck you, Tim," I say, but I take the towel he hands me, I rub away the cold, wet weather on my hands. I burry my face and hear the paper bag crackle as Tim empties its contents into the fridge.

In the darkness of my palms, I watch you again the way I watched you through that foggy glass of your new front door: the two of you in the kitchen, you leaned against him, opened your mail and flipped through catalogs as you lay against his chest. Your

body rested, content and safe. You are happy, and the simplicity of this, the frankness of it stilled me.

On the porch I took in what felt like the first full breath I'd had for months: in and in and in until I felt it in my fingers and then I unfurled my folder into the night. I watched the papers and the printed photos and the underlined passages leap, tangle themselves in the wind: white against black sky. I watched this and there, so present, was the moment from years ago. A frozen slice of time captured in an MRI: ghostly shards of ligament, specs of what had become just dust. An emptied space, waiting to be put back together.

“Leftover pizza for dinner?” Tim says now in the kitchen, and, with the chill in my clothes fading, I let go and nod.