

ISOLATION TO SOLITUDE

by

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A Thesis  
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of  
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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Fine Arts at George Mason University

by

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Bachelor of Arts  
Virginia Commonwealth University, 2021

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Fairfax, VA

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## **DEDICATION**

This is dedicated to my incredibly kind and loving family who have supported me through the best and worst of times.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

ISOLATION TO SOLITUDE

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George Mason University, 2021

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This thesis is a collection of personal essays that explores the relationship between isolation and solitude and the connections we made in the in between. It chronicles the narrator's struggles with addiction, her journey into and through sobriety, and her experiences of finding a way to both accept and give love.

## A RELATIONSHIP WITH ELIZABETH BISHOP

The poetry professor I'd loathed for overusing the word *bucolic* was finally shifting gears. Expecting to read more impossibly monotonous pastoral sonnets—iambic pentameter and a generic depiction of 17<sup>th</sup> century love causing my head to nod until I fell asleep—I was pleasantly surprised when said professor shifted gears. “She was a terrible alcoholic and suffered gravely with depression throughout her life.” I lifted my head from the notes I'd been scrawling for an upcoming project in another class.

I had returned to university to complete my degree after a four-year drug and alcohol binge fueled, in part, by severe need to medicate the Bipolar depression I'd been attempting to medicate with a low and infrequent dosing of Prozac. The pills prescribed by a physician in an urgent care clinic who had made no eye contact with me and seemingly only heard that I had been prescribed the medication previously and gone off it. I was in the urgent care for an infected cut across my wrist—a wound that was shadowed by some purple and white scars that had healed long ago or very recently. I told the physician I'd cut myself in the kitchen at the restaurant I worked at and he didn't question me further. I asked for Percocet for the pain and he declined. I smelled like booze from the night before.

At 27, a year and a half clean and sober, and distanced from the cloud of manic depression, I immediately felt a kinship with Bishop. The poetry professor's brief



biographical context touched on the loss in her life; the death of her long-time lesbian partner; her friendship with Robert Lowell—his work often fueled by manic episodes and hers fueled in spite of them. We read *One Art*; rather we listened to Bishop's reading of *One Art*. The recording was terrible and her voice shook, not in a nervous way, but in a way that sounded like she'd been carrying a lot of unimaginable pain for too long. She sounded tired. I was captivated by her. *The art of losing isn't hard to master*; I thought *Amen*.

I wrote a poem—a villanelle in an ode to Bishop—about the unconscionably gross sound that a lie makes. The refrain of the poem repeats with each stanza, imploring the reader to recognize *A lie, when spoken, is a terrible sound*. And resolves with a notion that *The truth. Harder to be found*. I recently revisited the poem. Now, several years removed from writing it and having gained life experiences—the most recent of which felt as though I'd been carrying an unimaginable but very real pain for far too long—I cringed. I berated myself for not being a poet, acknowledging that this had been my first attempt in a complex medium that I wouldn't begin to understand until befriending poets in my MFA program, and finally forgiving myself for an attempt that, while falling short of an obscure literary expectation I've put on it, was not a terrible attempt by a 27 year old with limited experience actually telling the truth or writing poetry.

*One Art* began more as a journal entry with no rigid form or structure to adhere to but, instead, a willingness of a poet whose work I have often found distant to be heartbreakingly intimate. The intimacy of the first of 16 drafts comes from, I imagine, a

lack of needing to be anything other than a vulnerable and invisible idea. I relate to Bishop's recognition of self destruction. She is reticent in later drafts--hesitant to allow herself to be identified. But in the early drafts she is fully present. The second line of *One Art* was *so many things seem really to be meant to be lost*. This line remained constant through fifteen drafts until Bishop called in to her editor and made an adjustment at the last minute. *{S}o many things seem filled with the intent/ to be lost that their loss is no disaster* brings into play a subtle syntactic change. *Intent* when coupled with *loss* is something I never expected to relate to but when I saw the pairing, I felt a new understanding of the cycles of my own past behavior.

The poetry professor elaborated on the circumstances behind *One Art*. He said it might have been the greatest love poem ever written. The girl I sat next to, who had a septum piercing, tattoos, and wrote poetry assignments that were intimidating due to an elaborate vocabulary I could barely understand, scoffed. "It's about loss and it's devastating," she said. "It's about loving someone so much—in such an unbelievable way you never imagined to be possible—that you need to write it down in order to make it real again," the professor responded. He explained Bishop's relationship to an enigmatic and animated Brazilian architect. She sounded so full of life and I daydreamed and wondered if perhaps she'd loved so intensely that it had taken its toll and she'd simply burned out. In reading Bishop's villanelle, I began to think that perhaps she'd loved a person incapable of loving her with the same intensity and that's what killed her.

A year before I got sober, I was living in Richmond, Virginia. I'd been there for years—first starting university to study theatre performance with enthusiasm and hope. I'd left before my final semester to drink. I was entirely lost and felt a debilitating aloneness.

A girl named Megan reached out to me with a picture of a class trip to Italy I'd almost forgotten about. Teenage crushes and drunken Limoncello kisses on the cheek. I sat on my dingy apartment floor and drafted stories for her about how well I was doing since high school and what an amazing, happy life I had. I told her I was painting and performing and constantly surrounded by creative and stimulating characters. She admitted that she had found me attractive when we were in high school. I thought about it and I decided that I had found her attractive too. I didn't take much convincing. She was kind and she liked me. Over the span of several months, I made the idea of her good enough to love.

I wanted to love so badly that anyone would have done. I thought about Megan all the time. I had found love in the seedy Richmond streets. I had found substance—heroin and casual sex with some kind, and some not so kind, strangers. I wanted love from a person, but junkies are hard to love. I was an addict amidst other addicts. Not a great combination for a meaningful relationship.

Megan was an idea that I had created who lived a hundred miles north and went to work and fed her cat, a chubby blue-eyed tabby named Teddy, on a regular basis. I developed an ideal person—kind and pretty, but not classically beautiful. I needed to put a face to her. Megan's face fit the mold. She was strange. She joked about wanting to be

an ornithologist, if only to study why ducks had corkscrew shaped penises. She went to farmer's markets on the weekends and sent me pictures of rhubarb and artisanal sausages that she said tasted like artisanal Slim Jims. She knew who Lidia Yuknavitch was and I loved that about her. I loved the idea of going to the farmer's market with her and gawking at all the yuppies fighting over organic kale. I loved the idea of her, but I loved heroin, cocaine and alcohol more. I hoped that would eventually change. I somewhat believed that at some point I would be able to stop using, or at least not use as much; I wanted to be a recreational junkie—someone who could hold down a job at a desk, make an appearance at happy hour, and then relax with a small line of heroin, just to take the edge of the day off.

I wasn't always into heroin, it just kind of happened. I wish I had a better explanation. I don't know anyone who thought to themselves, *I think shooting dope would be a really good idea*. I certainly didn't think that way. My first true love was alcohol. Alcohol held my hand at dinner parties filled with friends who were growing up faster than I was. Alcohol validated my terrible ideas and told me I was smart, and beautiful, and funny, and just as good as the friends who were starting to drift away. I hated dinner parties. I still do, to some extent. They've left a lasting trauma of sorts. I hated listening to my friends discuss their post college graduation jobs. Jobs in project management, and product management, and xyz management. I was in bar management.

Most social gatherings eventually found me hunkering down by the liquor cabinet. I was never able to keep a liquor cabinet of my own. The Jameson was always gone the day it was bought from the store or stolen from the restaurant where I was

desperately clinging to a job. But dinner parties were my opportunity to show off my proud bartending skill and my blossoming long-term relationship with booze. Eventually I started to bring my muddler and a corkscrew I'd stolen from work. I'd mix Sazeracs and Manhattans and all of a sudden, I wouldn't care that everyone else was getting married and starting families and meeting their career goals and buying homes and oh, how they were dressed so nicely in clothes that hadn't been found and settled on at the Goodwill! The hosts were often appreciative of my bartending abilities. I was free labor for them.

I came up at Christmas to see Megan. I hadn't been home to see my family in years but I returned to Northern Virginia to see her because she'd been living in an apartment relatively close to my parents' home. I didn't want my parents to see me and they were often happy to oblige. They knew I wasn't doing well, and it was easier to look away than stare into my sunken, bloodshot and yellowing eyes. It was easier to listen to me lie to them over the phone. Lies in person are so much harder to ignore; so are track marks and nose bleeds. Christmas eve felt forced and hollow. Lights and meaningless gifts. I had only asked for money to help pay my rent. The plan was to pay the tab at the bar where I'd left most of my dignity. My parents had given me prepaid gift cards on Christmas Eve. I wondered if Amazon sold liquor. I wondered if any of the bars would be open on Christmas.

I'd driven the two hours north, under the guise of seeing my family. I think part of me thought I would actually show up and be the daughter they were hoping for. I really came for Megan. I came for the cup of hot chocolate and the prospect of sleeping in the

twin bed of her childhood bedroom. I imagined creaking bedsprings and secret cigarettes after she was asleep. Yellow fingers and ashy clothes.

I stood at the door of the big chain coffee shop—a Starbucks or something like it. It was in a strip mall that I had trouble finding because it was surrounded by other strip malls and all of them had a fucking coffee shop. She was early. She sat sipping hot tea. I watched her through a snowflake decal, building the courage to walk through the door. I readied myself to walk away until I remembered the two airplane bottles of bourbon I'd stuffed in my coat pocket. It was one o'clock in the afternoon. I mustered my liquid courage and walked in.

In my sheepish phone call to her a couple days prior, I'd promised her the longest hug. She'd said she would accept it. I hugged her briefly. My body was rigid and unaccommodating. I was worried that I would make her uncomfortable. I was worried that I wouldn't be able to let go—that I would fall apart and make a mess in public. I bought a hot chocolate that I never drank. She told me that her uncle looked like Bill Murray. Then she said she thought Bill Murray looked like a homeless person with really nice shoes. I told her I met Bill Murray in Charleston once and he did, in fact, look like a homeless person with really nice shoes.

A polite gift exchange followed. I painted for her. I thought about how grateful I was to have gone to art school. "Art" school. I'd dropped out, but she didn't need to know that. She made me a box of fudge. The box said, *Sexy Sarah*. She writes in all capital letters. She was thoughtful. I was frantic.

She told me she needed to go. She needed to spend time with her family. Our meeting was over. I got into my car and drove two hours back to Richmond. My parents called me while I was on the road and I told them I wanted to beat the traffic on I-95. It was Christmas Eve and all I wanted to do was get back to my home. I ate Christmas dinner alone. The Indian place down the street from my apartment delivered.

When I read Bishop's poem, I felt a kinship with her, with her lover. I felt a connection to the alcoholic and the manic depressive. I felt a connection to the want to be loved and the inability to show or accept that love.

It is the final stanza that strikes me every single time I read the poem:

*—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture  
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident  
the art of losing's not too hard to master  
though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster.*

It is one of the few times in Bishop's poetry that she feels so close to the reader—a reader she directly addresses. It is the very personal from a woman who so often wrote from a distance. She loves more than the *joking voice*, but perhaps the gesture of writing that specific was easier than the combined simplicity and enormity of acknowledging love for the whole person.

In the final line, she implores herself to "*Write it!*" Bishop's voice breaks slightly as she reads these words in the recording. Yet she is forceful, commanding, even angry. She addresses the woman she loves as best she can and implores herself to be honest and tell the truth. *The art of losing...is disaster.*

## ALEXANDER

Ten more minutes. That's what Alexander always says when things are hard or scary or sad. He says it when things are easy or exciting or joyous too. Ten more minutes seems a bearable length of time in unbearable moments, and a valuable extension in moments you never want to end.

The first time he said it was after Luke died. The memorial had taken place on an early September evening, even though Luke had done it in July. They had organized it to take place after school so everyone who wanted to could attend. Football practice was cancelled so all of Luke's teammates could go. Alexander said he wouldn't go to the service. He said he didn't need to go to a church of a religion Luke hadn't believed in just to look at his football jersey--signed by the teammates he'd despised--set up at the center of a shrine that ignored what he'd done. He didn't need that to remember him. I said it wouldn't be like that. But it was almost exactly like that.

Luke's brother and sister had greeted everyone and said a few words of thanks. His parents were conspicuously absent except for a small cold note in the service program thanking everyone for their prayers. The family had moved to a Virginia suburb just outside of Washington after Luke's father had been elected to congress. Luke's father had taken his youngest son's body home to Kansas to be buried and I'm not sure he or his wife ever came back to Virginia. Alexander said he'd heard they'd left the house untouched: a macabre time capsule.



I drove the back roads from the memorial to Alexander's house. I passed the town cemetery on the way. Black trees framed it and its lights formed hundreds of tiny halos. Luke wasn't buried there, but I held my breath as I passed it out of respect for him, a childhood superstition reminding me that it wasn't polite to breathe when others couldn't. The road curved and the cemetery never seemed to end. A light rain tapped a soft song on my windshield, the wipers squeaking out the melody. A large thud jolted the song to a close and I caught a glimpse of wings as the wipers dragged them downward. I yelped. Partly out of surprise and partly out of a new superstition I formed instantly--that hitting a bat near a cemetery must be a terrible omen. The creature was trapped. I'd kidnapped it unintentionally. I could see it still struggling to escape, but it was a futile effort.

The ride ended. I pulled up outside of Alexander's house. He was sitting on the curb despite the drizzle. Pouring out of my car, I couldn't speak, only point at the hood of the car and he got up to investigate. Its body was limp and lifeless. He used a handkerchief and gently gathered it. His hands looked so big then.

"Should we bury it?" he asked, and I began to cry. The day hit me at full force. It was unforgiving, and I cried harder. Alexander walked to the large oak tree that protected his house. He knelt in the dirt and begun to dig a small grave with his hands. He buried the bat in his makeshift shroud and stood up next to me as we looked at the grave, pushing a lock of his ginger hair out of his eyes. I was still crying, but quieter now.

"Do you think it will always feel like this?" I had never felt grief like that and didn't know what it was.

"No."

“Do you feel it too?”

“Yes.”

“How much longer do you think it will last?”

“Ten more minutes, maybe?” He grinned a little.

Tears turned to a laugh. An unexpected and involuntary and completely inappropriate belly laugh. We never talked about Luke’s death after that.

Alexander said he wanted to move because he might find himself. I told him he didn’t have to move to do that, but he was adamant. He said San Francisco didn’t quite feel far enough but it looked like it had more going on than Richmond did, so it would do for the time being.

We had migrated apart for college and then back together after both of us left just shy of our degrees. He studied philosophy. He’d read thick books, written long papers, debated obscure theory, and never gone to class. I studied theatre. I’d read trite plays, rehearsed rambling monologues, drank strong whiskey, and gone to class hungover.

Richmond was an easy choice for us. I was already settled there, and Alexander wasn’t settled anywhere so it made sense. The rent was cheap, and the apartment was falling apart but, we didn’t really care that much.

One day I stood near the fridge and realized that the floorboards felt soft around it, like they were going to give out at any minute. I asked Alexander to inspect it and he

said the floor felt like our downstairs neighbors were going to inherit our fridge soon.

“Should we call someone?” I asked him.

He shrugged. “We could. Or we could not call someone and see what happens. It might end up being a better story that way.” We never called anyone, instead opting to walk gingerly around the soft spot on the floor. Sitting at the small dining room table, we would take bets on when the floor would give out and then stare at the fridge as if willing it to fall. “I know it’ll happen. Just give it ten more minutes.” It never did, but it made for a good game.

The prospect of the fridge falling through the floor was all we had, though. I worked a dead-end bartending job and drank too much. Alexander would work random low-level jobs until he lost interest in one and moved on to the next. I had started to think that maybe the restaurant scene was perfect for me. I would go to work at four o’clock in the afternoon, after nursing the hangover from the night before. Pouring drinks for people who drank like I did and nursing a bottomless mug of coffee with Irish whiskey and crème liqueur, didn’t seem too terrible an existence. And I was good at it.

A master bullshitter and professional enabler, I would make hundreds in a night and spend half at the bar before I got home. But everyone was doing it. And something, someday would pop up and I would be able to grow up like I had been watching my college friends doing.

I told Alexander I thought maybe I could manage a restaurant one day. “Managers make good money. The hours are good. I’ll have plenty of time to find a cure for AIDS and find a solution for world peace,” I said.

“Maybe both in the same day,” he smirked.

I ignored him and continued, “I could get a little apartment with a dog and be comfortable. It could be a pretty respectable job.” He looked at me and furrowed his brow with a look that bordered on disdain when he realized I was serious. He stared at me for an uncomfortable amount of time and walked away into his bedroom. He had told me before that he didn’t understand why I was wasting my time in restaurants. He said I only worked there to survive and that he knew there was so much more I could do; he just didn’t know why I didn’t see that.

“Who the fuck are you? What the fuck have *you* ever done? What makes you so much fucking better than me?”

“Nothing.”

“Then what?”

“I’m just sad.”

He wouldn’t look at me and I knew he wasn’t sad. He felt sorry for me, and that was much much worse.

He moved to Oakland that year. His uncle had lined up a job for him at a bank approving loans. The job had a salary and sounded important and boring. When he packed away all of his books in cardboard boxes I’d gotten from behind the liquor store, I knew he meant to stay away for a long time. The years we had spent apart in college hadn’t felt like this. It felt like he was going to be moving to another world with a language I didn’t know. Alexander was growing up and so was everyone else around me. I could feel Alexander growing tired of watching and listening to me complain about how

stagnant I felt. He asked less and less how my job was going. I felt my best friend flying away. I told him I felt like I was drowning and he told me to keep holding my breath and kick like hell for the surface.

Alexander left me with a copy of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (his favorite book), his small marijuana stash, and a contact for a friend he'd gone to college with who was moving to Richmond. So Alexander was out and Steven was in.

Steven worked on a farm outside the city. He was sweet and likeable, and I saw why Alexander thought we would get along. He would leave for work in the early morning and be home mid-afternoon. He drank like I did which was a bond that seemed unbreakable at the time. He kept a vial of cocaine in the medicine cabinet and labeled it *Hangover Cure* and told me it was fair game. He kept a bottle of OxyContin by his bed and labeled it *Life Cure* and said it was for special occasions.

Alexander would call every week. Always on Fridays. Always at the same time. Our early conversations consisted of me showering him with questions about what he was doing and who he was meeting. I wanted to be anywhere but Richmond, so his stories felt like a good escape. He told me about his house and that he had discovered dim sum and farmer's markets and that Californians didn't understand sarcasm but were fluent in passive aggression. I asked about his roommates and he told me they were working from home for a new startup company. He translated that he thought *startup* was Californian for *unemployed*.

He liked his new job. It did have a salary and it was important and boring. I liked to listen to him talk about it even though I didn't understand half of what he said. He met a girl and I liked to hear him talk about her too. He said she was kind and beautiful and, while she didn't seem to get his jokes, she tried and that seemed good enough. Listening to him be happy was wonderful and heartbreaking all at once.

Alexander always called on time. At first it was easy for me to pick up. When he asked about me I would tell him about the job I still had at the bar. I would tell him the same stories about how so and so got so drunk and acted like an asshole. The cast was different, but the story was always the same. I would tell him about Steven and how happy I was to have another roommate who got me. I told him about the dopey German Shepherd I'd adopted and named Hank because human names are always funnier on animals. I tried to grow up by buying things I thought grown ups bought and I told him about that too. Alexander would ask if I was writing or painting or playing music. I would lie and say I was doing all of those things, or that I would be doing all of those things once life got a little less busy. He never asked to see the evidence, so they felt like easy lies to get away with.

A few months later I started to miss some of his calls. I didn't like the part of the conversations where we talked about me. I hated telling him the same stories and the same lies. I hated that I couldn't tell him that alcohol wasn't a novelty anymore, but a necessity. I hated that I couldn't drink enough to feel normal. I hated that I needed cocaine every morning and Oxy every night. I hated Steven for shooting me up the first time. And I hated that I didn't trust anyone else to do it. Steven started to hint that it was

getting a little expensive and that maybe we should slow down. But I hated feeling sick and I hated feeling sober even more. So I switched to heroin.

Alexander said he didn't like the person he heard on the phone sometimes. After he said that I figured it might be easier to miss all of his calls. But he left messages for every single missed call and I listened to them. He told me come see him in California.

"I promise you, just ten more minutes and you'll be glad we did this," he said.

"I promise you that's not true," I panted back. Ten paces behind and I could see the sweat dripping down the back of his shirt. Both of us were covered in sweat and a film of dust that seemed like it would stay there forever. I truly hated him.

Earlier that morning Alexander had practically force fed me granola and some herbal tea he'd procured from a Berkeley farmer's market. I'd told him all I wanted was coffee and cigarettes, but he said there certainly weren't any antioxidants in those. "You don't have a track record for making great decisions at the moment, so I'm going to start making some for you. Eat. Drink. Shut up." I didn't have the strength to fight him, or anyone for that matter.

I had been up all night shaking, sweating, cursing and, at one point, begging him to kill me. He had sat next to the bed calmly reading *The New Yorker* to me, keeping a mason jar full of water for me and occasionally fetching a damp cloth to dampen my forehead. I don't remember falling asleep, but I awoke to him gently nudging me to get up so he could change the sheets I'd sweat through. The nest he'd made on the floor for

himself was now a neatly folded pile on the couch. Everything he did was purposeful, calm and quiet. And I truly loved him.

After breakfast, half of which I'd managed to keep down, he'd dragged me out to his old Toyota sedan. The sun felt like it was personally attacking me. He'd let me curl up in the back seat with a water bottle and backpacks for pillows. I remember glimpses of the bay as we crossed both the Bay Bridge and Golden Gate. "You keep acting up and we'll send you to Alcatraz," he'd joked pointing into the fog at the shadow of an island.

It was my own fault for telling him that I'd always wanted to see the redwood trees in Muir Woods. I should have been more specific: *I have always wanted to see the redwood trees in Muir Woods, except when detoxing from hard drugs.* But there I was, and there he was, ten paces ahead. He carried both backpacks which I was grateful for. My eyes stung with sweat and dirt. I thought my body would give out at any minute and I would die there. The ancient trees, immense and powerful, listened and accompanied Alexander as he told me stories about John Muir, some which were true and some I'm sure he made up.

The trail opened up and the trees cleared. We climbed further through chaparral and scrub. Alexander pointed out azaleas. When he stopped, I worried that something might be wrong. But he just stared back at me and said, "I told you it would be worth it." San Francisco Bay sat in front of us, but it felt like I could see the whole world. I felt minute, insignificant and wonderful.



Thoughtfully and carefully, he made a sandwich and handed me half. I hadn't felt like eating in days and was happy and surprised to be hungry. We ate in silence together until he finished his half and I could feel him watching me.

"Why are you doing that stuff?" He hadn't ever asked me directly.

"I guess I kind of hate myself."

"Before the drugs or because of them?"

"Both."

"Well you have to stop now. You have to stop now, or you will die."

There was no way I could deny that he was right.

"I'm glad I got to see the redwoods."

"Me too."

Alexander saved me that summer. I returned to Richmond with an honest and strong desire to stay clean. I had been given a taste of what it was like to actually live again and I really didn't want to fuck it up. Everything was so defined. I realized I hadn't felt anything sober in such a long time and my emotions had become foreign to me. Happiness and excitement were just as intense as anger and sadness and all were terrifying. I was holding on with white knuckles. It felt like life was moving at lightening speed and I was riding a bike with flat tires, trying to keep up. I thought life was supposed to be easier sober. I thought I would be able to think clearly and the voice in my head that constantly fed me thoughts of guilt and shame and inadequacy would stop.

Drugs and alcohol had muted it, and without them the voice grew to a roar. I was greeted with the harsh reality that with sobriety come the expectations and responsibilities of life. I couldn't just nod out and forget about the lies I had told and the bills I hadn't paid and the phone calls I hadn't returned. All of a sudden, I had to tell the truth and pay the bills and answer the phone. And all of a sudden, I realized why the drinks and the drugs had been so appealing.

When Luke died, none of us understood it. He was the likeable high school football star and object of many a high school crush. He had worked all summer rebuilding a '67 Mustang. The car barely ran and it smelled like sweat and mothballs, but the radio worked and he was happy just to have it. I'd seen him almost every day that summer. He would tear into the parking lot of the neighborhood pool I lifeguarded at every afternoon after football practice. The car roared so loud you could hear it blocks away and up close it was near deafening. Three or four sweaty teammates and a dozen or so empty beer cans would tumble out of the car and into the parking lot with Luke and the boys would make their way to the deck chairs. Some of the parents shook their heads with disdain and others chuckled with nostalgia.

I would close the pool down at night with the other lifeguards and the boys would lag behind. They'd flirt with us and ask to bring beer into the pool and go for night swims. Luke and I would lie on the diving board passing a joint between us and looking up at the stars. One night he jokingly asked if I would sleep with him. "You're not my

first-round draft pick,” I responded. He laughed and rolled off the edge of the diving board, crashing into the water below, soaking me.

That night he drove his friends and me home. I sat wedged between two muscled teenagers whose names I can’t remember. Luke had dropped me off a block from my parents’ house, so they wouldn’t hear the car. He dropped the others off. Then he went back to his parents’ house, drank a couple of beers, and hanged himself in the basement. His brother found him.

Alexander said you needed to feel really alone to do something like that. Some people, myself included, said it was selfish. Alexander said he didn’t know if it was. He said Luke cared too much about what we thought about him and that’s why he couldn’t see how much we cared about him. I couldn’t imagine feeling that alone and it really scared me.

“They won’t tell me when I can go home.” I whispered into the phone.

“Ten more minutes.”

“Fuck you, Alexander.” I made eye contact with the nurse and lowered my voice again. “I wasn’t serious. I wasn’t going to actually do it.”

“The neighbor seemed to think it was serious. People don’t usually call ambulances unless it’s serious.” His voice kept breaking and I couldn’t tell if it was the shitty pay phone or him.

“She didn’t have to get involved. She should have just minded her own fucking business.”

“I’m glad she didn’t mind her own fucking business.”

The phone beeped twice. *Your call will end in thirty seconds.*

“I’ll be there in a couple of days, I promise,” he said. I heard the click of the call being cut off. I knew the break in his voice wasn’t from the phone. I hung the receiver up and the nurse assigned to watch me held my hand and led me back down the hallway to my room.

The sheets were a perfect white and so crisp and starched that they hurt. I lay down and stared at the cinderblock wall. I pretended the nurse hadn’t sat down in the chair across from my bed to watch me, my silent constant companion for seventy-two hours. She’d asked me why I had done it. I’d told her I cared what people thought and didn’t think they cared about me. She’d asked about the drugs. I’d said I had quit and then I had started again when life started to feel bad. She put cream on my neck from where the belt had cut in. She told me I wasn’t alone. She told me I was going to get some real help. I think I was broken enough to believe her. I’m glad I did. She was right.

My parents came. I had been avoiding them for years, making brief appearances during the holidays and responding to one in twenty phone calls. I loved them and knew they loved me but I hadn’t wanted them to see me like I was and it seemed like they had been willing to believe the lie that I was okay. My mother rubbed my back and stroked my hair like she used to when I was little and had the flu. My dad stood in the corner looking terrified and occasionally crying. They were there every minute that they could be. They saw me detox the same way Alexander had. I knew I was ugly and felt so ashamed. But my mother wiped my forehead and gave me water and my father read

me books. I realized that I had broken their hearts and if they could have loved me clean they would have.

Alexander was there with my parents when I got out of the hospital. He'd flown in and rented a van and packed up my belongings and my dog. He followed behind my parent's' car as we drove two hours north to their home outside of Washington. I felt dazed and medicated.

"Twenty-six and moving home," he'd said. "You make a perfect millennial."

"I'm going to get a job. I'm going to get out as soon as I can."

"You will do no such thing. Live rent free in your parent's home. Eat their food. Use their electricity. Stay clean and sober. Restore the peace of mind you stole from them for years."

"Those last three feel like a bit of a challenge."

"Well, you're a bit of a challenge. And who knows, maybe it won't take that long for you to start to feel a little better."

He had made me smile. I hadn't been sure I would smile anymore.

"Say it." I said.

"Say what?"

"Say how long it will take to feel better."

"I don't know this time. It might take a little longer." He looked worried. I told him I needed him to tell me how long it would take to feel normal again. He sighed and relented.

"Minimum, ten more minutes."

## COMFORT IN DISCOMFORT

I had been admitted to the Virginia Commonwealth University Hospital after a botched suicide attempt. I'd hanged myself in my closet with my dog barking in the hallway. The belt around my neck; the same belt that I'd tied my arm off with countless times. The hospital was stark and sterile, and a woman named Marline roamed the dormitory hallways at night screaming profanities at the nurses who tried to corral her.

In between bouts of sweating and vomiting and shitting, I would shuffle to the common room. The hospital had issued me socks with little rubber grips on the bottom. Fuzzy socks—the same material as the socks my mother gives me every Christmas. Albeit, the socks my mother gives me aren't emblazoned with a hospital logo on the side. I did crosswords and played Jenga in the common room.

The common room was a nice reprieve from the therapists and psychiatrists and nurses and medications. Jenga gave me a sense of normalcy—memories from my childhood circulating sometimes comfortably and sometimes not as I played. Some of the pieces were missing. One could never make a complete tower, but over the years, patients and staff alike had written little notes of inspiration on the blocks. The handwriting varied. The level of inspiration varied. *You are worthy.* Stack the piece on top. *You have something beautiful to give to the world.* Stack the piece on top. *The food in here sucks ass.* Agree and stack the piece on top. I became a stickler for the rules—you can't poke the tower looking for a loose piece. If you touch it, you have to try for that piece. It's a rule that many ignore, but it's crucial to the game.

They had other activities, of course. Art therapy involved sanding precut slabs of wood and handing it to a nurse who would assemble the pieces into a crude birdhouse and yell enthusiastically, “YOU MADE A BIRDHOUSE!” As a prideful art school dropout, I found it easy to scoff, but individual and group therapy left me worried about life after the psych ward. The staff was trying to prepare me to reenter the world outside. I was trying my best to hold myself together inside.

When they told me I was being released after an almost two week stay, I felt fear. I was being forced into making a decision to change my way of life. No more bars or liquor stores or trap houses. Goodbye shitty apartment. Goodbye fair-weather friends. Though I’d hated every waking moment in the hospital, I knew that leaving signaled a shift in my life that I wasn’t sure I was ready for. Plus, I was getting used to the bland food and playing Jenga every night.

I like rules. I like structure. I am a creature of habit. I wasn’t always. I used to think it was charming that when invited out, it was a hit or miss situation as to whether I would show up. I was perpetually late—making plans, falling off the face of the earth, and reemerging days or sometimes weeks later. This was a symptom of my alcoholism. I woke up in alleyways and on park benches more than I would like to admit now. But at the time, it felt like a quirk; something my friends and I could laugh about together. I realize now, I was always the one laughing the hardest. My friends grew tired of my antics. What was the point in inviting me out when there was a 50%, then 75%, then 95% chance I would make a scene and create an embarrassing situation?

I got sober and was treated for bipolar disorder. I realized that life could, in fact, be manageable. I moved from Richmond, VA back to my parents' house in a suburb just outside of Washington DC—a hundred-mile distance that felt like a thousand. I became mentally, physically, emotionally stronger. I was twenty-six years old and felt like a newborn experiencing the world for the first time. A couple of years passed, and I managed to create the semblance of the life I had always hoped was possible. I moved out of my parents' house. I kept a good job. I bought a car. I made friends. This isn't a story about that journey.

Arrington, VA's second largest claim to fame is that it is "somewhat close to Charlottesville." Arrington, VA's first claim to fame is that it hosts a small jam band music festival called LOCKN. Every year in late August hippies and hipsters alike, mingle in dusty fields, set up tents on grassy knolls, engage in copious amounts of drugs, and enjoy sets by bands that indulge in forty-five-minute guitar solos. Women in paisley flowing pants and tube tops hoola-hoop with LED covered hoops while white men with dreadlocks and overalls with no shirts or shoes (a questionable look, at best) kick up red dust and dance with a freedom and lack of inhibition that only those on hallucinogenic drugs seem capable of. The festival rests somewhere between 1969 and the present day. Shirtless hippies wear flowers in their hair and refer to things as *groovy*, while vendors offer iPhone charging stations in the background.

After a couple of years of living like a square I decided that this sounded like *exactly* what I needed to reclaim my "bohemian" roots. I thought, *I can be a person who*



*goes to music festivals! I can be free and whimsical! I can skip instead of walk and dance around in circles! I can let the music take me to a spiritual place!*

Charlotte is whimsical. I thought she was incredible. I was awed by her. I still am. She is a close friend who has laughed with me, cried with me, and all that lies in between. When I first met her, she smelled like patchouli and talked about music like it was God. We stood in a parking lot and bonded over being addicts in recovery. Then we bonded over food. Then she told me about LOCKN. I didn't realize that sober people had a place at music festivals. I thought we were resigned to living buttoned up lives that made up for our degenerate pasts. Charlotte affirmed that sober people could have *fun*. I was stunned. She told me to buy a ticket for LOCKN. She said I needed to dance and eat amazing food and camp under the stars with the sounds of Phish and Umphrey's McGee lulling me to sleep. I agreed that I needed to try the food, bought my ticket and requested the weekend off from my job at a music shop.

A group of friends would be going to LOCKN. I knew Mike on the periphery. I was intimidated by him. He is adventurous and kind and everything one could ask for in a friend. I didn't know that at the time. All I knew was that Mike was Charlotte's friend and he would be driving us the two and a half hours to Arrington. I was reluctant to leave my car behind. I wanted an escape plan if I got too uncomfortable. What if I couldn't dance? I'd never tried it sober. What if I didn't fit in with the hippies and hipsters? I felt like I fit somewhere in between. What if the food sucked? I would be fucking furious.

I pulled up to Mike's house as he was loading up the car. Charlotte was late—a common occurrence. Mike told me to tell her to hurry her ass up and bring bananas. I sent her a text and quickly got the response, *5 min. Nanners on deck, playa*. Thirty minutes and several polite but short conversations with Mike later, Charlotte pulled up with music blasting. Another thirty minutes of situating the car to fit Charlotte's tent and belongings and finally we were on our way. We meant to leave at 8am and it was now 10. We were late and as a creature of habit and structure my anxiety was on high. Charlotte and Mike had a language of their own. Sitting in the backseat I listened to them animatedly discuss who they were most excited to see play; which friends they were excited to meet up with again; which food truck they were most looking forward to. As if sensing my discomfort, Mike asked about me; what I liked to do; how long I'd been sober; what was my story?

Just as my identity had been wrapped up in being an addict, my new life was wrapped up in my sobriety. I went to meetings at night. I worked a job selling guitars during the day. That's what my story was. Mike said I was going to have new stories to tell. Mike echoed Charlotte when he said I needed to have fun.

It's not that I wasn't happy. I was. I often thought about my time in the psych ward and how it had seemed like the end of my life. In a way, it was. It was the end of one life and the beginning of another—another life which I was eternally grateful for. When I got sober, I was told that I needed to change people, places and things in order to survive. I changed everything in my life. I never called out of work. I routinely worked

out at the gym. I had dinner with my parents every Sunday. It was the opposite of the chaos and unpredictability of my alcohol ridden life. It was calm and boring and a kind of peace and quiet that I loved. But something felt as though it were missing. I remember sitting at my piano and feeling okay. Just okay. No joy, no sadness. Just okay. That's how I had felt for the two years of my sobriety. There had been ebbs and flows. Some days were better than others. But overall, it had been a fairly even keeled ride.

When I bought the ticket to LOCKN I knew that I would be embarking into unfamiliar territory. I hoped that I could keep the even keel, but I was nervous. I had been to music festivals before as a citizen of the drug culture. I'd sold MDMA and acid and smoked pot and drank until I couldn't see straight. I never remembered the band. I never remembered the weekend. I assumed I'd had a good time.

Mike followed the signs, written in sloppy white paint on scraps of cardboard toward *Sober Camping*. Music festivals look like shanty towns. Tents as far as the eye can see with dreadlocked, shoeless hippies roaming around covered in a film of sweat and dust. Who willingly opts for this? I did.

Past the line of blue porta-johns and further along the dusty path, we found a parking spot. Friends of Mike and Charlotte were already set up and ready to greet us. I was hugged despite not knowing anyone. I was embraced with a warmth and kindness I felt unfamiliar with. We set up our tents and I immediately noticed the film of dust starting to form on mine. Again, I wondered why I had opted to live in this shanty town for the next

several days. I questioned how I would do it. And then Mike produced a keg of nitro brew coffee and I remembered that we were considered fortunate to be here.

Sober people camp differently. I was used to setting up a tent with a sleeping pad and sleeping bag and calling it a fucking day. The bare minimum. This is not the case with sober people. Sober people come prepared. They bring snacks and bottled water. They bring lawn chairs and blankets to sit on. They set up canopies and wear headlamps at night. Despite these comforts I was as uncomfortable as I had ever been in my sobriety. I desperately longed for the comforts of home. I wanted something familiar. I wanted a shower.

After setting up camp, it was time to walk from camp to the festival fields. I thought about how this was my chance to be whimsical. Over the course of the weekend, I discovered many things. I do not like to dance sober. I prefer to watch the band and see what guitars they're playing and bob my head in time to the music. I love food from food trucks. I don't mind the film of dust that accrues on one's body after camping in red dusty fields. I like watching as the dust streaks off in the outdoor shower. I need to shower after every use of the porta-john and therefore hold it until I'm about to burst. While I would never buy their album, I love watching jam bands play and seeing people on drugs dancing. While I can go to music festivals, I am not a festival person anymore. I do not skip instead of walk. When I do actually dance, it is rigid and forced. I like going to bed under the stars and listening to the late-night bands as they lull me to sleep.

On the last day of the festival Charlotte, Mike and I walked away from the stage and explored vendors' tents. Amidst the tents selling glassware, jewelry and tie-dye were an array of games. Twister, corn hole, bouncing castles, you name it. People lounged in lawn chairs. The music echoed from the stage. Mike gestured towards a giant game of Jenga and nudged me. I'd told him about my stay in the psych ward after he'd told me about his own stay in rehab. He asked me if I wanted to play for old time's sake. The blocks were oversized, and the tower stood almost as tall as me. The blocks were covered in writing from the various festival goers. Flowers and suns covered one. Lyrics from a song I'd never heard covered another. One read, *You are the most worthy and beautiful person to me*. Mike poked the tower looking for a loose piece. I ignored the blatant rule breaking. I tried to remove a rather stuck block from the tower and as I watched the structure collapse, I laughed a belly laugh. A genuine, involuntary, and completely and utterly indescribable joy.

This isn't a story about a psych ward. This isn't a story about a music festival. This isn't a story about Jenga. I don't know what this is supposed to be as I write it. I guess I think about belonging. About finding comfort in discomfort. About finding out who you are through who you are not. I think about sitting at the piano and feeling just okay. I sit at my piano now and feel a joy and contentment that I never knew I was missing. I think about Charlotte and her whimsy. I think about Mike and his kindness. I think about the birdhouse that I "built" that sits on one of the shelves I built in my

bedroom. I think about all the towers I've built and allowed to crumble. Only to be rebuilt again.

## WHITE NOISE

This past winter I left my home in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, DC to meet up with some friends in San Diego for a few days. John, a former roommate and close friend had just moved to San Diego to take on a dream job opportunity at the Department of Homeland Security. Mike and Brionna, also close friends, had moved from Virginia a few months earlier to Denver. We had all decided to reunite in San Diego. Phone calls and text messages filled with photos of west coast mountains that showcased the distance between us had begun to feel stale and monotonous. I was running out of things to tell them on the phone.

I am often worried by travel. I am hesitant to leave what I consider to be the safety of my small bedroom. But the bedroom hadn't been safe for months. I felt caged; trapped by my own anxieties. John, Mike, and Brionna were a beacon of what lay outside my bedroom door. I'd managed to make it through the first semester of my master's degree in creative writing. I needed a break from writing, and thinking about writing, and thinking about thinking about writing. I saw visiting my friends as an opportunity to force myself out of a self-imposed hibernation. A hibernation that felt like it was killing me.

Mike thought John might be lonely and could use a visit. I agreed and booked my plane ticket. I immediately began obsessing over the logistics of the trip. How would I get to the airport? Who would pick me up from the airport? What if John was at work and I couldn't drop my bags at his house? I didn't tell Mike that I was lonely—that I missed them all; that I felt like I'd been left behind; that my anxiety and depression was creeping

back in. I hadn't slept in months. Not since Cori died. I packed the notebook she'd given me. It has a playful sketch of a bird on the inside cover. I hadn't touched the notebook since her death. I didn't want to fill it up. I didn't want the bird to fly away.

Upon landing in San Diego, the rain began, and I resented myself for bringing it with me. The Coaster, a light rail that runs up along the coast, was crowded. I gave my seat up to a woman who seemed to be in her early 200's. John had told me that the ride was beautiful—I'd be able to see the ocean and the mountains. I saw neither, settling for a view of silvery fog covering the large shadows of mountains in the distance. I stood and rested my head against the window, attempting to follow the line of the train until it disappeared into the fog. A train headed into the abyss.

I took the Coaster from the San Diego airport to the Encinitas stop, a couple of miles from John's studio apartment in Carlsbad. When I'd left Virginia, it had been bitterly cold and sleeting. I spent the cramped five hour plane ride looking forward to seeing the sun. The woman next to me had tried several times to start conversations—what was I watching on the in-flight entertainment system? Did I live in San Diego or Washington? I gave curt answers and asked her if she wouldn't mind removing the coat that kept migrating into my seat.

As he rocketed up the 5 from Encinitas to Laguna at ninety miles an hour, John complained that California drivers had no system like on the east coast. "There's none of this left-lane-is-the-passing-lane nonsense. They just go wherever they want. They have



their own system, I guess. It's so frustrating." I couldn't help but think that John was the major disruption to their system. He weaved in and out of traffic, overtaking eighteen wheelers and hugging the right side of the lane to the point where it seemed I would be able to reach out my hand and touch the barrier, most likely clipping my hand off in the process. I sat clutching the leather seat of his overpriced Jeep with white knuckles. Boots, John's perpetually anxious beagle, lay sleeping in the backseat and I envied his ability to lay his nervousness aside.

John pulled into a massive parking lot, lined with enormous palm trees that seemingly sprouted from the asphalt. A very beige and very boring building with very authoritative looking security guards loomed over us. John hopped out of the drivers' seat and tossed me the keys which upon catching I immediately threw back to Mike as though the keys had burned me. Mike nonchalantly moved to the drivers' seat and started up the car. I struggled to look forward to the beach. John would be working for the next few hours and the rest of us were left to our own devices in a beautiful, yet unfamiliar, place. Boots remained asleep in the backseat.

As we entered the town of Laguna, with its coffee shops and copious amounts of juice bars, I felt a lack of belonging. I could smell the saltwater, which should have put me at ease. But I am not a surfer; I'm not carefree. I could never afford a beachfront, minimalist mansion. Being surrounded by surfers and seemingly free spirits with plenty of money to burn only highlighted my discomfort. I longed for the dingy winter isolation of the east coast. I longed for my bed. I longed to escape traffic and cars and asphalt. The

peaceful getaway I'd imagined on the plane felt unattainable. California had traffic and cars and asphalt too. It was just a bit sunnier.

The waves in Laguna crashed over jagged rocks. The sun shone brightly. Strong. A force shining through the clouds and permeating across the ocean. My eyes stung from the saltwater air in a beautiful and kind way. Mike, and Brionna ventured up to climb the rocks while I hung back. The beach was empty. I teared up from a mixture of salty air, exhaustion and exasperation. I breathed heavily, sucking the air down into my diaphragm until it felt heavy and explosive. I screamed at the ocean. I screamed at fear. I felt feral, and for the first time, a sense of relief in expelling the invisible baggage that had been holding me down for the past several months. I relished in my screams and the power of the waves. I watched my friends scrambling up rocks in the distance. Brionna held out her hands waving to me to join. I could see she was screaming for me. The waves drowned her out.

Mike told me that he and Brionna scream into each other's' mouths when they can't stand how much they love each other. They face each other as if to kiss and connect through sound and breath. They have only done this when their screams can be drowned out by music, or waves, or wind. It is a bizarre practice. It is not instinctual, and I don't care to ask how they figured out this method of stress relief. Perhaps someday I'll find someone I'm willing to let scream into my mouth. Perhaps not.

Audio tracks of water flowing, or waves crashing are often prescribed as a remedy for anxiety and insomnia. Our brains interpret sounds according to whether or not they are a threat. Car alarms; screams; loud and quick disruptions to our stasis alert us to

possible dangers. Waves; the wind; consistent, or only slightly varying, sounds blend in with our thoughts and movements. They are non-threatening. They are constant. They are comforting in their simplicity and monotony. I suppose the sounds, when set in isolation from a visual, discount the incredible force and violence of the elements. When tame and confined and seemingly controllable, nature welcomes and calms us. Is this sense of control and containment what I need to feel safe? Or, is it the immeasurable power of nature that brings me back to the reality that everything is fleeting; joy, anxiety, fear, and comfort? None of those things can exist without the other.

I pulled out Cori's notebook when we returned from the rocks. We sat on the beach. Mike and Brionna basked in the sun next to me. I sketched the waves crashing over the jagged rocks. Rushes of wind and sand blew the pages and grains of sand embedded themselves in the spine. The spine began to fall apart causing the pages to hang loosely and precariously inside.

We traveled to Joshua Tree National Park the next day. The desert was colder than I expected. I had feigned car sickness in order to ensure that I would sit in the passenger seat of the Jeep. Brionna drove. John was tired. He and Mike sat in the backseat with Boots squeezed between them. We wound through traffic, then wind turbines on grassy hills, then rocky brown mountains, and finally flat stretching expanses of sand and nothingness dotted infrequently with gas stations and shacks. Desert people were just what I imagined them to be. Strange; uncanny; you have to be in order to survive in a place nature designed things not to survive in.

Joshua trees (*yucca brevifolia*) were named by Mormon immigrants who had journeyed across the Colorado River in the mid-1800s. I don't know why they crossed the river. I know they were escaping religious persecution. But I don't know what they were searching for. Did they really have to travel this far west? I hear Utah is beautiful in the summer. When I think of Utah, I think of canyons and valleys. It seems better than a wasteland of sand and rock formations and trees that look like they just happened upon the landscape, got tired, and decided to set up camp forever. Nonetheless, the Mormon settlers marched on or, caravanned on. They ignored the name given by natives of the area: hunuvat chiy'a. I can't pronounce the name, but I associate a phonetic joyfulness to it. The Mormons associated the trees rather grotesque appearance with the biblical figure, Joshua, who held his hands up as he guided the Israelites in the conquest of Canaan. The limbs of the tree resemble outstretched hands of guidance through the desert. They didn't guide me. Instead, they inspired a new narrative in my sketch book of broken pages.

I stood back as John, Mike, and Brionna scurried up rock formations. Brionna wore a shirt that said, "Devil Woman." She looked impish and joyful and free. Mike looked like he really loved her, and I loved them both. The wind blew softly, animating the Joshua trees. Their arms bowed slightly back and forth and their wild flowers waved playfully. This was the unassuming nature I felt comfortable with. I held back from the rocks for a while. Boots tagged nervously behind John. His short legs scrambled across large crevasses and I had the overwhelming sense that I was missing out. Even the nervous beagle was journeying upward.

These rock formations were thought to have been formed more than 100 million years ago. They are the result of molten liquid, heated and churned by the earth's rotation, oozing up and cooling just below the surface. The rocks are called monzogranite, which, when spoken, elicits an auditory sense of whimsy akin to the visual whimsy of the Joshua trees.

The wind was stronger as I climbed the monzogranite. I worried about being caught by a gust and losing my footing. I kept my body low and close to the rocks. John and Boots skipped and jumped ahead of me. The wind varied slightly and softly. Brionna's "Devil Woman" rippled in the breeze above me. I climbed far enough to break a bone if I fell. I found a ledge and, after careful inspection, decided that if the rocks hadn't moved in 100 million years, it was unlikely that they would crumble beneath me now.

The pages of my sketch book fluttered and floundered. My hands stumbled and moved in a jagged staccato fashion as I drew the Joshua trees below. One sketch consisted of a single and uneven horizontal line—the binary of land and sky. The drawing grounded me.

Months before the California trip, I woke up on my thirtieth birthday sure that I was going to die. I had a tightness in my chest from the nightmare that had woken me up. I lay in between dream and reality, slowly exiting one and entering the other. I ran my fingers over my back-up white sheets—the ones with faded paw prints stained onto them from the time my roommate's dog had entertained a mud bath and ceremoniously entered

my bedroom in an attempt, I can only assume, to get me to join in. I like the paw prints. They remind me that imperfections can be joyful and spontaneous.

I think if everyone in my life were to indulge my fears, I would never leave the house. I'm certain I'll be mildly injured, or worse, disfigured in a car accident. So, I avoid highways and rush hour traffic. When on foot, I bolt across crosswalks, feeling the need to diminish the time I spend vulnerable in the middle of the street—open to the possibility of being hit by a car or a bicyclist who may not be paying attention. These fears began to manifest in the summer before the trip. Cori died of causes I still don't want to know. Something in me thinks it could have been suicide and I can't bear to hear that that might be the truth. So, I don't ask. I try to remember that people don't belong to us—that life doesn't belong to us. I meditate and attempt to find a serenity and acceptance that I simply don't have control over what may happen during the day. I imagined going to California as a reprieve from my anxiety and grief. I imagined the trip as an escape from the over developed world that often terrifies me. I was escaping the dreary winter of Northern Virginia's concrete landscape and replacing it with sunsets over the Pacific. I was escaping the death of a friend. Maybe beautiful views with beautiful, kind people would put me at ease. I left California reassured of only one thing: just like people and cars and traffic and cities, nature is as unpredictable and kind and vicious.

Upon returning from California I purchased a white noise machine to go to sleep at night. Cori's death highlighted the fact that I hadn't slept through the night for long

time. I used to wake with a fast beating heart and cold sweats. After Cori died, the dreams became more vivid. They were visceral experiences of death; the loneliness of death; the avoidance of grief. The sound machine is reminiscent of waves crashing onto the shore or wind blowing—consistent, unending, comforting. The sound machine helps me to drift off to sleep. I still wake up with nightmares most nights. A friend told me to purchase a weighted blanket to help with the nightmares. The blanket rests on top of my duvet and provides me with the feeling of being held tightly enough to be comforting and loosely enough to not feel claustrophobic. I experiment with tinctures of CBD oil and melatonin supplements. I search for the next quick fix in the hope that tonight will be the night that I get a restful sleep. My frustration stems from the recognition that none of these objects or chemicals are a cure for my grief—instead, they are treatments that are designed to alter my sleep habits over time. I don't like waiting, but I do it anyway. I have no other choice. I want sleep to be something I can rely on, but the idea of silence terrifies me. I was told that Cori died in her sleep. My nightmares often revolve around the idea that I haven't done enough or seen enough or heard enough. Just like the rest of life, sleep is unpredictable and wild. Just as the comforts of soft water and wind sooth us, sleep can be waves crashing and powerful gales attacking. Or sleep can be nothingness. Silence.

The notebook of sketches from the trip sits on my bedside table. When dropped, the pages scatter on the floor. I pick them up and place them gingerly back in the broken book. I consider making sure the pages are in order. I forget which sketch I drew first. I scrutinize the mark-making in each drawing—the steadiness of my hand serving as an indication of my mental state. I decide to give up on ordering the drawings. I see the story

as it was—jumbled and confusing and complicated. The sound of waves comforts us, while their violence and unpredictability sets us back on our heels. A simple breeze is welcomed while the threat of a tornado sends us underground to the safety of a church basement. The chaos and static are unpredictable as is the anxiety and mystifying patterns that our lives take. The little bird that Cori drew never moves when the book falls apart. The sketches in my notebook are simultaneously chaotic and static.



### *Antelope Canyon*

I slept on the couch in the living room. Jake and I had arrived in Page, Arizona after a five and a half hour flight from Washington to Las Vegas. We'd rented a car and Jake had driven the four and a half hours to Page. We'd been traveling for over sixteen



hours. Jake drove the dark roads. The reflective yellow paint was hypnotizing and I fought sleep.

Mike, Brionna, and Charlotte had driven from Denver. It had been a non verbal agreement that Mike and Brionna would share the master bedroom. Charlotte took the other bedroom with a queen bed in it. Jake and I would bunk in the “bunk bed” room with John when he arrived. John was driving from San Diego and would only arrive in the very early morning. We are a group of friends who has been together for years and share a common bond of addiction, recovery from addiction and the desire to grow spiritually and emotionally. Perhaps this is strange for a group in their late twenties to early forties who all behave like teenagers with a little more money than they should have or know what to do with. But they push me to be better in every way and I sometimes fight against growth in order to seek comfort. But they catch me when I fall and they push me when I stop putting one foot in front of the other.

As Jake and I brought our bags to our room, I began unpacking and immediately knew that I needed to be alone. No matter how much I love someone, I need space to breathe. I told Jake that the bunk bed was uncomfortable, that I didn’t want John to wake me up, that I would sleep on the couch downstairs so we could all have more space. I didn’t want to tell him that I needed to be alone. There was a shame in admitting that I needed solitude. I was worried Jake would mistake my solitary desire for isolation.

The back living room wall was windows and French doors that opened onto a patio that flowed into a desert expanse where I could see the mesas of southern Utah in the distance. I woke just before six in the morning and saw a shadow moving into the

room and knew it was Charlotte. When we lived together, a couple of years ago, we would typically wake up around the same time, drink coffee together, talk about our plans for the day and watch as the early morning turned to mid morning. The light would shift and my ambitions and intentions for the day would be set because I had verbalized them to another person. It had been a while since Charlotte and I had been able to have a morning together and I smiled as she crossed the darkness of the living room towards the light of the French doors. I smiled because her footsteps were loud even on a carpeted floor.

I startled her when I said *good morning*. I had been a motionless form on the couch. Probably pillows or a blanket or both. And now I was talking. Charlotte jumped and then immediately began laughing. I felt warm and comforted and jumped up to hug her. *Can we watch the sun rise?*

Was I hoping for a sunrise that would capture how I felt? I wanted something spectacular, but the sky was a blueish gray and the light didn't seem to be particularly flattering. The air was sharp as we stood on the back patio. Jake sauntered downstairs and asked me, *Did you leave the room last night because it's haunted?* I didn't need any time to think. *Yes*. He'd erased my shame and given me an out. He said something tucked him into bed and that he wanted to sleep in the living room too. *There are a bunch of native burial grounds in this area. I was reading about them.* I was crestfallen but would deal with my disappointment and need for aloneness later.

Jake and Charlotte were blue in the light of the sunrise. Everything was cold and beautiful and still. I realized that it was Thanksgiving morning and chose to fight the urge

to gripe about a hollow holiday built on lies and the genocide of an entire people. I chose to embrace gratitude for a beautiful place and beautiful friendships. It was a shift that is typically not easy for me to make. I have often chosen to take the more painful emotional route. I have consistently struggled to open up to people. I consistently fear being myself. I try to curb how I emote. I don't want to be seen as overly emotional, or rabid, or uncontained. So I sit. Like a bubbling pot with a lid that is ready to burst off from the pressure.

I had been admitted to an MFA program for Creative Writing in Virginia the year before. I had applied to the program feeling like myself. I had entered the program feeling like an imposter. I had survived my first year of the program learning what I did not know and what I hoped I could achieve. I'd learned the language of workshopping essays and, while I still wasn't fluent, I was beginning to understand and progress in my craft. I ended the first year feeling confident in what I knew, what I didn't know, and what I hoped I could gain from the program.

I thought about the dream job I had been offered the week I'd been accepted into grad school. It wasn't *my* dream job and I turned down a large salary, travel, and benefits to pursue the dream of becoming a writer. I was terrified by the competition of some of the MFA programs I'd been admitted to. But I wanted to embrace that competition as motivation.

There was cloud cover and I could see ravens circling. I knew they were searching for the small rabbits I had seen darting through the chaparral. Jake was in plaid red and black pajamas that looked like the ones my father used to wear. In his early thirties and dressed like a grandfather, Jake made me smile. Charlotte was in leggings and a puffy overcoat and looked supremely top heavy despite her tiny frame. I wore sweatpants and flip flops. The blue light made everyone look dead but I couldn't have felt more alive. For the first time in months I felt free of the anxiety that had weighed on me.

The sun rose. It was spectacular in the company that I kept and not the views from the patio. The views were expansive and different. I took a photograph of Charlotte and Jake posing in their bizarre sleeping attire. The desert is the backdrop and Jake shades his eyes as Charlotte beams from behind oversized sunglasses.

Mike and Brionna soon came down the stairs to join us. We drank cheap coffee and marveled at the miles of nothingness outside our door. As the blue sky warmed, the rust color of the desert earth intensified. The ravens crowed and circled and the chaparral and cacti rustled. I could hear and feel everything. My heartbeat in my ears. And for the first time in months I didn't want to retreat into aloneness. I felt contented with this family I'd cultivated over the years.

Mike always needs music. He and Brionna dance uninhibitedly and joyfully. They sing at and with each other. They move together like water on water. They are a lesson in being present for a partner and a friend. They are travelers and lovers and dancers and

artists. Mike sells flooring material and Brionna is getting her master's in social work. They are beautiful and whole and when I am with them I feel beautiful and whole.

Mike danced and cooked bacon and Jake made scrambled eggs. Jake's egg scrambling technique is complex and methodical. Mike flips bacon in time to the music. I was supposed to make a French toast casserole and I feel guilty for not having prepared it upon our arrival the night before. The guilt dissipates quickly when Jake says simply, *It's okay*.

My second year of graduate school was not what I expected it to be. My family and friends were proud of me. I saw myself differently. I thought academia to be more esteemed than the service industry I'd been working in up until then. I had been selling guitars. I worked on commission. I made a lot of money. But I continuously viewed retail as less than. I had grown tired of being at the beck and call of entitled customers. I felt over-qualified even though I'd only just earned my bachelor's degree (by the skin of my teeth and over the course of ten years) a couple of years earlier. I'd been offered a job with a large guitar company. It wasn't just a job, it was a career. I wouldn't be in retail anymore. But something in me knew I needed to write. Something in me felt that I needed to be exceptional—or, at least, not just another corporate employee.

As part of my graduate admission package, I'd been awarded the opportunity to teach at the university. I found the pomp of saying I work as a professor too appealing to turn down. I had never stepped foot in the classroom as an instructor and the feelings of inadequacy I'd worked to quell in my first year came flooding back stronger than ever. I

suddenly felt the pressure to be something that I simply knew I wasn't. I bought a cardigan in hopes of looking more professional. I covered my tattooed arms and wore my glasses. I tried to make my voice deeper and more authoritative. I tried to look like I knew what the fuck I was doing and in the process I lost myself.

I stopped talking to my friends. I ignored Mike or Brionna or Charlotte or John's calls. I wrote and tore up page after page in my notebook. I began waking in the morning to let my dog out and retreating back to bed. I began looking at pipe in my closet and wondering if it would hold my weight. I threw out every belt that I owned after I stared at the pipe for too long. I had felt this way before and had sworn that I would never let those feelings creep back.

The air was stale and gray and I felt dead.

John chopped kale leaves as I had directed him to. Every Christmas Eve, my mother makes a kielbasa and tortellini soup. It is hearty and rich and comforting and familiar. Our Thanksgiving meal was not to be traditional. A turkey is a hassle. None of us particularly liked sweet potatoes. And we saw ourselves as a family of misfits. How fitting to have a misfit meal? I made the soup. Jake expertly tended to garlic mashed potatoes. Charlotte meticulously chopped, marinated, and roasted brussels sprouts in sesame oil and soy sauce. Mike made spicy peppers and Italian sausage. Brionna had covered desert with a peanut butter and chocolate pie. The kitchen smelled of everyone's past and our home for the week. I felt protected and sheltered by my misfit family. Our

Thanksgiving was loud and filled with laughter. We ate too much too early. We played card games. We ate more. We watched movies and I fell asleep on the couch.

My writing began to suffer. I struggled to make the twenty-five minute drive to campus. The needs of the dog I had adopted over the summer were the only reason to get out of bed in the morning or early afternoon. I read student papers and books for my classes and struggled to form any type of written feedback or response. I found some comfort in Annie Dillard and Terry Tempest Williams. Their words carved stories that I related to—that resonated with me. They wrote of grief. I further contemplated death. I began being unable to attend classes. I had lost my voice and feared that I would cry if anyone spoke to me. I didn't understand how I could have worked so hard only to be feeling so utterly powerless, helpless, unhinged. I constantly felt out of control.

I had been staring longer and longer at the pipe in my closet and wondering if it would hold my weight. I finally confided in a friend. I told Charlotte and John over the phone what was going on in my head. I told them I was frightened of losing my position at the university. John made the astute point that I would certainly lose my position if I continued the way I was going. I was tired. I relented and I asked for help. I emailed my supervisor and professors and told them I needed to go to the hospital. I needed to be in a safe place away from the pipe in my closet that may or may not hold my weight. I was humiliated and ashamed and terrified.

Prior to the trip John had opened up about not doing so well. His physical and mental health were deteriorating. He had been diagnosed with severe Crohn's disease and his body wasn't processing nutrients as it should have been. He was rapidly losing weight and, to top it all off, he had discovered a string of infidelity from the partner he had planned on marrying. John said he needed us. I needed to hug him.

His body was slight and frail. He cried openly and fearlessly. He asked for help with a strength that I will always admire. He laughed during our Thanksgiving dinner and, while I knew that loving him wouldn't fix the trouble he was having, loving him would make it bearable. That night, John cried on the patio. Jake hugged him and told him that he loved him.

I didn't call anyone from the hospital. It was sterile and beige. I vacillated between feeling numb and terrified and angry and ashamed. I found out later that John had been calling from San Diego, trying to get in touch with anyone on the ground in Virginia. He finally reached Charlotte who found out that I was safe.

While I was in the hospital, I looked at pictures of Antelope Canyon in northern Arizona. As a group we had planned the Thanksgiving trip. It would be a reunion of sorts. The misfit family would come from all over the country to share a beautiful place with one another. I sat in the hospital and wondered if I would be able to take in beauty. I wondered if I would be able to accept the love of my friends.



Jake and I slept in the living room. Jake is steady. He is fiercely loyal and uncompromising, almost to a fault, in his sense of morality. He is calming and kind. He irritates me occasionally by making jokes as a way of avoiding intimacy. I can always be myself around him.

We visited Horseshoe Bend, a canyon a few miles from our rental house. Thanksgiving day had been filled with food and laughter and fighting over card games. We now ventured into the desert expanse. Jake pointed out every butte by saying, *That's a butte*. The roads we had driven in the dark a couple nights before were now bright and surrounded by a massive expanse that was overwhelming; an expanse that made me feel small and powerless and awed.

As our group approached the canyon, Jake and I stuck together. Charlotte and John wanted to take pictures. Mike and Brionna wanted to share the moment with each other. And Jake and I moved with a similar awe and appreciation not just for the beauty of the blue sky and the slight cloud cover and the rust colored sandstone, but for the beauty of simply being emotionally and spiritually safe with a group of people.

I cried as we looked over the edge of the canyon. Softly. Jake and the others didn't notice. The tears could have been caused by the winds that whipped loose sand around us.

The Colorado River runs through the canyon, forming a horseshoe shape. The drop is about 1,000-1,300ft. The Colorado River cut the canyon over the course of thousands of years. I thought of the water moving slow and steady through over the rocks. I thought of Jake's steadiness.

My hands were numb and my cheeks were raw and I felt unequivocally happy. My knees buckled as we hiked back to the car. My body was out of shape and I was surprised when I told Mike and Brionna that I had struggled on the hike. I had grown a tremendous amount of shame about my body. That shame existed somewhere to the side of where it had been for the past few months—still present, but not all-consuming. I loved the rust colored sand in the tread of my sneakers.

I left the hospital after a few days. I felt somewhat better, but still terrified of how I would make it through the semester. My supervisors arranged for substitutes to cover my classes for a week while I got back on track. I was both surprised and grateful for their compassion. I now felt that there was a deadline for me to get better. I just had to make it until Thanksgiving. I continued to look at photographs of Antelope Canyon. I saw reds and oranges and purples in the canyon walls. I saw shapes carved from floods. I read about the canyon and learned that we would need a guide to take us through.

I navigated the next few weeks of the semester clumsily. I spoke to the misfit family consistently.

I asked Amy, our guide from the Navajo reservation, what it meant to her to be surrounded by such profound beauty every day. Amy was soft spoken and the wind carried her voice away from us and into the mountains in the distance. She may have been twenty; she may have been a few years younger. She grew up in this desert and as I

marveled at my surroundings, she watched her step carefully on the red sand which made the sandstone underneath slippery. Snow coated the mountains, mesas, and buttes that lay tens of miles away.

Amy pointed out a coal powered plant—the stacks abrasive and unnatural to the scenery. The plant had closed two weeks prior. Many people lost their jobs, she said. The decommissioning process would be starting over the next year. The stacks would be gone. People would still be unemployed. Amy’s voice softly mentioned something about renewable energy jobs making their way into the canyon and her voice drifted off into the mountains.

She asked me where I was from. Virginia, I told her. I told her our mountains were blue and dwarfed by the majesty of the west. I told her that, back home, we couldn’t see a football field length in front of us without a house or smog obstructing the view. She told me how far the peak in the distance was and I felt small and awed.

The entrance to the canyon was unassuming. A steep metal staircase—more a ladder than a staircase led us to yet another ladder staircase. Amy casually bounded down ahead of us. I timidly clutched the railing cautiously testing my balance with each step of the decent. The canyon walls began to rise above us. The Navajo have named this part of the slot canyon *Hazdistazi*, which Amy said with ease and musicality while my mouth tripped over it. “Spiral rock arches.” Amy said. That’s the translation.

Canyons are notoriously difficult to age and geologist opinions vary greatly as to when the lower and upper Antelope Canyon began to form. What is known is that the Navajo sandstone has been carved, sculpted, smoothed by flash floods during the

monsoon season. Rainwater collects in the basin above the canyon and flash floods move through at great speeds during the monsoon season. Given the size of the slot canyon, a conservative estimate of “thousands of years old” is all I was able to garner from the various Navajo guides. I think of the power of the water over time; the power of the water in an instant. People have died in the canyons.

In 1997, eleven tourists and a guide were caught in a flash flood. Everyone was killed with the exception of the guide who had swift-water training. There had been little rain in the area, but a large storm miles away had flooded the basin. The waters came fast and unrelentingly.

As we navigated the canyon, following closely behind Amy, I felt overwhelmed and safe. I was astounded that such natural beauty could simply be. I thought of the pictures I had seen and the articles I had read about the canyon. I thought of how the people I was with had carved me into the person that I am. They are fierce and unrelenting. They are strong and steady. They are violently loving.

Emerging from deep slot canyon, one feels that they have been transported to a new world. The reds and oranges of the sandstone and the striking blue of the sky are impossible to process. I went with the idea of sharing an experience that I would write about. I went with the intention of leaving inspired and refreshed.

I left without pressure—without obligation. I left with the knowledge that I am loved and can except love. I left with the understanding that solitude can only come from

a feeling of deep connection. That connection stemmed from the sandstone; from the canyons and the rivers that carved them; from the misfit family that fights for me.

## HERONS

The safety orange color of my kayak is abrasive in the chilled late summer morning. It is before the sun has come up over the Occoquan River Reservoir. It is before the humidity makes the air thick and difficult to breathe. It is before the other kayakers and rowers and paddle boarders and beer-drinking fisherman begin launching their boats.

This is my favorite part of the day. I set my thermos of earl grey tea on the boat ramp as I meticulously, deliberately, patiently secure a bilge pump and a dry bag containing my wallet and keys and phone and towel for wiping down the boat. I have made sure to set my phone to silent. Not vibrate. I secure my life vest and make sure that the whistle (orange to compliment the boat) is still attached securely to the left breast pocket clip. I check the boat and check again, looking for any potentially weak spots from stern to bow. This kayak has been sturdy and well-loved through the summer. I only bought it this past spring. The orange has started to fade on the top from the sun. There are scratches on the bottom from running ashore on rough river banks. There is a granola bar wrapper behind the seat.

The water is calm enough to see the bubbles of the fish that inhabit the river reservoir. There is a subtle current which I paddle against so as to be able to return with the current on the way back. There are alcoves that branch off from the river and provide a sense of privacy. From whom? I'm not so sure. But the small alcoves are shaded and cool and there is no current. My boat sits—small ripples as I try and fail to keep the boat as still as possible. The kayak moves with my breath. Slight side to side rocking motion.

I spot a heron on the edge of the alcove. He stands motionless, eye fixed on me. He blinks and I try to time my blink with his. I keep eye contact. He is a fixed object I can focus on to keep still. I imagine he thinks of me as a large and obnoxious orange buoy and I wish I were smaller. I am cold.

The great blue heron is about four feet tall if, I was to estimate. I've seen this bird before. In fact, I see him every morning that I'm out here. I've seen him fly and noticed that his wingspan is certainly wider than I am tall. Herons have slow and deep wingbeats. Far slower and deeper than the hawks and eagles that fly overhead in the afternoons. I imagine the heron shrugging off the birds of prey above as show boaters. The heron's body works more efficiently. Every beat slow and deep and effective as his neck forms an S and he glides over the water.

The heron moves from alcove to alcove like me. I dig my paddle into the water deeper and slower and find that it tires me quickly. The heron tells me that I simply need to develop and maintain the muscles. It will get easier. It will become instinctual.

I struggle to take advice from a creature who lurks in the shadows and silently stalks his prey. I see the control that the heron exhibits when flying over the calm water and wonder if he and a pelican would debate hunting techniques. I smile at a heron-pelican rivalry and abandon and embrace the opposite of stillness.

I want the opposite of loneliness right now. That's the only way I can describe it. I want to want to paddle alongside the other kayakers and rowers and paddle boarders and

drunk fishermen. I don't want to lurk in the shadows and silently struggle to capture happiness or something like it.

I leave the alcove and I know the heron watches me. I've enjoyed watching him, I think. But the sun has come up and it is time for me to allow the current to pull me back towards the marina and boat ramp and the people all getting ready to launch into the river.

I leave for Brooklyn in the afternoon. I'm dreading Penn Station and the crowds there. I'm visiting a friend from high school I haven't seen in fifteen years. I'm visiting her because she reached out a few months ago saying she had always had a crush on me, and I liked—and was flattered by—the attention. I bought a train ticket. On a whim; based on the idea that sleeping next to someone might be nice for a weekend. I think I've been lonely for a long time now. I thought it was just solitude, but I've been isolating; I've been isolated.

My trail running shoes are still wet from kayaking. I choose a pair of Clark's boots to wear over the weekend figuring that they are comfortable enough but knowing that they are not. But they look nice, and the girl I'm visiting will tell me that my footwear is more professional than the watermelon patterned sneakers she will wear to the coffee shop we go to in the morning.

I like the train. I sit in the Quiet Car. The conductor has made it a point to remark that the Quiet Car fosters a "library-esque" environment. I think about grading my students' papers. Instead I read their reflections on the assignment. In response to the



question *How has this assignment changed your writing process?* One student wrote, *It hasn't*. Another wrote, *I might think about actually editing before I submit stuff*. I choose not to feel ineffectual as an instructor and decide to look up facts about the Great Blue Heron instead. Anything to avoid thinking about my own writing process, or lack thereof, recently.

I check to see if there have been any herons spotted in New York and I feel very upbeat when I learn that one has been spotted in Central Park. I'm visiting a friend.

Apparently, the heron is elusive. Or maybe people just aren't looking hard enough for it. One article describes the heron as "nearly electric blue" in color. I think about being *nearly* something. *Nearly* to me means you've just missed the mark. The heron on the Occoquan is not even *nearly* electric blue. He is more of a grayish color with hints of a rather dull blue that is simultaneously unremarkable and beautiful. I'm nearly comfortable.

I'm nervous about seeing the girl. We've spoken on the phone a few times. Not enough times to justify a trip to see her. I say that I was invited to my friend's opening reception for some paintings she had done while she was at a residency in Vermont. It's true, but it's also not the reason I'm taking the train to Brooklyn. I'm taking the train to Brooklyn to sleep next to someone I haven't seen in fifteen years. She liked me during a time that I didn't like myself. She told me she has always thought I was cool. I want to be around someone who took a different—more linear and traditional—path. I'm impressed that she finished college, moved on to grad school, and established a career while I was

snorting cocaine off of the backs of toilets in restaurant bathrooms. Now I drink chamomile and lavender loose-leaf tea before going to bed at 10pm and I think that is charming and impressive. Our definition of cool is different.

The heron in Central Park is mentioned in several articles alongside a Mandarin duck. The Mandarin duck became a sensation when it was spotted and coined as a “hot” bird; the adjective referring to the bird’s attractiveness and not temperature. I look at a picture of the duck and see that it is “electric” orange. Kind of like my kayak, but less gaudy. The internet is a silly place and New Yorkers began participating in a poll over who the “hotter” bird was. What makes one misplaced species better than the other? I wonder.

The train is slowing. I’m packing up my things. I have a laptop and assorted snacks that I have bought from the Café Car—snap pea crisps and two types of granola bars. I have a pit in my stomach about navigating the subway. I know I need to get onto the N or Q or R or W train at 34<sup>th</sup> and Herald Square, and then I need to transfer to the L train. In rush hour. With a backpack that contains my laptop and snacks and life.

The girl is meeting me at the show. She’s going to be late. She sounds busy. She always sounds busy. It’s attractive and I decide I should seem busy too. I’ll be early for the show if I leave now so I walk around the city for a while. I pass the entrance for the subway stop and keep walking down 34<sup>th</sup> Street. I look up at the sky every once in a while, as a reprieve from all the people bumping into me. I have to look past skyscrapers

to see a dirty sky. I wish it were light outside so I could try to find the heron and a piece of stability or familiarity or both.

The show is “very Bushwick,” says the girl when she miraculously finds the entrance in spite of there being no numbers or indicators that this is an art show. The building is grungy and cramped and the walls are too small to fit the friend’s paintings. The 300 square foot room is concrete everywhere and one corner is occupied by a large desk that houses recording equipment for a radio show. It is literally underground. I’m in a cement basement with too many people. The people are artsy. The friend wears a faux fur floor-length coat and drinks Modelo out of a can. The girl and I are small. We can see glimpses of friend’s abstract figurative work through the crowd, but we can’t get close. I put my arm around her. She worries that she doesn’t fit in because she’s wearing Madewell leopard patterned jeans and doesn’t have tattoos. I feel more comfortable with her under my arm and tell her that I got a tattoo while I was waiting for her. I smile and shake my head when she looks at me. Then I nod my head and then I shake my head again. I’m amused by her discomfort at being uncertain of me. I want to be alone with her and I say so. We forgo the train and get a Lyft to her apartment in Brooklyn Heights—a neighborhood I’m afraid I will be kicked out of for not wearing Madewell leopard patterned jeans. But I’m happy to be in a car and in close contact with a body. She notes an \$18 million brownstone with a tone I can’t discern; awe or disapproval or both. I am ambivalent. About everything.

In the quiet of her apartment she tells me about her life and the things she has to do this weekend and I realize that the only significant time I will spend with her is while we sleep next to each other. I watch the tree outside her bedroom window as I hold her and fall asleep to not so distant car alarms. I am an unwelcome distraction.

But the next morning as we prepare to go to coffee, she shows me that she has bought some organic ginger and turmeric tea because I mentioned in one of our phone calls that I liked it. I am touched that she filed away that detail and feel uncertain of how to react. I put my hand on her shoulder and she rushes away to find a sports bra to wear to the gym.

We go to a coffee shop. She comments on how nice my shoes look, and then I walk her to the gym so she can get on with her day. As I watch her walk briskly across the street, I think about how I'm going to keep busy. I watch as the girl starts to jog across the street, and I choose to believe it's due to oncoming traffic and not an overwhelming desire to get away from me. I feel very self-conscious.

My cousin, the actor, meets me for breakfast. She asks who the hell I know that can afford to live in this neighborhood. "I could be kicked out for wearing Dr. Marten's," she says. Noted. We talk about our fathers and art and her husband's work and eat eggs Florentine. There is too much hollandaise sauce on the eggs so we silently scrape some of it off. Our mannerisms are so similar. I often forget that when I've been away from her for a long time.

She's busy too. She has the start of a nasty cold coming on and she needs to finish writing something she's been working on for a pitch. I walk her to the bus stop. She asks me what I'm going to do for the rest of the day and I say I'm not sure. I'll probably post up somewhere and try to write. The weather is perfect to sit in the park and look for the heron. Or the duck.

"Brooklyn Bridge is that way. You can walk across the promenade. It's crowded and disgusting and delicious. Love you lots!" She disappears on the bus and sends me a text message saying that she loves me and I believe her and tell her I love her too. I had been hoping I could spend more time with her. That seems to be the theme of this trip.

I don't think I can define what human connection means to me. Nor can I define loneliness. I can tell you that loneliness makes me feel homesick when I'm sitting on my couch, surrounded by things that I am familiar and comfortable with. When I'm lonely, nothing is familiar. Everything has an uncanny glare that sets me back and causes me to want to crawl into bed and only speak to my dog. I never question whether the dog is interested in my stories or too busy to spend time with me. The dog likes watching birds even more than I do, though she isn't the best birding companion due to her instinct to chase and retrieve. I prefer to look from afar. I don't need the details up close.

Before I left for Brooklyn, the dog retrieved a bird for me. It was a young wren. I had thrown a neon yellow tennis ball for the dog which had gone into the bushes at the back of the yard. The dog disappeared into the bushes and when she emerged, I noticed that while she was carrying something, it certainly wasn't neon yellow. She gingerly

dropped the wren at my feet. The wren was alive. Shocked, but alive. I scooped it up. I don't know if that was the right protocol. I was startled and acted on impulse. As I walked toward the bushes to return the wren to where she had come from, she gathered herself and flew out of my hands.

I walk the Brooklyn Bridge. I navigate the subway system. I make it to Central Park and I do not see the heron. I go to the places he has been sighted. But I see no electric blue bird. When I return to her apartment, I tell the girl that I had a great day. I tell her I'd spent time with my cousin and had lunch with a friend. I had eaten a cheese and tomato sandwich in the park next to a stranger on a bench. I had watched starlings flying overhead and ducks floating nearby. I sleep next to her again at night and look at the tree outside her bedroom window. We wake up and I take the train home in the afternoon. It is cold in Brooklyn.

I didn't sleep well in Brooklyn. I sleep much better at home with the dog curled up next to me. Her breath is steady and she snores a little which makes me smile. Her paws dance as she dreams and her breath quickens. Her dream concludes and the soft and steady breathing commences again. I stroke her ears because they are soft and warm. I want to go out on the kayak in the morning, but I'll sleep in a little.

I see the heron again at the river. He is just as I remember him. He is in an alcove that is a little farther out than I am used to. It is late morning and other kayakers and rowers and paddle boarders and drunk fishermen are out on the water too. I wave at a

fellow kayaker and am surprised that it doesn't feel forced or uncomfortable. The sun is warm.

## ON WALLOWING IN AN UNMADE BED

There are times when lying in bed feels like my only option--as though it prevents the day from beginning and therefore eliminating my need to participate in it. I curl up with my dog, Kevin, a 42.2 pound rescue dog. Kevin was found as a stray dog on the side of a busy road outside of San Juan. I like to imagine her adventures in Puerto Rico--giving her a resourceful and confident personality as she navigates scuffles with bigger, scarier, more street savvy dogs. In my imagined adventures she is often a very slick thief who manages to outrun danger just in the knick of time. She returns back to a makeshift doggy hobo camp and shares the goods she's managed to pilfer.

The reality is that she was starving and sick with heartworms. In the year that I've had her, I have noticed that her instinct lies outside of the typical fight or flight mechanic. She simply shuts down. She closes her eyes and curls her body up tightly. She waits for danger to pass.

I have found out that my preferred reaction to a global pandemic is to lie in bed and wait for it to pass.

On March 4<sup>th</sup> of 2020, I left my home in northern Virginia sometime mid-morning to attend a writing conference in San Antonio, Texas. The conference was a precursor to the main event of helping John, a dear friend, move home to Virginia from San Diego.

I'm not one for remembering dates, even important recurring events like birthdays and anniversaries seem arbitrary. I don't see how the simple passage of time merits celebration. The dates I choose to remember often lie on the precipice of a shift or change.

I got sober on September 6th, 2014. I remember the day because I was being discharged from a Richmond City hospital. I moved into my parents home in northern Virginia. The heroin



addiction and alcoholism I thought I'd kept so carefully hidden were out in the open and I lay in bed hoping that I would be able to overcome them.

I met John, shortly after moving into my parents house, outside of a crowded AA meeting. He was smart, funny, and extremely charismatic. I was initially irritated by him because he seemed the type to be able to get away with anything. John never bought his own cigarettes--rather, he would saunter up and slyly ask if you had a menthol. I smoked Marlboro 27's and when I offered him one he shrugged and said, "Beggars can't be choosers." My shoes were worn through to the soles and he wore loafers that looked like they could rival the price of my car.

I would see John every week. His laugh was infectious and I watched how people were drawn to him. On the occasion that his attention was focused on me, I felt a sense of being heralded into the fold. I sense of warmth and belonging that I hadn't anticipated needing washed over me and I began to seek out that feeling--that connection.

My sobriety grew stronger alongside John's, though he had been sober for a couple years longer. He began sitting next to me in AA meetings and clapping loudly--obnoxiously--when I would stand to celebrate increasingly longer lengths since my last drink. We went on like this for the better part of a year. I knew little outside of how John made me feel--special, seen, validated.

When I didn't see him for several weeks I began to question others about his whereabouts. "Well, you know he lives in Philadelphia, right? He's in school up there." I'd had no idea. I had no idea that John, who had regaled me with stories about his life as a high school dropout, had been accepted to the University of Pennsylvania. It all seemed perfectly on brand for someone like John--someone who seemed able to navigate the world with ease.

John came home most weekends and stayed for the summers. On a particularly muggy summer night he asked me if I would like to drive out and watch a meteor shower with him. It was the first time that we would be spending time alone together. We drove out past the lights of

the suburbs and lay blankets down in a clearing. We giggled and teased each other and when small white trails began to cross the sky we competed to see who could see more of them.

Our friendship only grew stronger. We camped on beaches in the Outer Banks of North Carolina and hiked the Appalachian Mountains. We illegally swam across the Potomac River between Virginia and Maryland and made jokes about the security of our borders. John graduated from UPenn and began applying for positions with the Department of Homeland Security. He watched as I applied to and was given my choice of graduate programs for writing.

We lived together in a shabby house with a couple of other friends. John wanted a dog and I went with him when he found Boots, an excitable beagle, and brought him home. John was quickly promoted within DHS to a position as an asylum officer. He had to take a polygraph for a security clearance and came home and laughed at the stony faces he'd been met with when he told them about the times he had bought dope in Tijuana. John's work hours increased and Boots howled for hours after John left the house in the mornings. So I began sitting with him until the very last minutes before I had to go to work myself.

I accepted a spot at George Mason University to get my MFA in Creative Writing. John was ecstatic. He was glad I wouldn't be leaving for some place in the middle of the country that he wouldn't want to visit. I read him the acceptance letter as we assembled a children's drum kit I'd bought on a whim. John said he'd be interested in learning the drums and I thought I might be too. We played the kit once but took many pictures with it. We justified our lack of playing by blaming it on Boots' nervousness around loud noises.

John moved to San Diego as a career move. He claimed it was where he had always hoped to end up, though I only remember him talking like that a few months before he left. I visited him in San Diego and while the ocean was beautiful, I could sense a distance that I

attributed to our evolving lives on different coasts. Weeks after that trip John called to tell me that he was drinking again—that he didn’t think he needed to be sober—and while it terrified me, I tried not to impart my anxieties on him. I realized that the common bond of sobriety was not the only thing that held us together and while life would be different now, it did not have to change us.

In the weeks leading up to the conference and the cross-country journey that would follow I fretted about whether I was smart enough, articulate enough, emotionally strong enough. Enough.

As the Assistant Nonfiction Editor for a small literary journal, I sat in a booth promoting our latest issue and attended panels about writing and publishing that made me nervous that I completely lacked the disposition for a career in writing or publishing.

I had dreaded the entire event. I was an assistant editor in name only and had been lucky enough to be able to rely on the kindness of my editor and defer most major decisions to her. Though I was becoming more confident in my own decision making and choices, I still felt an overwhelming need to please those in authority—even if that authority was almost ten years my junior and a genre editor who was in no way authoritative, and in every way a kind friend.

This feeling of inadequacy pops up from time to time for me. I find myself reckoning with the life I led as an active drug addict with the life I lead now which is far tamer and much less chaotic. The terror of the conference was that it would enable me to be in the room with people I admire; an opportunity to fail in a room with people I admire; an opportunity for people I admire to pull back the curtain of my sobriety and see me—and I might not be enough.

This was my first time at the conference, which is held annually and characteristically fills the convention centers of the hosting cities. The San Antonio convention center was filled with whispers of the novel coronavirus and cancelled events. Many had chosen to forgo the

convention as the city of San Antonio had announced a state of emergency due to an uptick of virus cases. Several of my friends who were set to attend the event had cancelled their flights. Part of me had wanted to cancel mine, not for fear of the virus, but for fear of an unfamiliar and overwhelming experience. But I knew that John was waiting for me in San Diego. All the same, the world seemed no different aside from a half-hearted encouragement to wave instead of shaking hands and either way I would have felt somewhat disconnected.

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of March I left San Antonio and flew to San Diego. I'd spoken to John almost every day since his move to San Diego. I was one of the first people he told when he decided to drink three fourths of a glass of red wine. I remember being so terrified by such a small number. But his life seemed to be going along happily. His boyfriend moved out from DC to California and they planned to start a life together. John told me about instances of infidelity, but they seemed innocuous and overshadowed by John's want to start a life with someone.

The space between calls began to grow longer. Conversations began to take a different tone. In what seemed like an instant, the relationship crumbled and John's mental and physical health seemed to follow suit. I wasn't sure what parts of the story I was missing. His demeanor changed so suddenly. He told me he thought he might die. He was rapidly losing weight and the doctors couldn't figure out what was happening to his body. What frightened me most was that I simply didn't trust John's account of things. Holes popped up consistently, but John was a person that I trusted and I wasn't ready to let go of that. When he asked me to fly out to San Diego to help him move back to Virginia, I said yes without initial hesitation.

I upgraded my seat to business class when I couldn't really afford it. I just wanted to feel a little more comfortable and have a little more peace and quiet. I was immediately annoyed by the strikingly blonde and handsome flight attendant who, in an effort to make sure I was

completely comfortable, made me feel wholly out of place by offering me a hot towel I had no idea what to do with. The man in his mid-thirties next to me took every complimentary item offered him with such confidence and familiarity that I eventually began to follow his lead. When he noticed me imitating his orders for seltzer water with lime and mixed nuts, he smiled at me and I turned red.

I landed in San Diego just before 10 o'clock. I worried when the baggage carousel took twenty minutes to begin unloading bags. I worried that I would keep John waiting so I texted him apologetically and he responded that he would be leaving for the airport in a few minutes and not to worry. I sat outside the terminal and watched as my fellow passengers got into cars and drove away. I watched as an SUV tried to parallel park and dinged the car behind him. The driver of the car got out and started shouting. I locked eyes with an older couple who had been on my flight and were waiting for their son to pick them up and we laughed. Their son was late, and I clung to the little bit of familiarity they provided while we all waited. We all looked on hopefully at every approaching set of headlights—me hoping that John would pick me up before their son got there so that I wouldn't be completely alone. Their son came and they waved goodbye and I sat down on a steel bench.

John picked me up from the airport two hours after he said he would be there and well after midnight. He was disheveled and manic and his car was filled with his two dogs--he'd adopted Quinn to keep Boots company-- and everything that he owned. We strapped my suitcase to the roof and I tried to make myself small enough to fit into the crowded passenger seat. "I just have to get out of here," he said. *Me too*, I thought. I smiled and did a pretty good job of seeming calm and optimistic for the road trip home. Inside the car, I felt burdened by the things piled on top of me and the prospect of traveling with a friend who's broken life had made him almost unrecognizable.

John chain smoked Marlboro 27's and popped Xanax across the country. Occasionally, he would hit a vape pen that whispered the scent of marijuana. He asked me if it made me uncomfortable and I said that it did not so long as he wasn't driving. On the rare occasion that he drove, he would hit the pen when he thought I was asleep and I found myself saddened but not surprised that I no longer trusted him. My suitcase remained precariously strapped to the top of the car. Each night, in the parking lots of cheap hotels, I would wipe the carcasses of innumerable insects off the suitcase knowing there would only be more the next night. We found pet-friendly hotels and stayed in separate rooms so John could look after the dogs and I could be well-rested for driving.

We stopped in Sedona and bought crystals and vortex sand. We bought matching rings set with Mallacola stones to "promote emotional balance." We drove to Santa Fe and stayed with my mother's best friend—an eccentric painter who gave John a joint when he said he wasn't feeling well, took me out for Mexican food, and made impossibly strong French press coffee in the morning.

We visited the Painted Desert and Petrified Forest National Park where I walked over cracked earth and stood on stone tree trunks. I walked until the car was a speck on the horizon—a buoy in the distance that kept me safe. John asked if it would be wrong to take a fragment of the petrified wood with us and I said yes and immediately felt like a killjoy from both his reaction and my own rigidity.

The walk in the desert was also an opportunity for the dogs to run for a bit. The National Park Service only asked that dogs be leashed and picked up after. John fed the two and we watched them run around us. They stuck close to us and to each other and for a moment I something similar to the calm of a clearing during a meteor shower.

Our walk in the desert caused John to feel sick. His body hunched over and he turned gray and the face I almost recognized became completely foreign and pained. I thought if I could just get him home—past the desert and the cheap hotel beds with overly starched sheets—he would be able to be the person that I remembered.

At rest stops I would check my email while Boots and Quinn whined in the back seat. The university where I was in the second year of my MFA program was sending increasingly panicked messages about the rise in virus cases. I was safe in the uninviting desert, but New Mexico turned into Texas which blended into Oklahoma. Trees began to line the highways where red rock mesas had been; where desert had been; where flat fields with dairy farms and wind turbines had been. And John still smoked Marlboro 27's and popped Xanax and slept.

We stayed in a nondescript hotel in Oklahoma City under a freeway. The lights from the parking lot shone into my room all night and I couldn't sleep despite being exhausted from the drive. I watched the local news but turned it off when I realized that every segment was about the virus. I wanted to wallow in my own unmade bed—the bed whose sheets smelled like lavender from my detergent and whose white duvet cover had muddy paw print stains I'd never bothered to get out. I knew the panicked emails and local news segments would follow me home but something in me also knew that home was safe and messy and I could close myself in and feel as though nothing could get to me.

In Arkansas the trees that dotted the side of the highway looked like the trees back home. The road curved and I adjusted the speed of the car in accordance with the elevation—something I'd not had to compensate for while we were in the desert and the flat plains. I continued to get emails and messages from home. Sometimes they were updates about the virus and some were

friends asking for updates on the trip; updates on John. I had hope that he was starting to feel better, less broken, the closer we got to home. I think I thought I could will him back to recognition. I wanted to will the world back to recognition. He turned the car stereo up when I spoke to him.

Outside of Nashville, I pulled off to get gas. Tornados had ripped through the area the week before and the gas station had no roof and only three walls left. Remarkably, the merchandise inside appeared mostly untouched. I found myself marveling for a little too long at an intact Dorito's shelf display surrounded by rubble. There was something utterly ridiculous in the notion that *that* is what nature would leave untouched.

I stopped at another cheap and nondescript hotel in Nashville. John screamed at the clerk at the hotel desk and called him incompetent for charging a pet fee for our rooms. I sank into my seat in the car and tried to hide from him when he returned with our keys. His body was so thin I could see his shoulder blades sharp through his t-shirt. It looked as though he was trembling with anger but he could have been trembling from sickness. I'm not sure which one I would have preferred.

We went to our separate rooms. I unstrapped my suitcase from the roof of the car and wiped it down—a task I was now used to. I waited until I thought he was settled in his room before stepping out. I wandered around Nashville with no real intention of anything other than looking for a piece of home. I found a hole in the wall bar where I ordered a soda water and a barbeque sandwich. A band consisting of a guitar player with a vintage Gibson jumbo that made her look like Emmylou Harris, a fiddle player with yellow in his mustache, and a banjo player who I imagined would be a really playful grandfather, played bluegrass while a middle-aged couple swayed on an otherwise empty dance floor.



John wanted to make our last stop before home a hike in the Smoky Mountains. I remembered how the casual walk in the desert had turned him frail and gray and made a case for taking a photo at an overlook instead. My hesitation irritated him and he snapped that no one goes to the Smoky Mountains just to take a photograph and I thought of the dusty drum kit we'd bought only to take photographs. We hiked for a mile or so and he softened a little and asked if I would like to take a picture with the blue mountains in the background.

I turned the email alert on my phone to silent. As we drove up through southern Virginia and the small towns on the highway signs became more recognizable and so did John, to an extent. I couldn't help but have the sinking feeling that I was no longer outrunning the virus and I couldn't ignore the feeling that the person sitting next to me smoking Marlboro 27's was not the friend I had envisioned bringing home. I no longer had the safety of driving for hours and only checking for news at rest stops. I no longer had the safety of concentrating on the road and the music to avoid conversations. I was returning to a world that was paused and a friendship that was frail, gray and in no way reminiscent of what it had once been.

Pulling onto my street and untethering my suitcase from the top of the car for the last time, I shuffled into the house and into my bedroom. I had left the bed unmade in my rush to leave for the airport. I'd wanted to get to John. Typically, I find it incredibly uncomfortable to return to an unmade bed, but after nights in hotel beds made with perfect hospital corners and a pervasive uncertainty of what the world would look like—what my friend would look like—the next day, there was something lovely about curling up with the dog who left the paw print stains on my duvet, burying my face in my pillows and deciding to simply rest for a while.

I watched Kevin's breath make her belly rise and fall. I looked at the curve of her small body and didn't see the tightness of fear she'd lived in when I first brought her home. That

tightness had slowly loosened as she began to trust me, to trust that I loved her, that I would feed her, that I wouldn't hurt her.

I wonder about the expectations of friendship. Shortly after returning home, it became clear that my relationship with John had shifted. I no longer understood what I was to him--was I an equal, a support? What exactly is a friendship and how do we navigate them when they change? More confounding was that I didn't know what John was to me. I watched him lash out, manipulate, and hurt people. I began to question if that side--the side that said "beggars can't be choosers" when offered a cigarette--had always been lying underneath and I just hadn't seen it. I watched, feeling helpless, as he berated mutual acquaintances for trivial actions he took as direct slights. He held a set of standards for the world that he would not abide by, and that the world could not anticipate.

I wrote him a letter out of concern--out of love. I wrote to him to tell him that I was worried about him. I wrote because I feared a direct conversation. I feared that I would back down, that I wouldn't be heard, that I would stumble over my words.

I revised and edited the letter over and over. I took out any hint of an ultimatum--"I don't think I can be around you," shifted to "I'm sorry if I've been withdrawn." I ran the letter by mutual friends who all agreed that his behavior was concerning and should be addressed.

What I failed, or refused, to understand was what John was capable of receiving. I wrote to the friend I'd sat under the stars with. But the person who received the letter was a far cry from that friend. Minutes after receiving the letter, John wrote a flurry of messages to me. In them it became clear that I had not fulfilled his expectations. The letter had been the first time that I had questioned John. I had looked up to him and supported him. I thought that I had grown with him; that we'd supported each other. I realized that perhaps we had simply grown alongside each other and when the commonality of sobriety was gone and thousands of miles sat between us, we'd

grown apart. John effectively told me that I had failed him on the trip across the country. He cut all contact with me.

I lay in bed for days or maybe weeks. I vacillated between anger and grief. I questioned what I could have done, or should have done. I have finally landed on the idea that I could have tried to understand John as he was rather than who I wanted him to be. But I also understand that nothing I could have done would have met his expectations, because I'm not even sure he knew what they were. I spent so much time questioning my identity as a writer and as a friend. And perhaps it would have been healthier not to dwell for so long. But the gift I can take--as well as the hurt or the grief or the feeling of inadequacy--is that I was able to have the experiences at all. I didn't stay in bed and wait for it to pass.

## **WALKING: MOTHER AND CHILD**

Roughly 10,000 years ago, a woman walked with her young child for a mile along the muddy shore of Lake Otero in what is now New Mexico. Today, the lake has evaporated. What was once a landscape lush with vegetation and grasslands spreading like the prairies of the great plains is a white desert. The dunes of the Tularosa Basin exist with their own different movement. Instead of a humid and lush landscape, one feels fine grains of gypsum sand on their face when the wind blows.

The shift began 12,000 years ago as the Ice Age climate began to change. Rains became less frequent and as the large lake disappeared into the encroaching sands, gypsum crystals were left behind and broken down by the winds. We are left with white dunes—the result of the white sulfate crystals. We are left with a salty desert air; the salt reminds us of the life that inhabited this space. A lush lakebed is now known as White Sands.

We know of the woman and child because their footprints have been fossilized in the former banks of Lake Otero. They track for longer than a mile telling a vague story of their journey. I marvel at the informed imagined space the scientists who have been researching these fossilized footprints live in and I enter into my own imagined space. The scientists tell the story of the landscape and I wonder about the story of the woman and child. I wonder about a connection I will never know about that existed 10,000 years ago.

The scientific importance of the footprints is that they exist among prints from animals of the time. They give evidence of how humans interacted with their surroundings and lived among the wildlife and not just beside it.

I walk with my dog Kevin along the wooded trail by our house. I've seen ruby throated hummingbirds here during the summer. Kevin wasn't particularly reactive to them, so I was able to watch them working for a while. Their wings beating into a blur and making me dizzy. Their long thin beaks searching the wildflowers that dot the edges of the trail and mix with the poison ivy that I carefully avoid and honeysuckle I take gingerly in my hands and suck on for the drop of sugary water that reminds me of childhood.

We walk the same trail most mornings. Kevin, a 2 year old Labrador mix I adopted a year and a half ago, walks beside or slightly ahead of me. When in front, she glances back to make sure I am still with her. I walk in silence. I walk at a fairly brisk pace, but slow enough to be able to notice the deer that occasionally cross the path down to the stream that runs alongside it. After heavy rains, I look at the prints left on the muddy trail. Some parts of this trail never seem to be dry—just after a raised bridge that crosses the stream; just after a sharp bend in the path where I have been tripped by tree roots; just before the mark where Kevin and I typically turn back and head for home.

I do my best to walk around the mud, leaving little trace that I was there. I see bicycle tire tracks and the prints from other, larger dogs that have not deviated to the edges. They are the signs of life that I notice on the trail. I occasionally am passed by a

jogger, and while we acknowledge each other, there is only the fleeting moment of physical closeness, only the hint of acknowledgement. I am likely to learn more about these joggers, whose faces blend together, from the footprints I will see from their sneakers. Some barrel through and I imagine the dark blackish water that will splash onto their shins. Others will slow and walk along the edges like me. And I wonder if the others notice the tracks that I leave.

The scientists who study the fossilized footprints in White Sands debate on whether they are the footprints of a young woman or an adolescent boy. Most lean towards the idea of a young woman. As they have studied the tracks, they have noticed how her weight has shifted from one foot to the other. The absence of the toddler's footprints next to her during these stretches implies that she carried the child—shifting them back and forth across her body. The scientists do not delve into why she was walking along the lake shore, and if they have hypotheses about it, they have not published them.

But I think about the woman walking with her child. And I think about how I walked down city streets with my mother. I remember her carrying me, even though I felt too old to be carried. I remember resisting and then feeling the warmth of being held, feeling safe, and settling in. Almost as though I were surrendering my own want for independence in favor of knowing that I just wasn't ready for it yet. When walking, my mother's hand kept me safe from traffic and unevenly paved sidewalks. Her hand was security and always knowing where to go.

In the past, I have had a tendency to look down at my feet and carefully anticipate each step on a hike. This habit came after many slips on loose rocks or raised tree roots. The fear of twisting an ankle and being left dependent on help to get me off the trail prompted this awareness. I have noticed that while walking with Kevin, the tendency is to look forward. I glance at the ground when I feel it becoming uneven. But I watch her and her body language. When her slight frame tenses, her head raised and ears forward, I become more aware of the movement in the woods.

We see adolescent deer drinking from the stream. She sees them first and while her body bristles with curiosity, she glances to me for reassurance. I watch the deer for a moment. I kneel beside Kevin and she watches me as I observe them, glancing between my face and the young spotted deer. I wonder if their mother is nearby, or if they are of a mature enough age to have ventured out alone. They seem to be right on the cusp of adulthood. They move confidently, and though I am sure they have spotted us, they do not view us as a threat, and I am both grateful of that and worried that they are unaware of the damage that humans can do.

10,000 years ago, a child trusted the person that was carrying them. I feel confident in that assertion. A scientist would say that it is likely that the child was carried based on the disappearance and reappearance of the smaller footprints and the variation of weight distribution in the larger ones. An anthropologist might say that the mother carried the child based on cultural norms of the time. I read that the original, ancestral

form of bonding is the attachment between parent and child. I wonder when we began to confuse that attachment with love. I think of how I define love—specifically familial love; unconditional is a word that I want to use but hesitate on.

While browsing articles about the footprints, I see an artist rendering of a scene in which a young woman with long black hair clutches a naked toddler to her chest. She is slightly bent at the waist and wearing, what I think the artist thought to be a primitive, hide dress that stops at her thighs. It looks like a mini dress that Twiggy would have worn for a Warhol shoot and I question whether the artist rendered this based on research or her own imagination. The child is crying, and the woman looks off and to the side with concern. The sky is ferocious, and lightning is striking in the distance. Just behind her, are two mammoths whose trunks and curved tusks are quite menacing. Rain falls in sheets at a diagonal.

I read in the article that this image is associated with the fact that scientists have indeed found fossilized tracks of Columbian mammoths in this region. They've found evidence of giant ground sloths and dire wolves and American lions. The former banks of Lake Otero are rich with fossilized tracks and the pools of water that formed in the lakebed as the water dried up became watering holes for all kinds of species.

What interests the scientists most is the relationship between the wildlife and humans. Inside the tracks of a giant ground sloth—a creature that when reared up would stand 7-8 feet tall—they found human footprints. These suggest and give clues as to humans stalking and hunting. They give insight into the risks of these people as they navigated the land. They show the risk of survival. Evidence showed that these hunts



often ended badly for the humans. About one in five were successful and to fail was often to die.

Few tools have been excavated in the area. The people were nomadic, following their prey and existing with few comforts. So, was attachment their comfort? The tracks of the young woman show a journey of about a mile. She turns around and returns to where she came from. I read an article that makes me laugh because I find it ridiculous. There are only a few lines on the White Sands National Park website that infer that human prints found in larger mammoth tracks could have been children playing. I laugh because the imagery associated with children jumping into the pools formed by mammoth footprints completely goes against the artist rendering of the menacing creatures kicking their feet and flailing their trunks behind the woman and child weathering a ferocious thunderstorm.

I'm not entirely sure why I adopted Kevin. I had been longing for the companionship of a dog having come to a realization that, after several failed romantic relationships, I was not capable of giving and receiving love. I was not capable of the vulnerability and compromise and accountability required to foster and maintain companionship with another person. I felt stifled by relationships. I felt trapped by invisible ties that restricted where I went and who I spoke to and how I interacted with the world. I felt burdened by the simple act of telling another human being where I was going. I felt resentful and as though a freedom to act and be was being slowly stripped away from me. And I felt incredibly lonely.

I browsed images on shelter websites for months before actually taking the jump to visit one of them. My mother was also in the process of looking for a small companion dog. She had resigned herself to living beside my father in their small townhouse, with little interaction. She told me of a shelter she was visiting and asked if I would meet her there. I didn't tell her that I was thinking of adopting a dog too.

I walked into what looked like a residential home, but what certainly smelled like a dog kennel. Volunteers in matching neon t-shirts shuffled around frantically trying to appease a fairly large swath of persons crammed into the small waiting room of the facility. I was taken back towards a room that smelled of dog urine and sanitizer and was filled with cages occupied by dogs—some barking, some whining, some looking out from their small spaces with big terrified eyes. I know that there is practicality to these setups. I know that they are an efficient way of housing these animals for a short time. But I think of the children kept in cages along the US border and I associate and anthropomorphize these dogs with the emotion I've seen on news broadcasts. The practicality of the setup also lends to our human nature to protect.

I saw a small brown dog lying in a cage. Unlike the others, she seemed to have little interaction with the world outside of her immediate space. Balled up tightly, as though to make herself invisible, I asked to see her. What should have been smooth short brown fur had a grimy texture and her hip and rib bones defined her slow resigned movements.

I stroked her face and teared up and knew that I needed to take her home. The adoption volunteer told me that she had tested positive for heartworm and would need to

undergo a fairly rigorous treatment. She was a stray that had been found on the side of the road outside of San Juan, so she was not housebroken or socialized. I looked at the woman, who seemed like she could have been fresh out of high school and told her that I understood and would still like to adopt. I was already feeling a sense of possession and ownership that has since been replaced by a general respect for the life that I brought into my home that day.

I named the dog Kevin because it made me laugh. A distinctly human name for a distinctly canine companion gave me a sense of connection and imposed a certain level of personality that had yet to be uncovered.

Kevin slept for the first two months that I had her. I would wake in the night and feel her stomach to make sure that she was breathing. When she moved it was only to be fed and to go between soft comfortable spaces that she could bury into and make herself small. She cowered from other people and dogs. We were restricted to short walks because of her heartworm treatment. I feared that the anxiety of seeing other people and dogs and cars and bicycles was putting an unhealthy level of stress on her heart—which the veterinarian had told me would be dangerous for her condition.

I worried about her constantly and debated whether I had taken on too much. I had been incapable of loving and caring about the feelings of a self-sufficient human being and had somehow thought that caring for a dependent dog would be more manageable. I had discounted the complexity of her fears and instincts.

But I loved that she trusted me enough to curl up next to me at night—fitting into the curve of my body as I lay on my side stroking her rough fur and feeling the warmth of

her breath on my face. I felt immense joy when she began wagging the tail that usually curled up between her legs and under her body at mealtimes. And over time her tail would flick back and forth when I would walk into a room, or when I would speak to her, or simply look at her. I felt honored that an animal that had not trusted before would trust me. I felt genuine joy and pride when she began holding her head up on our lengthening walks and she began venturing further from me in order to explore.

The White Sands toddler's footprints show up periodically across the mile-long tracks. They are beside the woman's prints and when they are not present, the depth of the woman's prints increases and show shifts in the distribution of her weight as she walks. The artist rendering of the woman carrying a child amplifies the sense of protection while the actual prints of the child beside the woman imply a burgeoning independence. I wonder if she held the child's hand the way my mother held my hand through city streets. I wonder if she guided the child and pointed out both danger and beauty. I wonder if the child wanted to venture further but realized their dependence, attachment, love for the woman that was their protector.

Dogs have evolved over time to be more attractive and relatable to humans. 33,000 years of domestication have influenced the physical evolution of a dog's facial features. The term "puppy dog eyes" is actually explained by the development of a muscle in a dog's forehead named the levator anguli oculi medialis (LOAM). The LOAM raises the inner eyebrows—a feature that wolf ancestors and descendants do not

have. Some domesticated breeds like Huskies and shepherds—the more wolf like breeds—have less pronounced LOAM activity. Other breeds, further in appearance from their ancestors have active LOAM that mirror the expressions of their owners.

I have been taught to never look a strange dog or predatory animal in the eyes. Their instinct tells them that it is a challenge and it can cause aggression or fear depending on the animal—either way, an undesirable result for a person just trying to connect. I honored this teaching when I first adopted Kevin. Looking instead at her frail body and stroking her chest and sides. Slowly I would make eye contact, but look away gently, shyly. I began to feel her watching me and unlike the confinement I felt as the result of the perceived watchful eyes of various romantic partners, I felt a comfort in Kevin knowing and watching my movements as a gauge of my general well-being.

She gained weight and the hip and rib bones that had been so pronounced became softer lines. Her coat became smooth and soft and shone when the sunlight hit it. I began to experience the world as she saw it, noticing the birds that flew overhead and the walnuts that fell loudly from the tree in our back yard. I realized that her confidence was directly tied to mine, and when she hesitated at heavy summer rain, I ran out ahead of her, looking upwards, laughing, and holding my hands out until she walked tenderly towards me. I watched her swim only after she saw me wading forward into a shallow body of water.

White Sands has yielded many fossilized prints besides those of the woman and child. These prints tell stories of the interaction between species. They inform the

influence of human beings, their hunting tactics and influence on the decline of animal populations. They show the movement that existed before the movement of the shifting dunes. They show a harsh but natural environment—relationships in nature that categorize prey from predator. They show an evolutionary progression—sometimes heartbreaking, sometimes joyful—in which the earth dictates a natural order of living things. What strikes me when I look at the images of these fossils is that they have existed for thousands of years and yet, there is still an impermanence to them. Scientists are actively working to preserve the fossils—a difficult job because of accelerated soil erosion in recent years.

Present with the signs of life is the knowledge of death. Death is always the same. It is a life that once was but no longer is and, in its place, we are only left with absence. The fossils themselves are a perfect example of this absence. They are depressions in the earth—taken and buried and uncovered. They exist as a reminder of the impermanence of life despite their ability to last.

The footprints in the trail that Kevin and I walk will not last past the next rain. They will be covered by other tracks and by shifting dirt. They will be obscured by the leaves that will fall in the autumn. I know that Kevin will not live forever and while I imagine that I belong to her, I accept that she does not, in fact, belong to me. She is not mine to possess, but she is what I choose to protect. She is an avenue for me to feel a connection, sense of attachment, and even an idea of love. I've walked the trail alone once. I was attempting to be a jogger like the ones who pass me on my walks with Kevin.

I focused on the ground in front of me, weary of tree roots and loose gravel. I heard my feet padding quickly down the trail and only realized the spots I had seen the hummingbirds, tasted the honeysuckle, observed the young deer, once I had passed them. I came home and washed the black mud off my shins and took my muddy trail running shoes off so they could dry after plowing through the muddy spots I am typically so careful to avoid. I only remember the absence of observation on the run and the sounds of my breathing as my muscles and joints propelled me further, and then back along the same track I had started on.

And so, I continue to walk the path with Kevin by my side, occasionally pulling ahead of me. I accept that while she is not mine to own, the bond and relationship and protection we provide each other is what ties me to a sense of place. I recognize the impermanence of our relationship. I recognize the limit of the connection that I am able to have with her, though that limit does seem to ebb further past where I imagine it to be. I realize that with a connection comes a sense of purpose and not a burden. The burden is in the fear of failure to protect.

The woman at White Sands protected the child for at least the mile forward in their journey and the trek back from where they had started. There are differing opinions on the purpose of their journey. The idea that she would hunt while carrying an infant feels removed, while the idea of foraging and possibly even teaching the child how to interact with the landscape doesn't seem too far from the imagination.

In revisiting the artist rendering, I acknowledge the want to showcase the harshness of a life devoted to survival, but I want the nuance of connection to be considered as well. That we are capable of more than simple attachment; that we find purpose and have developed the ability to move that sense of attachment—love—outside of blood relation and necessity is something to be considered. Though, I suppose, those stories might be the most difficult to tell.



## **BIOGRAPHY**

Sarah Wilson graduated from WT Woodson High School in 2006. She received her Bachelor of Arts from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2016. She currently works with Paoletti Guitars as head of their North American marketing branch.