Empty Lungs: Essays from the Inside Out

Rachel Erin Rosolina

West Virginia University

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Empty Lungs: Essays from the Inside Out

Rachel Erin Rosolina

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ABSTRACT

Empty Lungs: Essays from the Inside Out

Rachel E. Rosolina

*Empty Lungs: Essays from the Inside Out* is a collection of creative nonfiction essays that explore my personal growth, interactions with family and community, and travel experiences. These essays have been written over the past three years, but span nearly my entire life.
for my mother
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WEEKDAYS: A PREFACE

German flows from the throat of Rosalind Ocvirk as I follow her round silhouette up the cobblestone alley to her boarding house. Four study abroad students, including myself, have been assigned to live with her for the next five weeks. A new roommate, Carrie—a German major back at Murray State in Kentucky—nods, carrying on a halting conversation. The other two roommates walk with their heads tilted, listening. My biceps knot under the weight of my red dufflebag as I focus on not tripping over the bumps in the road; I can’t understand a word they’re saying. After months of filling out forms and hours of flying, it is not until this moment that I fully comprehend the fact that I am in Bregenz, Austria, with not one German lesson behind me. In fact, I have only the German/English dictionary that I glanced through during the seven-hour layover in Chicago, though I found I was too jittery to focus on anything other than finding a decent food stand and checking, again, that my boarding pass was still in my front backpack pocket. Taking a deep breath, I try to stay calm, reminding myself I chose this trip, to study abroad in Austria.

Frau Ocvirk pauses halfway up the hill, squinting down at me in the bright afternoon sun; her hair is pure white and cut short.
“Why you quiet? Tired from trip?” Her eyes are sharp.

“Sí.” I answer, immediately realizing my mistake.

Frau frowns, and I flush with embarrassment. Carrie grins and pats my shoulder.

“Ja!” She laughs.

For the rest of the walk, I do no more than nod and smile.

* 

My life has been a progression from one small goal to the next, each movement forward built on choices. When I was younger, I chose to quit gymnastics out of fear of broken limbs; I chose to take up writing because the books I checked out at the public library opened my eyes to new worlds; I chose to work with children because they made me feel important. I often wonder, looking back, how I would have turned out had I made different decisions. Sometimes those choices have seemed impulsive, both to me and to those around me, but each new direction has refined my sense of self.

I’ve found that testing experiences, the ones I used to avoid, help me grow the most. Traveling abroad, for instance, situates me so far out of my element that I am able to gain a new perspective on who I am and where I came from. When I am open to different cultures and ideologies and values, my understanding of the world expands. The process of discovery takes time and is often uncomfortable, but without challenges, I would never advance. When I first arrived in Bregenz, Austria, I felt like the uneducated tourist I was: frustrated. I began to realize, as I tried to buy a phone card, order at a restaurant, or even find a place to use the internet, that my worldview was much narrower than I had thought. I’d traveled before and had assumed I could handle living in a German-speaking country for five weeks. I would be taking classes in
English for most of the day, anyway. I did not foresee I would find myself voiceless for the first time in my life.

* 

Every day, Frau Ocvirk attempts to tutor me in the basics of German. Instead of teaching me colors or letters or numbers, she begins with food and furniture, whatever her eyes land on first. At breakfast, she points at various items around the small, but bright dining room, questioning my knowledge. *Mesa,* I think as she rests her hand on the table with its plastic tablecloth. *Pan,* *jamón,* *y pastel,* her palm now hovering over the bread, the ham, the homemade currant pastry. I look up at her blankly.

"*Brot und wurst und kuchen.*" She speaks with force.

I nod and smile some more.

I feel like a child learning to speak. Sometimes it seems I can’t even hear—as if I am relying only on sight, smell, and touch to experience the world. Not knowing how to communicate forces me to recognize how much I take communication for granted. Though body language is significant, almost everything I convey is processed through words. I talk in words. I think in words. I write in words. I need words to articulate the basics—to tell someone how I feel or what I would like to eat or where I am going on my walk. My stay in Austria is akin to being captured in a helpless child’s body.

* 

By the second week, I spend most of my day outside, wandering around the small village or sitting by Lake Constance, watching the locals. I learn to avoid my Frau when I am in the house; I peek out my bedroom door in the mornings to see if the long, dark hallway is empty before dashing to the shower room, or I walk through the front door after class as quietly as possible,
paying attention to which stairs creak on my way down. Her loud demeanor and insistence that we talk scares me. She made it clear on the first evening that she does not think students without a background in German should be allowed to apply to the program. “They will be lost,” she told us, looking directly at me.

While sitting at the small table in my bedroom, handwriting an essay for my Medieval Literature class, Frau Ocvirk bursts in without knocking. Her palms are filled with clinking change and her square wire glasses sit low on the bridge of her round nose. Her usually ruddy face is a deeper shade of red than normal; she is angry and I am the only one home to field her questions. I feel my face flush. As she bellows, she points to the laundry room across the hall, then to the smaller coins in her hand, and finally to her glasses. Though I can’t respond in German, I understand that her vision is no longer strong enough to see the small coins she’s been given in exchange for doing our laundry. She would rather have larger coins or bills. My brain fills with Spanish phrases, but I hold my tongue. I do my best to communicate with nods and trade her handful of coins for a bill. She is exasperated at her attempt to speak with me, but pats me on the back as she leaves the room. She is smiling.

*

Through the frustration I am beginning to see how much I can learn about the German language, about Austrian culture, and about my own reactions as an outsider. Except for a brief stint in Mexico, I have never been in a country where a different language is spoken. I have never traveled to a place where I must rely on memory to tell me which button is “enter” on the ATM, or where the letters on the computer keyboard are arranged differently. As I grow more comfortable in Austria, I begin comparing my culture to the Austrians’. At my parents’ house, I have to drive thirty minutes to get to town. Here, people live in small villages and either walk or
ride the train to get where they need to go. If they do use a car, it is tiny. Their stores are run by
people in the neighborhood, and have window shutters that actually work. They know how to
make beautiful bread. In fact, they seem to eat only starches, but they are all fit and healthy.
When wheezing my way up a hill to the medieval part of town (they have a medieval part of
town), an elderly woman in a simple cotton dress bicycled her way past me—uphill.

My Spanish vocabulary has also impressed me. I had no idea I retained this much. The
phrase “Como se dice ______ en Alemán?” or “How do you say ______ in German?”
continually runs through my head. I feel like a child still, but at the developmental stage where I
want to label everything.

I have a long way to go in Austria. The language barrier makes me feel like a snobbish
American monoglot, unable to get over myself enough to learn the native language, but I am
getting used to this new world where not everyone knows English or Spanish. I know how to
order ein stilles Wasser, water without seltzer, how to get around the train station on my own,
and how to apologize (entschuldigung) for hitting a complete stranger in the shins with my
rolling suitcase. But when I pass a group of girls on the sidewalk giggling and talking in German,
my first instinct is, wow, they learned German quickly. Then I remember English isn’t their first
language. Or I’ll pick up a pamphlet and stare at the German hoping it will automatically
translate into English. Or even Spanish. I’ll take what I can get.

The German is coming through, though, in the grocery store or the post office; being
submerged in it leaves little room to breathe anything but the cacophonic language.

*
In a week, I will be home in Tennessee, looking at photos and trying to remember every detail of every day. But right now, Frau Ocvirk stands at the door of my bedroom with a frown on her face. Using the little English she knows combined with German, she is teaching me phrases.

“Hoya ist Sontag.” She pulls down a finger for each day of the week. “Vot ist Morgen?”

I stare back at her, searching my limited vocabulary.

“Morning?” I say with caution.

“Ja, but Hoya ist Sontag und vot ist Morgen?” She pulls harder on her fingers, her light blue eyes squinting at me expectantly, as if they have the strength to pull the answer out of my mouth.

Suddenly, a light clicks on. Raising my eyebrows in surprise at my own understanding, I respond, “Montag!”

“Ja! Monday!” She is as excited about my Helen Keller language leap as I am.

“Sí!” I say in excitement.

* 

The night we left, Frau Ocvirk cooked a large supper of traditional Austrian fare. As we sat at her picnic table in the evening sun, eating pork chops with Salat and a potato ball, Frau seemed relaxed. Before serving dessert, she brought out a large scrapbook filled with the photos and names of all the previous study abroad students who had stayed with her. Turning toward the end of the book, she pointed at a photo of us four roommates that she had pasted in from our first day, and handed us a pen to sign the margins. As I wrote, “danke” and my name, Frau patted my back, laughing. With a smile, she handed me a small wine glass filled with a nearly clear liquid.

“Here is apple wine. This is all you get, because you will bounce off the walls.”
For the first time, I felt comfortable, despite the language barrier. It seems I had proven myself over the past five weeks, and Frau accepted me where I was. We spent the evening telling travel stories. When the sun had set, she and her husband drove our luggage back down the hill and waved goodbye.

* 

The essays in this collection attempt to express the difficulties I’ve had of learning to live in my own skin. Each essay reveals small steps I’ve made that push me toward new understandings of myself and the world around me. They start at the core, where I am vulnerable and pliable. In these essays, I expose my thought process and my motivations—whether it is a fear of judgment or the gratification of helping someone. From there I move further out, to my family and community, who taught me where I come from and where I can go. These people have been my structure, shaping me, and providing me with a frame of reference. History can be uncomfortable, but these memories—regardless of whether they are my own—help me appreciate what I have. Finally, I end in the wider world, with the realization that I have farther still to go; I will continue to learn and be challenged, even if the lesson is that the countries and towns I both love and fear will persist, as they always have, without me. And regardless of whether I grasp every important moment, I will have experienced a reality larger than my own and will be the better for it.
CORE

[kawr, kohr] noun, verb, cored, cor·ing

- noun
  1. the central part of a fleshy fruit, containing the seeds
  2. the central, innermost, or most essential part of anything
  5. the inside wood of a tree
  9. the softer interior of a piece of casehardened metal

- verb
  15. to remove the core of (fruit)
  16. to cut from the central part
  18. to form a cavity in (a molded object) by placing a core, as of sand, in the mold before pouring
LIVING FLAT

I learned to draw at Laura Ann’s Formica table. For ten years, I spent two hours a week sitting at that kitchen table making art. I cut linoleum or wood blocks to print ink lady slippers. I painted blueberries or pink and green lilies with watercolors. My favorite projects, and the ones I chose most often, were colored-pencil drawings—especially still lifes of glass bottles and vases, sometimes filled with marbles or feathers, sometimes filled with the afternoon light pouring in Laura Ann’s bay window. That kitchen table, with its gray boomerang design and shiny silver legs, became a familiar backdrop when recreating the odd beauty around me. I saw it in the shining reflections of her copper teakettle or the stark pen and ink of a lighthouse she’d made in art school.

Sitting hunched over a smooth sheet of blank paper with a glass of her homemade mint iced tea, colored pencils sprawled around me, I arranged glass bottles so the light from her kitchen window would catch the blues, greens, and browns and meld them into an unnamed color. I drew what I saw, playing with curves and shading to make the bottles appear round on the page. I darkened the shadows that separated the bottles, pushing one back, bringing one forward. Depth was an illusion.
“You need glasses.” Dr. Holsclaw-Jones’s white lab coat loomed to my right in the dark room. I could feel my left eye straining to read just another line lower.

“A, L, H… no, no, N,” I said.

“You need glasses.”

We moved to the next test—depth perception. She handed me a plastic sheet covered in circles. Each circle contained a diamond of four dots.

“Which dot pops out at you? The top, the left, the right, or the bottom?”

“Umm…” I stalled, trying to figure out whether it was a trick question. “None of them?”

“You need glasses.” She sounded bored, monotone, not the tenor of voice I’d expected for such a life-changing announcement.

All I could think was that twelve was too young for my body to start falling apart. She reassured me that the change had not been sudden, that perhaps my left eye had always been weaker.

“Your right eye just took over, that’s all.”

That’s all.

“At least we caught it now, if you had gone any longer without a check-up, the left might have become a lazy eye. Then you would have had to wear an eye patch.”

I would not have worn an eye patch.

The next week, we got the call. My glasses were in. The left lens magnified, the right was plain glass; they pinched my nose no matter which way she bent them.

“You’ll get used to it,” she said. “These will give you the depth perception you’ve been missing out on.”
I stared at the floor on the way out, hoping the other patients in the waiting room were too dilated to notice my glasses. The flat expanse of carpet made me feel less dizzy, less watched. The carpet turned to sidewalk with the jingle of the door and then to pavement. Soon, I glared at my sneakers on the floorboard of the car. Red clay caked the soles.

“You’re going to have to look up sometime.” Mom’s voice was quiet.

No I don’t, I thought.

But the floor grew boring so I peeked out the window. The world swirled lemon-lime green. I tilted my head slightly toward my mother, hoping she wouldn’t notice I had given up sulking. Through her window, I could see the creek rushing down the mountain we were climbing. It looked cold and clean, bending the afternoon light around and between the shiny rocks. I leaned forward into my seatbelt as we swung wide around the mountain curves. Rhododendron. Tulip Poplars. Wilted Daffodils. The Stevens’ new shed.

For the first time, the view popped out at me. Individual tree trunks separated from those behind, leafy branches reached for my window, and birds broke free from the blue of the sky. Before, my world sat tame on the horizon. Now it bounded at me, full force. With my hand pressed against the cold window, the familiar mountain road engulfed me.

Then I saw the power pole. The power line. As I stared, the black wire seemed to swing down like a dark jump rope. I expected Mom to swerve, but she held fast as it sped toward us in a perfect arc, closing in, its shadow already on the windshield. I ducked deep into my seat, head to knees, waiting for the shower of sparks. It never came.

“What’s wrong with you?” Mom turned to me, raising an eyebrow.
Twisting, I stared over the shoulder of my seat through the back window. The power line hung, as usual, from its wooden poles. The only thing on the road was the shadow, a thick, black line on the blue-gray asphalt.

*So this is depth perception,* I thought.

* 

I had always been proud of my vision. On our late nights in town, my family would sit at a booth in Fazoli’s, eating breadsticks and pasta, and compete to see who could read the farthest billboard.

“John Skinner Honda—Get a Free Price Quote,” I would say.

I always won. So, when I went for that first eye exam, I wasn’t surprised when Dr. Holsclaw-Jones said my right eye was 20/15. Better than perfect. I grinned to myself in the huge, faux-leather eye-doctor seat. When they tested my left eye, 20/40, I sat silent.

Living without depth perception wasn’t strange or difficult; I didn’t know it existed. As a child, I wondered what people meant when they talked about 3D; I assumed they were referring to the space you can explore in real life that doesn’t exist in photos and paintings. The way I saw it, we lived in a flat world we could move around in. I didn’t assume objects were two dimensional—seeing my bed from different angles let me know what shape it was. For me, determining where objects were in relation to one another was straightforward: whatever was in front hid what was behind and whatever was biggest was closest. I assumed that’s how it was for everyone. When I was ten, my family went to Disney World on vacation. One afternoon, at Mom’s request, we went to see the 3D Muppet Movie. Something about those blue and red glasses worked—perhaps the contrast of colored lenses forced my eyes to focus in a different way; I was amazed when Gonzo split from the screen and reached his blue, furry hand out to me.
I, in turn, reached for him, only to feel air. I understood this as an entertaining trick of the film industry, nothing more. I had no idea it imitated real life.

*

At Laura Ann’s, my glasses changed more than just my looks. The first time I wore them for an art lesson, Laura Ann looked at me quizzically, then sat down across the table to work. I waited.

Glancing back up, she tossed her long blonde braid over her shoulder. “Have you always worn glasses?”

I shook my head.

“They look good on you, I didn’t even realize what was different at first.”

*Oh great, I thought.*

I sat down and arranged my bottles as I did every week: the cobalt Arizona tea bottle facing slightly to the left, the Sprite bottle with its green dimples in the middle, and the brown root beer bottle back right. Picking up the yellow-green pencil, I started in on the dimples. But something was wrong. Blinking, I looked again, leaning in. I focused on the lines, as I always did, trying to imitate what I saw. But the lines weren’t matching up the way they had before. I closed my left eye. *There are the lines.* I closed my right eye. The lines shifted, the Sprite bottle seemed to move to the right, covering less of the Arizona bottle and more of the root beer bottle—not what I had drawn at all. Frustrated, I drew without my glasses for the rest of the lesson and ended up with a headache, a sign that my mind was already giving in to the lenses.

*

Over the years, I’ve grown accustomed to glasses and now a single contact lens, though my depth perception still isn’t up to par with the rest of the world, according to my optometrist. At
least I know now that depth exists—in fact, it is hard not to notice. My continually developing depth perception is most apparent when I drive, especially if my windshield is dirty. Even when wearing my glasses, I find my right eye ignores the speckles of dirt, focusing instead on the road, as it should. But my left eye, straining to see past the dirt, inevitably drifts from the road back to the windshield, causing me to see—like a camera trying to recover its focus—a slightly blurry road through a blurry windshield.

I sometimes wonder who I might have become if my eyesight hadn’t needed improvement. When I was six, I knew I was going to be an Olympic gymnast. I was short, thin, and motivated. I remember walking into the warehouse-like gym wearing my favorite pink leotard; it was summer and the oversized garage doors that made up the back wall were open, providing a breeze that tickled my bare legs and arms. I walked across the mat and around the balance beam to join the rest of my group; we each sat on a carpet square and listened to our instructor.

“Today we’ll be using the uneven bars,” she said.

We craned our necks to see the older girls twirling and flipping as the bars bent and creaked under their momentum. Spinning in the air, they flung their bodies from upper bar to lower bar, their eyes locked on an invisible spot before their face. It was as if they could feel where the bar was in relation to their body, or the bars were simply an extension of themselves. It looked exciting. I just hoped that afterwards we would get to play in the foam pit or on the trampoline.

Then we heard the scream. Everything in the gym stopped. One of the uneven-bar girls lay on the floor writhing in pain, holding her wrist; the bars bounced empty above her. After that,
no matter what activity we were doing, I couldn’t concentrate—what if I was in the middle of a flip and couldn’t find the bar to grab? What if I didn’t reach the correct distance?

So I joined Girl Scouts instead; it seemed safer. Plus, they had snacks.

But the lack of confidence soon leaked into other aspects of my life. Except for gymnastics, I never was any good at sports. Especially those with balls. Unfortunately for me, in second grade, we spent most of our recess outside playing kickball or wiffle-ball. I always ran to the wooden pole that marked third base when we picked positions. No one ever hit the ball to third base, meaning my lack of aim when it came to both throwing and catching would not matter. It also meant I was free to pick buttercups.

One afternoon we were let loose onto the grassy field to choose our spots. I ran toward my wooden pole but Crystal Byrd blew past me. When I finally got there, she was leaning against the pole smiling and twirling one of her golden curls. I scowled. At that point, only one position was left open. Second base. Where everyone hit. I tried to catch, I really did, but for the life of me, I could not tell how close the ball was to my hands until it was too late. My best efforts resulted in grass stains on the knees of my new dress and frantic screams from my teammates. “Rachel! Catch the ball already!” Even Luke Guinn sighed loudly whenever I missed, though, just the week before, he had given his entire marker collection to me because he thought my eyes were pretty. Those same eyes stung with tears by the time we walked in for math.

I soon found that by avoiding my weakness I could appear composed. In fact, I went to great lengths to make things easier on myself even before being told I lived depthless—like suddenly feeling sick when it was time to play games at summer camp or explaining that the sun
was in my eyes when I didn’t catch the ball. I once hid in a bathroom stall for an hour to avoid wiffle-ball; no one noticed.

I remember a mission trip one summer to Kentucky when I was fifteen. My youth group’s job for the week was building houses. My father had built our house, so I had grown up in construction; I knew what studs were, I knew what a bearing header was, I knew how to put up sheetrock—I was excited to prove my knowledge of the subject. After a quick training, we were given hammers, nails, and 2 x 4s. I was paired up with Tim, a member of the organization we were assisting. He was cute and flirtatious with big blue eyes. As he held the first nail against a future doorframe, my stomach dropped. I knew that my one contact didn’t always help me judge distance, and smashing his finger with a heavy-duty hammer would make the rest of the day awkward.

“Are you sure you want to hold it? I can hold it and hammer.”

“No, you’ll be fine,” he said. “I trust you.”

To be safe, I hit the nail gently—I didn’t hit his finger, but it took forever.

“How ‘bout you let me do the next one, ok?” I could tell by his voice he was frustrated, that he thought I was just another girl without any strength. I ended up sweeping sawdust and carrying lumber.

The summer after I received my driver’s license, I could no longer hide. Though I only had a few months of driving under my belt, Mom suggested I take a friend, Katie, to the local Mexican restaurant down the block from our youth group’s yard sale. It was warm, so I rolled down the windows of my old Prelude and opened the sunroof. I was nervous—I’d never had passengers other than my parents and the neckless man who had administered my driving test. Rubbing my left eye—the contact irritated it—I crept down the road. I decided to pull into the
parking lot across the street rather than attempt to parallel park. As I entered the small lot, I noticed a rusty van whose tail end stuck out farther than I had realized. Twisting the steering wheel as far to the left as it would go, I thought, *Oh good, I’ve got plenty of room.* Katie tensed up in the passenger seat and gripped the dashboard.

“We’ll be fine.” I was talking more to myself than to her. A shudder ran through the vehicle. Then I heard the crunch and scrape of metal on metal. Wide-eyed, I jerked the Prelude into reverse; the van dropped five inches as I backed out from under it. Slowly, I unbuckled and opened the door to face the damage. My fancy pop-up headlights no longer matched. The left was dented and the van’s bumper had a nice patch of my blue paint.

“Geez, how did you think you were going to get the whole car through there?” Katie asked.

Without answering, I got back in the car and tried to turn on the headlights. *I will never drive again.* The right popped up fine. The left twitched for a minute but remained closed.

I couldn’t distinguish the distance, I couldn’t understand the space, and suddenly, the driver’s license I had wanted for so long became menacing. It proved to the world that I was fallible, that I wasn’t as collected and in control as I claimed—which my rusted headlight reminded me of each time the sun went down. I drove just out of necessity after that. I was the only one of my friends who chose to be dropped off at work by parents.

* 

It didn’t take me long to realize that I couldn’t depend on my parents for transportation, or that constantly sitting on the sidelines was only separating myself, not protecting myself. Once in college, I surrounded myself with friends—within that safe haven, it was okay to miss the ball. It was okay that I saw differently. My friend Hollee, a seasoned softball player, asked if I would
toss a ball with her one evening. I knew the light outside would be dim, impairing the bit of
depth perception I had developed. But I also knew she would be patient with me, so I agreed.
The glove she let me borrow felt foreign on my hand—heavy and wide. When she first tossed the
ball, underhanded, I held out the glove and closed my eyes. The ball crashed into the bushes
behind me. Hollee grinned. The more we played, the less afraid I became of the ball. When the
sun finally dropped behind the mountains, I realized I had caught more balls than I had missed.

I am hoping that attempting to understand my quirks makes me one step closer to letting
them go. I know that once I became aware of my depth-impairment, I used it as an excuse to not
get involved, to not try, to not even ask questions. Instead of reaching outside my comfort zone, I
refused to fail. I stuck with things I knew I could do, things I’d done before. I’d never considered
myself a competitive person, until Mom pointed out that I am very competitive—so much so that
I refuse to compete unless I expect to win. She’s right. I don’t like the feeling of letting myself or
others down, and I’m only just beginning to understand that sometimes the experience is more
than the score at the end. Being out in the sun and the dirt, even when losing, is better than
hiding in a bathroom stall. But I still long for the simplicity of Laura Ann’s kitchen table where
things were flat and dependable; they stayed the same week after week. The only thing that
shifted was the sun.

Maybe that’s why I turned to writing: to experience the world flat again in words on a
page, depth only an illusion. It is not only an escape from everyday life, but a chance to shape
my own experience from the ground up, to reconsider how all the pieces of my past have
reformed to create who I am; just like the glass bottles, sometimes the colors bleed and blend
making new colors and new meanings in the context of one another, until there is a new picture
altogether. There is something both fascinating and frightening about the imagined depth our
minds create; the detailed worlds we conjure up when reading reside solely in our heads, no matter how real they seem to be. Writing is a world I am comfortable with, but the constant illusion continues to push me to new levels of understanding. Perhaps, though, it is simply that writing, and art in general, represents both sides of me—flat and deep.

* 

My one contact has become a novelty to my friends. I’ve learned to laugh with them when we are playing Frisbee and I don’t catch it or when I park at the far end of parking lots to avoid other cars. I’m not completely used to depth yet, even though it’s been thirteen years since that eye doctor appointment. I still reach too far for jars on a shelf, or swat at bugs that are beyond the length of my arm. It’s just part of how I see the world. Beyond the physical, I know I need to push myself because I see how afraid I am of failing. And I’m tired of hiding.

I just interviewed for a new editing job, one that will help me make sense of the worlds words create, one that will hopefully lead to even more opportunities. Sitting in the warmly lit director’s office, decorated with ornate rugs and big leather chairs, I began to wonder why I had risked being turned down. In the middle of the interview, I felt my fear moving to my throat as I realized I didn’t have much experience. I didn’t know enough to do this job. But in the back of my mind I knew that I wanted to try—enough to risk failing. Once it was over, I had no idea where I stood, but I was proud of myself.

Driving home after the interview, the street signs blurred past me, each breaking away from the hillside behind it. Though it was too chilly to roll down my window, the sun had warmed the inside of the car. A dark swoop of bird nearly brushed my roof and tree branches leaned down as I passed under them. The world swelled to meet me and I reached back.
WHERE THE TWO ROADS MEET

“Nothing important is completely explicable.”
—Madeleine L’Engle

Her obituary was handed to me at a wedding. The clipping, cut in a neat square so that Saturday, September 8, 2007 still appeared, nearly whipped out of my hands in the autumn wind. I wasn’t surprised; I’d heard her name mentioned on the radio that Thursday and braced myself. But seeing the obituary made it real. Looking at the picture, I remembered her kind eyes, her kind words. Her short silver hair turned dull gray by the grain and color of the newspaper. It was the same photo on the back of the books I’d known so well.

The wedding was outdoors, high on a hill above fields of grape vines glowing orange in the early evening sun. I took my spot in the chamber choir’s semi-circle with the sun at my back and sang the low alto line of “Set Me as a Seal upon Your Heart” as the bride walked down the grassy stretch to the altar, oblivious of everything but the man in front of her. My mind was not in the music, even as I sang the words. My mind was on that obituary, on death. I felt ridiculous, reacting like I’d lost an old friend or a relative. She wouldn’t have remembered me.

*
I can’t recall the first time I picked up a novel of Madeleine L’Engle’s, but I remember curling up on my bed reading *A Ring of Endless Light* beneath the slanted ceiling of my bedroom. Every couple of years I’d pick it up again, slowly remembering the characters, slowly remembering the place. Anytime I read, I settle in first. I crack my bedroom door enough to let in heat and set a glass of juice on the stained coaster on my Victorian nightstand. Pillows have to be piled behind my back—leaning against my headboard is uncomfortable. I tuck the blankets around my legs. I turn on the lamp, positioning it so the bulb doesn’t blind me. Then, I take a sip of juice and open the book. My copy of *A Ring of Endless Light* is torn and yellowed. I’ve handled it so often, the paperback is creased from years of reading and glancing again at the cover. Lying under my blue and orange quilt, I’d once again walk through the Austins’ stable-turned-house full of libraries. I’d listen to Grandfather’s wise counsel. I’d see dolphins leaping through choppy waves off of the coast.

* 

When I was twelve, I had to present a book report for my homeschool group—something I dreaded. Speaking in front of people has never been my strong point, but back then I balked at asking for ketchup at the McDonald’s counter. A book report was going to be torture. To settle my nerves, Mom suggested I present on a book I loved, that way I would be excited once I started talking and I would forget my audience. I debated on using one of C.S. Lewis’s Narnia books or the Cynthia Voight series I was in the middle of, but I wanted something I knew better, a book I’d read again and again. So I chose Madeleine L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle in Time*. It was one of the first novels I’d picked out myself at the library as a kid. Back then, when people asked me about my favorite books, *A Wrinkle in Time* was always first on the list.
The more I thought about the presentation, the more I began to enjoy myself. What if my audience had never read the book? I would be opening new doors for them. Remembering the thrill I’d felt of reading it for the first time, the suspense building at each page turn, I became eager to share. And yet, I found it difficult to summarize the plot without giving too much away. How would I explain time travel, planets ruled by giant brains, pure evil dark Things who kidnapped fathers, and a neighborhood tramp who is “exactly 2,379,152,497 years, 8 months, and 3 days” old? As I sat down to write, hunched over the drafting desk under my dormer window, every part of the book seemed important. Even the first sentence was genius. Who else could get away with *It was a dark and stormy night*? Half a page later I realized I was still in the opening scene, with Meg and her little brother Charles Wallace in their kitchen. The presentation would be hours long at this rate. At one point in the narrative, Ms Who says, “She keeps thinking she can explain things in *words*.” I needed a different approach, so I crumpled my page of notebook paper and tackled the title.

The day of the presentation, I volunteered early in the line-up. There were probably thirty families—more than usual—sitting in the main meeting room of the Princeton Arts Center and I wanted to get my speech over with before the nervousness outweighed the excitement. All of the students clutched their favorite books, their eyes following me to the front, knowing they would soon be up there. I had decided on a more visual approach. To illustrate time wrinkles, the main characters’ way of traveling, I used the example in the book. I cut a long piece of string and glued a plastic ant on one end. The ant end of the string represented today, the other end represented next week. I brought the two ends together so the ant could cross, forming a tesseract, a wrinkle in time. As one character put it, “a straight line is *not* the shortest distance between two points.”
The presentation went flawlessly, every face—children and adults alike—seemed engaged as I described just enough of the miraculous events in the book’s pages to entice the audience into reading it. But when I closed, the group before me, sitting in rows of cold folding chairs, simply clapped and waited for the next presenter. No questions, no comments. No requests to borrow my book. They had no idea what a gift I had given them.

* 

Of course I wanted to be like L’Engle. I wanted to grow up in the excitement of New York City, to be the rising star in theater, the young girl whom everyone expects great things from. Not that I had ever been to New York. And I hated memorizing lines for my church Christmas play. I just knew she had done something right in her pursuit of creativity, she had tapped into something magical. I was determined to follow the same pursuit, find that magic, even if it was outside of myself. I read the bios in the back of her books and told grown-ups I wanted to be an actress on Broadway—even as I said it I knew I was lying. And I didn’t argue when my mother made me write a daily journal because I knew Madeleine L’Engle started keeping one at age eight. Such forced connections made the genuine similarities, though small, all the more surreal.

Not too long ago, I was in a book store looking at different copies of A Wrinkle in Time, which I give as Christmas presents to people who have never read her work. Choosing between the various versions of cover art was difficult, so I flipped through each copy, feeling the paper fan under my thumb. A newer edition included a short interview with the author at the back. Skimming the list of questions, I stopped on one mentioning breakfast. Her favorite meal: cream of wheat with a little milk and brown sugar. I rarely eat breakfast on my own—I burn Poptarts—but when I’m home in Tennessee, my dad wakes early on Saturday and Sunday mornings to cook breakfast—bacon, scrambled eggs, biscuits with jam, fried potatoes, fruit. On the days
when he is too rushed for a full breakfast, we get cream of wheat. It fills the gray and blue chipped bowl, and I cover the top with sugar. Dad scoffs. According to him, cream of wheat calls for syrup.

But there, in the middle of the children’s section, I discovered Madeleine L’Engle was a sugar girl, too.

*

I met her once, at a reading in a local church when I was about ten. Then, she looked just like the author photo inside the back cover of my paperback copy of *A Ring of Endless Light*, except a little older, a little tired. Someone helped her to the table at the front of the sanctuary where she sat and sipped water. I don’t remember what she read, though the sound of her voice has stuck. It was low and strong and quiet, like she knew everything there was to know but wasn’t prideful. She sounded wise.

I remember, as clearly as if I was still sitting in that pew, the question and answer session. I’d been writing bits of stories since I was five, filling notebooks with elementary scrawl about sock monsters, pet chickens, and princesses, but I never could finish them. The beginnings would flow easily, exciting me, but then the energy would fizzle out. I would lose interest and the unfinished story would disappear into a Rubbermaid tub under my desk. Mom said I needed to plan out the entire plot before I began writing. Then I would know where I was going. To me, though, the pleasure of writing—even if I never finished anything—was the unexpectedness, the surprises as I penciled out the words in my notebook. It was more like reading a story than writing one. I didn’t know what would happen next—both my enthusiasm and my downfall.

So, before my family left home that evening to hear L’Engle read, I planned out my question. *Do you have the whole story in mind before you begin writing, or does it come to you
as you go? I practiced it in front of my dresser mirror; I mouthed it in the back seat of the car. The more I went over the question in my head, carefully wording it, the more anxiety crept up my throat. Perhaps that is why I don’t remember what she read.

After a last sip of water during the clapping of the audience, she asked if there were any questions. Mom looked at me. I put my hand halfway up, but my heart threatened to quit so I pulled it back to my lap. L’Engle called on someone else. Then another. I started to put my hand up again. “One more?” With a deep breath, I thrust my hand into the air, half praying she wouldn’t pick me, half praying I would still remember my question. “You,” she said. I looked up; she was pointing to the opposite side of the sanctuary. Disappointment and relief washed over me. I felt sick.

The next half hour I stood in line waiting for her to autograph my copy of A Ring of Endless Light. The line shuffled forward and grown-ups all around me talked about their favorite L’Engle book, the first time they’d read her, her fiction versus her nonfiction. I debated whether I should ask my question when I reached the front, but as I approached the table, I could see there was no time for small talk. Just a quick thank you, a signature, a smile.

I held my breath when it was my turn. There she was, the woman in whose mind lived so many of my favorite characters. She asked my name with a smile. “Rachel,” I said. As her hand swept across the title page, I tried to catch what she had written; it had been more than just a signature. “Well, Rachel, here you go.” She handed back my book and I tried to express, in my thank you, how grateful I was to be in her presence. I hurried to the edge of the room before opening the cover. To Rachel— it said in the thick lines of magic marker, Be a light bearer. Madeleine L’Engle.
During the car ride home, I held the book open and looked at the letters of my name and hers in the strobe of passing street lamps, and later, in my bed with a flashlight. The question still burned in my head, but maybe I didn’t want to know the answer. What I’d wanted to hear her say was, “Of course I don’t know where I’m headed when I write.” I would have felt justified, then, at the huge number half-written stories under my desk. But if she had said the opposite, forcing me to figure out where I was going, perhaps I wouldn’t have picked up my pencil for a very long time. Though I now know it is easier to write with at least a general idea of where I’m headed, I never even considered that I didn’t have to agree with her.

*  
The evening before I moved into my first dorm at Berea College, a film version of *A Ring of Endless Light* aired on the Disney channel. I forced my family to watch it, or at least let me watch it, in our Boone Tavern hotel room. I braced myself, films are never as good as the books, but I still had hope. Perhaps the director would capture the subtlety of the characters, the wisdom of a dying grandfather, the dangerous beauty of the coast. I had looked forward to it all day—it was a way of denying that I was going to be left there in Berea for four long years.

Within the first few minutes, I was disgusted. This storyline certainly wasn’t the *A Ring of Endless Light* I’d read. Characters were missing. The main character—a precocious girl—was now ditzy. A plot that evidenced how pain and sorrow can make life more meaningful, more purposeful, had been made vapid. The director had turned it into a chick flick about teen romance. I’m pretty sure I turned it off halfway through.

Seeing L’Engle’s work watered down disappointed me and I wondered how Disney had been allowed to make such drastic changes. In my mind, L’Engle had been the epitome of authorial control, down to punctuation. In her first edition of *A Wrinkle in Time*—which Disney
had also eventually mutilated in a made-for-tv drama—L’Engle fought and fought to keep the periods out of Mrs Which, Mrs Who, and Mrs Whatsit. The lack of punctuation, in her opinion, helped suggest the essence of the three witches. The publishers refused, saying it was too British. But by the time the second edition came out, she’d had her way—the periods were gone.

Apparently, L’Engle kept the film rights to her books for years because she wanted to protect them from bad adaptations. She was waiting for a screenwriter who understood what the books were about. Eventually, she agreed to let Disney make films of both *A Ring of Endless Light* and *A Wrinkle in Time*. Perhaps she thought they got it, or perhaps she felt she was running out of time, I don’t know. It does make me feel better that, after *A Wrinkle in Time* aired, L’Engle said, “I expected it to be bad, and it is.”

*Years ago I took a nonfiction workshop where I read L’Engle’s book *Two-Part Invention: The Story of Marriage*. Until that point, I had only read her fiction and a little of her poetry. Much of her nonfiction is about her religious conversion in adulthood, but *Two-Part Invention* is about love and hate and growing old. The title refers both to Bach’s “Two-Part Inventions” and her relationship with her husband, Hugh. A two-part invention is an exercise piece for piano consisting of two imitative lines, one for each hand, that toss musical motives back and forth, creating conversation. Because there are no chords, the harmony of the piece comes when the lines intersect. Such music surely frustrates the young pianist, but helps her grow in her playing.

The first few chapters of the book relate the separate childhoods of Madeleine and Hugh, and how they met. Then Hugh proposes. Instead of jumping chronologically into marriage, L’Engle wrote an Interlude, using the house she and Hugh lived in, Crosswicks—meaning where *the two roads meet*—as a symbol of her marriage. Crosswicks is an old farmhouse with drafty
windows and creaking stairs; it is home in every sense of the word, but constantly needs renovation.

My father started building our house before I was born. It is still under construction. The kitchen cabinets were crates with blue curtains until about two years ago and my bedroom is just now getting trim around the windows and doors. Growing up, a majority of my parents’ arguments were about the lack of progress on the house, but it was home nevertheless. Using L’Engle’s renovations metaphor for my parents’ marriage doesn’t work—maybe because I’ve witnessed the stress such labor causes. Metaphors make pain shadowed and beautiful. The actual living, however, is rough, raw. The renovations on Crosswicks expose the fact that work must be done to keep the walls standing. My home has plywood floors and sheetrocked walls, and I wonder if it will ever be finished—a finished house might detract from the home we’ve grown accustomed to.

Yet L’Engle does not ignore the waywardness of relationships, the insecurity of living. Even with repairs, her life with Hugh is uncertain. She ends her Interlude about Crosswicks, saying, “My husband is ill and I do not know how it is all going to end. Of course we never do.”

Without the Interlude allowing a glimpse into the difficulty and instability of marriage, the narrative, picked up after the proposal, would not be as powerful. Knowing all along that Hugh is going to be ill at the end makes me grateful for the time, the pages, they have left. Once again, she drew me into a new world, though this time it was her own.

Reading that book, I felt even closer to the woman I had met only once. I had a hint at why L’Engle continued to write; writing is a love affair that involves failure as much as it does success. It is about reading what makes you happy and writing what helps you improve. I write because it is the natural way I express myself, but I’ll be the first to admit I don’t always enjoy it.
The playing with words, the construction of emotions and colors and textures using type on a page—that is what I love. But when the words don’t flow like I want them to, I become frustrated; and the necessity of setting aside time to write is something I’ve always fought. Though the rest of my day to day life is carefully planned out. Schedules don’t seem to allow for the spontaneous. This stems, I’m sure, from my original romantic notion that art should come naturally and easily. L’Engle made time to write, though. Late in the evenings after her family had gone to bed, the only time of day that was quiet, she spent hours hunched over a desk in the attic, writing. Those few hours were her escape from life, or perhaps her way back in.

Since reading *Two-Part Invention*, I’ve tried on various occasions to set aside time to write. If it worked for Madeleine L’Engle, then it would probably do me good. I never keep the resolution long, no matter how strong my desire to write like her.

When I first started writing stories, I purposefully mimicked L’Engle’s style; it is natural, I suppose, for a beginning writer to focus on her favorite author. My goal was to compose something I would want to read, and I wanted to read L’Engle. In one such story, I began with a girl—probably named Jenny, I named every female character Jenny. She was at the beach with her family, but decided to walk alone up the coast. Her family, of course, didn’t notice her absence. Behind a large rock outcropping, she met a boy. Though much of the detail was of my own imagination, colored by vacations in South Carolina, the plot was nearly identical to the opening of *A Ring of Endless Light*. In my attempts to imitate, I came too close to my model. As I continued writing, without direction of course, I began to see how very similar the two stories were. The worlds blurred; soon, I had only L’Engle’s story in mind and couldn’t escape it. I could not finish my own—perhaps it had never been my own.
Now that I’m older, I can see how heavily I’ve been influenced by L’Engle’s writing style. Not just story lines, but the voice of the words on the page. She speaks simply, and uses short staccato sentences for emphasis, as I tend to do. Or at least try to do. She also reflects often within her writing, though with more subtlety than I can manage. I suppose I couldn’t help but be influenced in the long run—I have more than one copy of many of her books. Sometimes, though, I wonder how much is mine and how much I’ve borrowed. What would my voice sound like alone?

*

The first time I realized Madeleine L’Engle had books in the adult section at the library, it felt like a gift. She was often labeled a children’s author, but disliked that limitation, saying she never wrote with a particular age group in mind. She did admit, “if I have something that is too difficult for adults to swallow, then I will write it in a book for children.” I’d read all of her books in the children’s section of our library and had even moved on to other writers in that same aisle—Ursula K. LeGuin and Lois Lowry. Excited about the new-found L’Engle books, I pulled out a few and settled on the library floor between towering shelves. I read the synopsis on each, trying to choose which to check out first. Camilla seemed a good choice because much of the book was based off of L’Engle’s own experiences growing up in New York City. Perhaps I would discover a bit of the author disguised as Camilla. The front flap noted Camilla was one of L’Engle’s first books.

Camilla seemed like someone I would be friends with. She was the kind of girl who noticed the first star through the clouds and liked looking out the window at dusk, making up lives for the people cooking dinner and reading books in other apartment buildings. On the cover, she stands on a snowy street looking grown up in a beret and a pea coat. The beret never
stuck, but the pea coat, ah the pea coat. I’ve wanted one ever since. Though the artist made the coat teal, and I’ve long since outgrown my teal phase, the idea of a pea coat has always made me think of Camilla.

I lived vicariously through Camilla while reading that book, perhaps because my own life was so drastically different. While I grew up in the rural hills of Tennessee, Camilla lived in a brownstone in Greenwich Village with a stern father and a mother who acted like a child. She rode in taxis, relaxed in Central Park, did her homework at the Museum of Natural History. But Camilla’s life became complicated when she accidentally walked in on her mother kissing another man. That, I could barely imagine.

Just in time, Camilla found Frank—who I fell in love with instantly, too, of course. He wasn’t beautiful or even necessarily tactful, but he was genuinely curious about who Camilla was, who she wanted to be. In all of the shadowy mess, he was her escape. I was immediately taken by the romantic plot line, impatiently waiting for my own to begin. It became clear; despite the fact that my life didn’t include such devastation as adultery, perhaps I’d find a Frank of my own once I looked the part. I just needed the right coat to reveal my sophisticated side. It didn’t matter that Frank and Camilla never worked out.

This year for Christmas I got a red pea coat. It has become a staple in my wardrobe.

* 

Beyond influencing how I dress, L’Engle’s words have shaped how I remember my own experiences. In Two-Part Invention, she describes her daily swim. I’ve never been a good swimmer, but I remember my late afternoon lessons at Freedom Hall pool when I was about twelve. Besides my instructor and myself, hardly anyone else was there—maybe an elderly woman walking with weights in the shallow end. It was an indoor pool; as soon as I walked in I
could smell the chlorine, feel it stinging my eyes. The sun glowed orange through the huge, steamy windows and onto the tile wall above the bleachers where my mother sat watching and waiting. The only sound was water lapping at the tiled edges. I remember the loud rush and then the silence as I dove, fingertips overlapped, chin to chest, into the just-warm-enough water. It was a beautiful, quiet time, when my muscles burned in rhythm to my strokes.

L’Engle wrote of her time swimming, especially when her husband was in the hospital and she had spent the night alone in their bed. Swimming was when she prayed. Her prayers were wordless, just groans before God, pleas for his mercy. She beat the strokes out across the pool, pouring herself into her prayer. Since reading that passage, my prayers have often been wordless. L’Engle taught me that sometimes there are no words to fit.

Her writing has also changed the way I understand the world. She brings up ideas that cause me to question the given, to reconsider all I know as truth. In A Wrinkle in Time, the main characters travel to a planet where vision doesn’t exist. Instead of seeing stars, the natives hear the stars and know the “movements of their dance.” One of them asks Meg, “What is this dark? What is this light? We do not understand.” She tries to explain, but how can one describe blue or sun to beings without the need for sight? And what can these beings not explain to her? In an introduction to A Wrinkle in Time, L’Engle wrote, “Some of these questions don’t have answers, but the questions themselves are important.”

The same idea surfaces in A Ring of Endless Light. Seven-year-old Rob spends his summer sitting with his dying grandfather. One evening, after Grandfather has had another blood transfusion, Rob asks his sister about how she would describe vision to a person who had never experienced it. She listens, says it sounds impossible. “So,” Rob continues, “maybe when we die, we’ll get something as important as sight, but because we don’t know what it is, nobody could
tell us about it now, any more than we could explain sight to the people on a planet with no eyes.’”

There is so much I will never know.

*

According to the obituary, she died in a nursing home. That breaks my heart, as if her children didn’t appreciate her magic, letting her go into an impersonal home. But who knows what the real circumstances were. The paper says she died of natural causes. I think that naturally is the only way she could have died, that it happened only when she chose to let go. The obituary quotes her as saying, “In my dreams, I never have an age.” In this world, she was 88.

I wonder if she was still writing.

Even now, months later, as I take out the small, creased piece of newspaper that is tucked in the back of my journal, I’m moved—quietly mourning a life much larger than my own, a life I’ll never fully know, but will always be encouraged by. I’m glad I crossed her path.
SHIFTING BANKS

Group One Taxa: Pollution sensitive organisms found in good quality water.

Water pennies are good to find. These immature beetles with a flat, nearly clear body, are difficult to see, but if you pick up any rock in Paint Creek, it will have at least one water penny stuck to it. Gilled snails are good, too. Of the class Gastropoda, they have a tiny black spiral shell, the opening of which is covered by a thin, protective plate, the operculum. In my own stream, at home in the woods of East Tennessee, I called these snails “periwinkles.” My brother, Samuel, and I built periwinkle farms on the small silt and rock island in the middle of our tiny creek, with docks for rhododendron-leaf fishing boats. The caddisfly is another positive sign; it can grow up to an inch long in its pupal stage, so it is easier to spot, with six hooked legs on the front end of its body and two more at the back. They are ugly, wormy creatures at this stage, though, if I’m lucky, I’ll find one in a mysterious, homemade casing of tiny pebbles and leaves. When it has hatched from the casing, the caddisfly has grown wings.

*
Cedar Creek Learning Center was my first overnight camp experience; I was nine. I’d spent the night with friends occasionally, and with my grandparents, but I could never handle more than a night or two away from home. I remember sitting on my Mamaw’s maroon and green couch, on what was supposed to be a week-long stay when I was six, trying not to worry, trying not to think I would never see my parents again. I made it to Wednesday. To prepare me for camp, Mom addressed and stamped postcards so I could write notes home. She packed each day’s clothes in a gallon-size baggie, so I wouldn’t have to worry about matching, which was, strangely enough, one of my biggest fears. There were separate bags for cave day, canoe day, water treatment plant day, Paint Creek day, and mountain day. Once I’d worn the clothes, I stuffed them in the mesh laundry bag.

Cedar Creek Learning Center was an environmental science and natural history program for students in the upper east corner of Tennessee, though campers came from all over. Each day we studied the ecology of our surroundings. Experiments and lectures were often involved. We would spend the day out, at whatever biome we were studying, and then come home in the evening to play games, write in our journals, visit the country store at the end of the camp road, and eat ice-cream. Most students at Cedar Creek were recommended by their science teachers. Because I was homeschooled, I was recommended by my mother.

The learning center was housed in a long, low building that had once been a rural elementary school. As my parents and I approached from the makeshift parking lot / baseball diamond my first year, I saw a bright yellow wooden arrow bearing the words “Register Here” above a picnic table on a concrete porch. Assistant counselors sat behind the table with rectangles of cedar and balls of string to make nametags. The place swarmed with children, parents, and lumps of luggage. The air buzzed with cicadas. I met my assistant counselor, Kirby,
who had wide blue eyes and shoulder-length blonde hair frizzed out to the sides. Smiling, she said I would be a Homer’s Hero for the week. She then directed us into the gym next door to meet Homer and pick up my activities folder. I thanked her. Pulling my nametag down over my French braid to my neck, I breathed in the sharp scents of cedar and permanent marker, and made my way into the gym, parents in tow.

The gym was lined on one side with ancient pull-out bleachers and had a giant fan in the far doorway to circulate the hot summer air. I walked to a table in the center, where four men were sitting, each with a sign in front of them: Jerry’s Berries, Jim’s Jays, Don’s Butterflies, and, on the end, Homer’s Heroes. Homer was a quiet man with a large mustache, glasses, and ears that stuck straight out. He’d sketched an elephant on his “Homer’s Heroes” sign. I told him my name and, as he marked me off the list, I scanned the other names in the group. My friend Kimrey would not be with me; a pang of anxiety twisted my stomach. Homer handed me a blue folder with exercises for each experiment, as well as fifteen or twenty pages of blank notebook paper for the required journal. I thanked him and went inside the main building to pick my bed.

Walking into Cedar Creek for the first time was daunting. Once through the double doors, the brownish-green carpeting matched the scratchy-looking couches sitting on either side of the small lobby. Above the door, a mounted fish clutched an unblinking baby doll head in its mouth. Framed caricatures of the counselors were displayed on the concrete block wall on the right. On the left hung a bulletin board covered in newspaper clippings, postcards, and handwritten letters. A small bookshelf was full of Far Side comics and US Weeklys. I walked through the lobby and turned left down the hallway, as Kirby had instructed; the cafeteria was the only thing to the right. Posters of the periodic table, poisonous snakes, and local fish covered the hallway walls. Dark curtains, rather than doors, hung in doorframes painted bright teals and yellows. Each
curtained room was named: the Hilton, the Ramada, the Comfort Inn. I made my way to the end of the hall, past another ratty couch, and entered the last door on the left, the Hyatt.

The dorm, now full of bunk beds and shelving, had clearly once been a classroom. Chalkboards covered the wall on one end. The windows along the far wall had been painted over, but the paint had peeled and cracked in places, and the sun shown through in miniature lightning bolts. I dragged my duffle bag to the last bunk on the left, which Kimrey had saved for me. I could put my new Timex travel alarm on the chair next to my bed. Kimrey sat on the bunk above mine, her legs dangling between the slat railing and the mattress over my head. When she moved, I heard the springs creak.

Mom and Dad made sure I knew where to store my laundry and that I had plenty of postcards, and then they left. I did my best not to cry. Kimrey, excited to be away from home for a week, talked incessantly about how she hoped they had vegetarian options in the cafeteria and wondered what it would be like to spend a week around animal heads mounted on the walls.

“Have you seen the classroom yet?” Kimrey swung her feet back and forth, letting her calves bang against the creaky bunk.

“Not yet.”

“It has a giant moose head. Some kid was throwing paper airplanes into its antlers when I was in there. Oh, and there is a terrarium full of hissing cockroaches.” Her body shook with an involuntary shudder.

I focused on stretching a bottom sheet around my mattress and unrolling Mom’s blue sleeping bag.

Kirby threw the curtain door aside, hollering for us to get to the gym for orientation. I waited as Kimrey climbed down from her top bunk, her ballerina feet curving around the two-by-
four ladder. She brushed her thick brown hair, put on her Birkenstock sandals, and walked with me down the hallway back to the gym. The large room echoed with the chatter of sixty kids. Everyone was sitting in small groups on the bleachers. I sat on the bottom row on the side closest to the door, beside Kimrey. A girl behind me shrieked as her flip-flop dropped under the bleachers to the dusty floor.

“Now you’re stuck,” a man with white hair, glasses, and a plaid shirt said as he walked into the gym; everyone stopped talking. “The bleacher monster is known to eat shoes. And pencils. So don’t drop anything else in there.” He smiled under his mustache. A few people giggled, the rest of us sat quiet. He introduced himself as Doug Ratledge, the director of Cedar Creek, and explained where to line up for meals, when to take showers—and for how long, the speed limit for the hallway—five mph, and who to go to for emergencies in the middle of the night. I prayed that I would remember everything, or that Kimrey would.

That evening Homer drove us to the lakeshore. We sat in a circle in the grass while he talked about DDT and how it still affected the environment so many years after ecologist Rachel Carson had helped get the substance banned. He then had us pull out the “Food Web” sheet and the “Persistent Pesticides in the Environment” sheet from our matching blue folders. The food web mapped who ate what; the green heron, for instance, ate bill fish, which ate silverside fish, which ate plankton, which ate water plants. According to the pesticides sheet, the green heron, because of the build up of DDT in each stage of his food web, would have around 3.5 parts per million of DDT in his system. I wrote “3.5” in dull pencil under the words “green heron” on the edge of the sheet in my lap, trying not to poke through the thin paper.

On the way back to camp that evening, we were allowed to ride in whichever bus we wanted. I found Kimrey and stuck to her. As we bumped along the road, we scratched bug bites
and tried to remember everyone’s names. Kimrey whispered, tickling my ear, which boys she thought were cute. One boy in the back of the bus began showing everyone how, if you held your breath and stuck your head between your knees, you could pass out. Suddenly, everyone was quiet, heads down. I only got dizzy.

The next morning, Monday, we lined up in our groups in front of the cafeteria door for breakfast. Polly, the cook, would yell for each group to come in for homemade biscuits and sausage gravy. Kimrey had cereal. Doug, wearing a Hawaiian print shirt, stood beside the milk cooler. As he handed out the tiny cardboard containers of milk, he sang. “Vitamin A and vitamin B grow your bones and help you see. Vitamin B and vitamin Q give you strength to tie your shoe.”

As I deposited my tray in the dirty dish bin, Homer opened the screen door to the cafeteria and advised us to get ready for creek water; we would be leaving in a half hour. According to the schedule I had received a month earlier, my group was visiting Paint Creek to assess the water quality. Kimrey’s group was going spelunking in a local cave. As she put on layers of play clothes, I donned a new black bathing suit with the neon stripes across the chest and my denim baseball cap.

Paint Creek was much larger than my creek back home; in the middle, the water easily came up to my waist and had a tugging current. The area was part of the Cherokee National Forest and concrete picnic tables dotted the open space between the parking lot and the creek. Rhododendron thickets interspersed with maples, oaks, and pines surrounded us, blocking out much of the summer sun. We gathered around the tables as Homer explained the three taxas of creek organisms on our “Save Our Streams” water assessment form—pollution sensitive, somewhat tolerant, and tolerant. These organisms could tell us the quality of the creek; the more
taxa one creatures, the cleaner the water, since they cannot stand a polluted environment. I
couldn’t help but see the sensitive category as innocent and helpless, with the tolerant category
hiding under rocks and in shadows, waiting to ruin the water.

As a group, we spread large, rectangular nets across the creek. One person stood on either
end to hold the net upright in the cold water like a fence; Homer placed rocks on the bottom
corners to keep the net from floating downstream. Then, the rest of us went upstream to stomp,
jump, and rub rocks clean until the once-clear water ran brown with silt and mud. When Homer
was satisfied, we lifted the net out of the creek and ran with it to a nearby picnic table. It smelled
of thick mud. The net was spread out, so we could see the bugs and crawdads we had caught.
Kirby opened a fishing tackle box filled with magnifying glasses and tweezers and told us to
separate the macroinvertebrates in the water-filled plastic Tupperware bowls she had lined down
the picnic table’s benches.

Leaning over the table as far as I could, careful not to touch the cold net with my
stomach, I picked a water penny off of a stick with my tweezers. Its little legs wriggled in the air,
grabbing for something solid. It was almost clear when I held it up to sunlight. Without
squeezing too tightly, I placed it in the water penny bowl. Then I went back to the net. Turning
over a pebble, I saw a stonefly nymph try to scuttle away, but its legs caught in the net’s
webbing. I grabbed for its middle, but pinched the tail instead, which looked like a pair of long
antennae. My fellow campers swarmed around me, picking at the net with their own tweezers.
The kid in the safari hat started talking about which bug he would be. Seaton, whose name I
remembered from the bus the night before, sat at a nearby picnic table and scratched at a scab on
his knee. A girl named Emily, who had a bunk near mine, began counting the number of bugs
Homer called “sensitive.”
Just before lunch, we added up the categories. With the few formulas in the handout, we calculated the total index value of our day’s catch: 36. Paint Creek’s water quality rated “Excellent.” The mountain creek was clean enough for sensitive organisms to thrive.

By the end of the week, I’d come to love the oddness of the camp—the bagel nailed to the wall in the cafeteria, the painted handprints covering the old school bus, and the energy of the counselors; it had become a safe place for those of us who were interested in science and our surroundings. I was homesick, but I still looked forward to attending Level II the following summer. There was just one thing left to conquer; on Saturday morning, each group—now schooled in all ways Cedar Creek—presented a slide show to the parents, who gathered in the dim light of the gym. I hated memorization, and now had to deliver two lines about Paint Creek to shadows of people I didn’t know, when I really just wanted to find my parents. Homer had warned us there would not be enough light to read the lines; we had to know them by heart. I had practiced and practiced, and when I walked up to the projector, I felt confident. I clicked the button and heard the projector clunk to the next slide. Glancing at the screen—a photo of me holding a container of caddisflies, I blanked. With my mouth open, I stood in the darkness, silent. I looked back at Kimrey, hoping she could jog my memory; she had helped me practice, but she just shrugged. After a long, awkward pause, I found the words to describe taxa one and clicked over to my next slide. That line came immediately, and after delivering it, I rushed back to my seat, red-faced.

Group Two Taxa: *Somewhat pollution tolerant organisms found in good or fair quality water*

Crawdads fall into the second taxa. The sheet in my folder said they can grow up to six inches long and resemble a small lobster. Though it is not necessarily a great sign to find crawdads, it’s
not bad either; they will just tolerate more pollution than a water penny or a caddisfly. Plus, catching them is fun. Crawdads swim backwards, so one person has to startle them, while another hides behind with a cup or a bucket. Picking them up takes practice; I’ve learned from years of being pinched that it is best to grab them behind their front pinchers. Crawdads are plentiful in Paint Creek. As a camper, we had crawdad-catching competitions—even the babies counted. The somewhat-tolerant category also includes damselfly and dragonfly larvae. Damselfly larvae have an elegant, streamlined look to them, with what the sheet refers to as “three broad oar-shaped tails, positioned like a tripod.” Dragonfly larvae, with wide oval abdomens, have to grow into their beauty.

* 

After completing all three Cedar Creek levels as a camper, I soon returned as a student assistant, like Kirby had been on my first stay. I was assigned to work with a new counselor, one who had taken the place of Don and his Butterflies. Her name was Robin. I would be helping her with the first-ever group of Robin’s Rascals.

I was determined we would go down in history as the greatest group, even more fun than Jerry’s Berries. Kimrey had been in Jerry’s group our first year and, while the Homer’s Heroes’ bus had broken down by the side of a potato field, Jerry took his group to the dump, where he picked out something special for each camper to take home. Kimrey was given a large painting of the Virgin Mary. I wanted my campers to feel that special, to be proud of Rascals.

Now it was my turn to sit behind the picnic table and hand out cedar nametag supplies. Every camper who walked up to the table, whether they had a set of three matching pieces of luggage or an old duffle bag, looked terrified. I did my best to explain that I, too, had been a camper, and had come out the other end just fine. At one point, a family originally from the
Ukraine walked up—they had the duffle bag—with two sons. Though neither boy was in my group, I remember the youngest brother was Vlad, short and round with a buzz cut of thick black hair. He was so excited that, after checking in, he ran inside to study the periodic table posted next to the cafeteria door.

Just after Vlad, I helped a quiet, heavy set boy from the area make his nametag. Slowly, carefully, he wrote KENNY down the length of the cedar in Sharpie. Later that evening, as the campers mingled in the twilight of the patio getting their tongues stuck to popsicles and trying to catch lightning bugs, I gleaned from the whispers of the counselors that Kenny was the scholarship student that week. Every week the Greene County school board sponsored a deserving child. Kenny, it seemed, wasn’t as enthusiastic about science as most scholarship recipients, but, after all, it was only the first evening. I realized there was a lot going on behind the scenes of Cedar Creek that I had missed as a camper: funding problems, red tape from the school board, and dropping admission levels.

As I herded the kids inside for tooth-brushing and a movie, I noticed Vlad standing in front of the periodic table again, talking to a counselor about quarks and the half-life of an element I couldn’t even pronounce. He knew what he was talking about. Kenny walked up behind Vlad and turned to the counselor with a thoughtful look on his face. I paused in the lobby, waiting to see what he would say. “How come all those blocks are different colors?” he asked, stuffing his chubby hands into his jean pockets. Without missing a beat, the counselor explained the table in layman terms; Vlad helped, pointing out basic elements, like oxygen, that Kenny would already know.

Being a student assistant meant it was my turn to comfort homesick girls who crawled into my bunk crying, or clean up boys who woke to massive nosebleeds that had soaked their
single pillow. On day trips I rested in the bus, rocked to sleep by the lousy shocks, only to wake up to giggles and twelve disposable cameras stuck in my face. Once we arrived at our activity for the day, I did my best to match the energy of my campers. It was difficult to be both a friend and a counselor. I’d joke around with the girls, and then expect them to listen to me as I taught them how to paddle a canoe. I had to constantly remind the campers that their safety depended on how well they paid attention.

In the mornings, I was finally able to participate in the celebrated wake-up routine, which involved Doug playing “You Are My Sunshine” on the ukulele, a strobe light, and loud banging. That first morning, as we entered each dorm room, kids popped up out of their bunks with wild hair and squinty eyes. Many groaned. Vlad, who was on a top bunk in the back, was amazed by the strobe light; he waved his hand back and forth in front of his face and said, in a Ukrainian accent, “Wow. It’s just like the movies!”

After breakfast, Robin and I took our campers to the same grassy patch by the lake where Homer had taken his Heroes. As they got out their journal paper and their pencils, Robin asked them to imagine themselves as an ant in a square foot plot of grass; they were to describe the terrain, where to get food, what to do if it rained. Some were truly engaged, going so far as to lie down to get a better view. Others drew the ant with giant raindrops crashing around it. Terry, blond with a buzz cut and a scratchy laugh, was twisting the toe of his shoe in the corner of his plot, like he was putting out a cigarette. When I glanced over at Kenny, I saw that he was eating grass.

That evening, after I got all the campers in bed, I read through some of the day’s journals. Terry’s ant hadn’t fared well; after a monsoon, during which he hid under some tall grass, giant shoes came out of nowhere. The ant ran, but his little legs just weren’t fast enough and he was
crushed under rubber soles. Kenny’s ant got distracted by how sweet the grass tasted. I learned halfway through that Kenny’s favorite food was Pepto-Bismol.

On Mountain Day, we hiked an eight-mile loop on Yellow Mountain. The forecast called for temps around ninety, so I made sure all my campers had their canteens filled with ice water. I brought two water bottles, just in case. In the beginning, the pace was strong. The fourteen of us climbed up a few fairly steep hills before stopping for our first break; I was impressed, though I could already tell who would soon be lagging behind. Terry and his buddies remained standing during the break, knowing they would have to fight their leg muscles to get back up. Others sat on logs or in the middle of the trail, turning over rocks and sticks to look for salamanders. When it was time to start moving again, I could see the strain on Kenny’s face, though he didn’t say a word. Robin and I decided she would take the front and I would take the back, to make sure we didn’t lose anyone.

Just before it was time to stop for lunch and experiments, Kenny began to struggle. His usually pale face had turned a deep red and he had started to mumble. Soon, it was just the two of us trying to catch up to the group. I told him to set his sights on a curve ahead in the trail, or a specific tree, and when we made it there we could rest for a second. He pushed himself to each new goal. And then, when we were close enough to hear the main group eating lunch, Kenny began hyperventilating. His blue eyes bugged out in panic. We sat on a log and I let him have my second water bottle; his round plastic canteen hadn’t lasted long. Once he had cooled down and was calm, we made our way around a few more curves and joined the group. Kenny scarfed down his peanut butter and jelly sandwich and asked if anyone had extra potato chips. When lunch was over, Robin and I gathered the Rascals into four smaller groups and sent them out to measure trees and work with a dichotomous key to figure out their species. The measurements
showed skinny trees, but not too bad for a young forest; and there were plenty of ash and maple saplings growing despite the shade of the larger, older pines.

By the time we returned to the parking lot, the kids were worn out, ready to sleep until dinner. But before leaving, Robin and I led them to a rocky outcropping covered in blueberry bushes. They gorged themselves and sat, grinning wildly, looking out over the mountain they had just climbed.

That night, the only entry in Kenny’s journal read, “Rachel gave me water and saved my life.”

Next was Paint Creek Day; most of the campers were excited about spending the day wading around in a creek. Canoe Day had allowed them swim time, but searching for bugs in a mountain stream seemed cooler on a hot summer afternoon. All morning my girls begged me to French braid their hair and apply sunscreen to their backs. When it was finally time to go, I didn’t have to search for late campers, they were already in their seats on our bus.

The park was more crowded than usual, but we were able to claim the same three picnic tables Homer had when I had been in his group years before. Not much had changed; the grimy iron grill, the concrete tables, the gentle slope through a few pines and rhododendron down to the bubbling water, it was all still there. Robin and I unloaded the bus, handing out nets and plastic containers for bugs, and reminded the forgetful to grab their folders from the sticky bus seats.

After explaining why we were there, we began with a lemon race, to measure the speed of the current. Robin gave lemons to Kenny, Terry, and a feisty little girl named Mary. The rest of the campers went downstream exactly fifty feet. When I yelled GO, the three with lemons dropped them in the water and cheered as they bobbed along. Terry’s got stuck in an eddy along the bank, but Kenny’s and Mary’s kept going. Just before reaching the line of campers
downstream, Kenny’s lemon leaped a wave and took the lead. When I glanced at his face, he stood silent, his mouth wide open; I watched his expression change, with a beaming smile, to one of pride. Someone yelled, “I got it!” and I clicked the stopwatch. We repeated the race three times. Back at the rough concrete picnic tables, Robin and I directed the campers to the correct page in their folders and helped them calculate the stream’s speed. We divided the distance the lemons traveled by the number of seconds each winning lemon was in the water and then averaged it out. Paint Creek was traveling at a rate of 2.9 feet per second.

Combined with the average depth (.8 ft.) and width (37 ft.) of the streambed, we had the kids figure out about how many cubic feet of water were flowing per second, and finally how many people Paint Creek could support if the average person, according to the US Office of Education, uses 200 gallons per day. Given our calculations, Paint Creek could support 277,378 people. The kids were stunned. Most had predicted anywhere from twenty to fifty people. Suddenly, they saw the creek in a different light, as something more than just a place to cool off in the summer.

Then came the fun, catching critters. The crawdad competition began almost immediately; all of the campers scurried around looking under rocks for the biggest crawdads they could find. After Robin and I finally got them to use the net to catch the smaller bugs, they scoured the net with their tweezers. Some of the girls whined when picking up hellgrammites or crane fly larvae, but after seeing the boys get into it, they did too. We didn’t find any damselfly larvae, but we had a much larger number of dragonfly larvae than I remembered catching as a camper. I explained to the group how each of the larvae would transform into one of the many dragonflies that shimmered around our heads. The number of organisms in the somewhat-sensitive category had begun to rise.
Around one o’clock, Robin and I began counting so we would have time for lunch and play before packing up and going back. The kids were each assigned a plastic container to count. Four beetle larvae, taxa two. Twenty-one gilled snails, taxa one. Eight riffle beetles, taxa one. Forty-five crawdads, taxa two. As we began adding, the campers rooted for taxa one, and clean water, to win. With calculators out, we discovered the water was still, barely, pollution sensitive. The kids cheered and ran for the sliced watermelon. I sat on the creek bank with my own slice, watching. Watermelon seeds were flying. The girls had discovered that most of the rocks that make up the bed of Paint Creek leave multi-colored clay stains on your skin. With cold, wet fingers they covered each other’s faces in lines, dots, and squiggles, imagining themselves Native American princesses. And then they came to me, smearing clay over my pores, cooling my face, until I, too, looked like an exotic royal.

Group three taxa: *Pollution tolerant organisms can be in any quality of water.*

Taxa three includes leeches, and while I’ve never seen one outside *Stand By Me*, I’m always afraid I’ll overturn a rock and find a blood-sucking slug instead of a crawdad. This category also lists pouched snails; they’re tricky, because they look like the gilled snails in the first taxa, but their opening is on the opposite side and they have no operculum to protect them. The campers call them evil twins. Aquatic worms are the most common taxa three organism. In their plastic container, they struggle without a rock to hide under and tie themselves in knots, like live shoelaces. Every once in a while we’ll find a puffy midge fly larvae, a white worm with a segmented body and two tiny legs on each end. I get a chill when I see them. They are one of the few organisms in the pollution-tolerant group that eventually leave the water for the sky.

*
Each summer, once June rolled around, I would spend every other week until August working as a Cedar Creek assistant counselor—the permanent staff cleaned during the off-weeks. The summer after my freshman year of college, I arrived feeling grown up for a change. Looking back, I realized that first summer as an assistant counselor I had only been a few years older than the campers. But the age divide grew. In the beginning, my campers had a hard time seeing me as an authoritative figure—probably because I had the same problem. Over the years, though, I had learned how to be both a friend and a counselor. It was a fine line to walk, but one I felt I had mastered. I knew how to get a scared nine year old girl to talk to me, but I also knew how to get hyper boys to be quiet and go to bed.

The opening week that summer, my first session as a college student, Robin decided she and I were going to make sure the campers would never forget their experience. There weren’t nearly as many campers registered as we’d had in the past—the number had been dropping steadily since I was a camper; we wanted to make the week special for them, so that maybe they would come back for the next two levels or at least encourage their friends to attend. Awareness of the issues Doug and the staff had to deal with to keep the center afloat was eye opening; it seemed like threats surrounded us, whether they were funding, enrollment, or even new transport laws that forced us to sell the old painted school bus.

After we calmed the six or seven homesick ones and got everyone in bed, Robin and I sat in the lobby on the rough couches with duct-taped corners, each with a bag of pretzels from the pantry and a small bowl of ranch dressing. The water and sewage treatment plants were first on the schedule.

“That trip will be memorable anyway, if only for the stench, but we should do something funny.” As she talked, I could only see the left half of her face, lit by the porch light outside.
“Let’s do something to really gross them out. That’s the spirit of Cedar Creek, right?” I pointed above the double doors to the mounted fish with the winking baby doll head in its mouth. During my first year as a camper, the Homer’s Heroes trip to the treatment plants had happened to fall on Jerry’s birthday. Homer arranged to bring his fellow counselor a birthday present—a mason jar of excrement complete with a toilet paper bow.

“Oh, I got it,” Robin said, looking smug in the half-light, before she bit a ranch-laden pretzel in two.

The next day, the kids were less than excited about their first outing. While other groups prepared for canoeing or gathered in the classroom to learn about caves, we sat everyone down on the gym floor and discussed the Archimedes Screw Pump that lifted sewage from one vat into the next, churning it all the while. We talked about aeration, and how the waste-eating bacteria need lots of air to work. We talked about being polite to the workers, even though everything smelled horrible.

Piling into our bus late that morning, I turned on the radio. It was going to be hot, which was less-than-ideal for the sewage treatment plant visit—the stench would be magnified. The static from the radio station sounded like an underwater preacher.

“My favorite station! Rachel, turn it up!” Robin grinned as she bounced us down the gravel driveway toward town.

The campers groaned, so I turned it up.

In the sewage treatment lab, everyone paid attention until they noticed the emergency eye washer in the corner. The smell outside could have been worse, though I did have to escort a pale boy named Hunter back to the bus to lie down. Our campers didn’t even ask the expected balloon
questions about the inflated condoms floating in the initial vat of waste. By the time we got back to camp, most of the kids were napping, leaning against the vibrating windows.

As we pulled up the driveway and parked in the grass beside the makeshift wiffle-ball field, Robin grinned, turning in her seat. “Are you guys ready for a treat? Rachel and I stayed up most of the night baking for you. You are such a great group.” Eyes widened, and mouths shut.

We had them go put away their backpacks and water bottles and then sit in the cafeteria. Once they were all quiet, I offered a no-bake cookie to each of them, with lots of oats, a little green dye, all in the shape of a log—on toilet paper. Some laughed, others looked horrified. The reactions intensified when Robin brought out glasses of bright yellow lemonade.

“But these, these look like…” Katelyn, a skinny blonde girl, was unable to finish her sentence.

We grinned. “Eat up!”

That evening, the other kids surrounded our group; each was asked about the snack, whether they ate it, whether it tasted good. From my vantage point in the hallway, I could tell they enjoyed the attention. We were officially cool.

On Friday, the last full day, we took the campers to Paint Creek. Before rounding them up on the bus and making sure they had packed enough water, Robin pulled me into the kitchen.

“You haven’t been to Paint Creek since the flood in the spring have you?” She bit her lip. I shook my head, waiting.

“I just want you to be prepared.”

“We can still take measurements, right?” I made sure my water bottle lid was screwed on tight.

“Yeah, but we may have to go swimming down on Horse Creek, instead.”
“Really?” I hadn’t realized the damage had been so severe. “Maybe it’s good we’re testing the water quality there—we’ll see how much the flood has changed things.”

She nodded, grabbed a bag of pretzels, and jogged out to the bus.

By the time we pulled up, I’d nearly forgotten the kitchen conversation—until I saw our regular picnic spot. I didn’t even recognize it. One of the concrete picnic tables was broken in half as if a tree had landed on it. Thick clumps of brush lined both sides of the bank. On down the road, a bridge had completely washed out; this was as far as we could drive. I couldn’t tell where the fire pit had been. I tried to picture things as they once had been, the way I’d seen them as a Homer’s Hero; I couldn’t, and it bothered me that these campers would never know the difference.

I unpacked the crates of plastic containers, thermometers, lemons, and nets as Robin walked the kids around the campsite, telling them how far they could and couldn’t go. By the time everyone gathered back together, I was sitting at the only picnic table still in one piece, ready to hand out their folders.

We completed the experiments and filled out all of the Paint Creek paperwork before lunch. The sky had been threatening to rain, but it held off until we had proved to ourselves that the water was as clean as it had ever been. In fact, there were fewer taxa three organisms than we’d found the previous summer; we counted twelve pouch snails and several aquatic worms, but there were plenty more gilled snails and water pennies to counteract their presence. The rain rushed in with a strong breeze, blowing pine needles and dead leaves onto our net, so we sat on the bus to eat lunch, talking and laughing. When the sky cleared, the kids poured off the bus to play in the water, to paint their faces with mud from the rocks, to see who could catch the
biggest—and smallest—crawdads. I sat on the bank eating watermelon, realizing that the course of the creek in front of me might change again by my next visit.

At the end of the week, Doug called me into his office; the room, which also served as our first-aid center and housed a coke machine, was cluttered with papers and shelving weighed down by boxes of files and equipment.

“Have you heard the big news yet?” He had on a toned-down shirt and tie, to impress the parents on their way to collect children, but he still wore his wrinkled khaki cargo pants; his glasses reflected the fluorescent light in the lobby, so I couldn’t see his eyes.

“Nope, what big news?”

“I’ve decided to retire.”

I’m sure I looked shocked, afraid even. “No! When?”

“At the end of the summer. So enjoy my presence while you can.” He laughed half-heartedly.

“Who will be taking your place?” I knew Cedar Creek would not be the same without Doug—or at least someone who had spent a great deal of time there—in charge.

“Not sure yet. The Greeneville School Board is in the process of interviewing people.”

“Well,” I said, “you’ll be missed. Do they have ukulele player listed as a job requirement?”

He grinned. “They’d better. We should get to the gym so I can tell the parents how much their kids have learned this week.”

I sat on the floor against the far wall as Robin’s Rascals, in their brand-new, goldenrod Cedar Creek shirts, went through their assigned slides. Some forgot their lines and looked back at me, afraid. Others enjoyed the spotlight. When all the groups had gone, and Doug had
announced his retirement, the lights came up and parents poured from the bleachers to collect their children. I posed for photos and gave out hugs, waving as the minivans pulled out and disappeared around the graveled curve. I told Robin I’d see her at the next session.

“I’ll work on perfecting the poop cookie,” she smiled.

I loaded up my car and began the hour drive home, knowing that the course of Cedar Creek might change before year’s end as well.

I came back the next summer, but not as an assistant. After talking with Doug’s replacement and realizing there was no way they could pay me what they had in the past, I’d taken a job working at a day camp at my college in Kentucky. The new director, Dana, seemed nice enough, but Robin had kept me informed; Dana’s plans had exceeded the budget by such a large margin that Cedar Creek might not make it through the season. I wondered how it would feel to be a Homer’s Hero again, oblivious to the hidden struggles of maintaining the camp’s quality, knowing only how safe I felt that first summer. Just in case, I needed to see the place full of happy campers one last time, so I stopped by for the Level III slide show one Saturday. I knew that some of my campers had returned, so I expected at least a few familiar faces. And I was looking forward to seeing Robin and the other counselors.

I pulled my Honda in beside a minivan parked on the wiffle-ball field. Smoothing out my t-shirt, wrinkled from the drive, I pulled open the double doors to the lobby. Because it was so bright outside, my eyes adjusted slowly to the change in light.

Inside, I heard, “Rachel!”

The lobby was full of campers, all rushing to hug me. I felt like a rock star.

“You guys ready for your slide show?” I asked; they groaned.
An assistant counselor, Sean, who had been a camper of mine years before, stepped around the corner. “They’re ready.”

And they were. For the first time since my younger brother had been a camper, I sat in the dark bleachers among parents as the slides clicked through and lines were recited from memory or from smudged ink on a palm. Instead of watching the show, I caught myself looking past the screen to the edges of the gym where the other groups sat in their goldenrod shirts, squirming with anticipation, their counselors assuring them they would be just fine.

* Cedar Creek closed the following summer. Whenever I’m in that part of Tennessee, I’m tempted to turn left just past the hair salon, onto the back roads toward the long gravel drive. But I haven’t, because I don’t want an empty building to replace my memories. I don’t want to see that the fish eating the baby doll head has been taken down, or that the clotheslines out front are no longer standing. I’d rather drive out to Paint Creek and see how things have changed there, find out which way the creek is headed now.
FRAME

[freym] noun, verb, *framed, framing*

- **noun**
  1. a border or case for enclosing a picture, mirror, etc.
  2. a rigid structure formed of relatively slender pieces, joined so as to surround sizable empty spaces or nonstructural panels, and generally used as a major support in building or engineering works, machinery, furniture, etc.
  3. a body, esp. a human body, with reference to its size or build; physique
  4. a structure for admitting or enclosing something

- **verb**
  22. to form or make, as by fitting and uniting parts together; construct
  24. to conceive or imagine, as an idea
  28. to form or seem to form (speech) with the lips, as if enunciating carefully
  29. to fashion or shape
Pastor Kent clears his throat as he stands before the pulpit. He is a small, balding man with wire rim glasses; his voice is gentle, but loud. “The desire for power caused the angels to fall; the desire for knowledge in excess caused humankind to fall, but in charity there is no excess, neither can angel nor human come in danger by it.’ Francis Bacon.” Smiling at those sneaking into the back of the sanctuary, he sits down in a simple wooden chair to the right of the pulpit. The organist begins to play.

A few years ago, I walked the path to Union Church nearly every week—from my dorm on the campus of Berea College down Prospect Street, the church’s large white columns visible from far away. On warm fall evenings, I sat on the front steps and watched traffic go by until the chill of night set in. Union Church was my church away from home; it is good to be back, to see the familiar smiles of faculty and community. This morning, as I walked in with my parents, I was greeted with a handshake and a strip of red tissue paper.

“Hold on to that for the remembrance service,” the usher whispered, “you’ll write peoples names on it.”

It is November 4th, All Saints Day.
Pastor Kent’s hands rest on the pulpit as he begins the morning’s liturgy; his voice is calm and he smiles as he speaks.

*One:* Remembering All Saints Day gives us an opportunity to celebrate and remember those in our lives who have gone before us. Their presence in our community has contributed to and shaped our work, our life, character, and story.

*One:* We remember those whose faithful witness proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ in words loud and soft, in actions great and small.

*All:* We gather before God, and remember the saints who have told the stories of God’s people, and witnessed to their faith in times gone by.

* *

Until I was a teenager, my brother and I spent autumn afternoons running around our yard trying to catch falling maple and poplar leaves. If we caught a leaf, we got a wish. With a good gust of wind, countless leaves would break free from their stems and glide down, each on its own path. Samuel and I ran and lunged, laughing, even though our lungs were frozen. If, by chance, we did catch one, we lied on the ground in a pile of brown leaves to catch our breath and smell winter coming.

Back home in northeast Tennessee, the leaves begin changing in early October. The mountains burst in vibrant reds and oranges and yellows. The ginkgo is my favorite; it stays a waxy green until the end of the season and then, almost overnight, it bursts into gold. And nearly as fast as it turns, it losses its leaves. Each individual leaf spirals to the ground, like a feather, until there is a bright yellow carpet around the trunk.

I grew up in the First Christian Church of Erwin, Tennessee. “Almost North Carolina,” we would say, as if that made us more sophisticated. When I was young and someone asked which church I attended, I always replied, “Mamaw’s church.” It wasn’t until I was seven or eight years old that I bothered to pay attention to the block lettering on the brick welcome sign out front, complete with the name of the pastor, the youth minister, and the schedule of services.
My mom grew up just down the road, at the end of Main Avenue; the family walked up the street every Sunday morning for church. When I was little, Mom took us down there to visit her old neighbor, who was probably ninety. In her dim living room, she gave my brother and me chocolate covered peanuts and we stared at her glass egg paperweight with all those tiny bubbles inside as she and Mom caught up.

The church is a red brick building with a white steeple; wide stairs lead to heavy, wooden double doors and, out front, grow perfectly manicured shrubbery. There are no ginkgos, but we do have two bright red Japanese maples that a former youth minister planted. The foyer and sanctuary sit on the corner of Main and Iona Street while the rest of the church—the Sunday School rooms, the kitchen, the nursery—all extend down Iona.

The sanctuary of First Christian is simple with a high, white ceiling and stained glass windows. Each window is tall and thin with a pointed top, like elementary school drawings of houses made up of colored diamonds: reds, blues, greens, golds, purples. Above the baptistery is a large diamond-shaped stained glass image of a stern-looking Lamb of God, lying on a thick red book, waving the Christian flag.

Rows of pews fill the sanctuary, each one with a brown velour cushion spanning the length of the seat. The pews are the perfect height for a child to hide under during a game of hide and seek, though I once twisted around and got stuck. When I was in preschool, the sanctuary’s sea-green carpeting was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen—it matched my favorite crayon. The carpet contrasts the dark wood of the pulpit, the communion table with the gold-leaf “In Remembrance,” and the whitewashed walls. Our baptistery is recessed into the wall behind the choir loft and looks like a giant bathtub. During youth choir practices, my cousin Robert and I
dared each other to peek behind the brown velour curtain. Robert once told me that if I touched
the water in the baptistery, I would turn to dust. I refused the dare.

I have so many memories of First Christian’s sanctuary, like the time a yellow jacket
came in an open window and buzzed my ears through the entire service. Or performing in
Christmas plays, praying I would remember my lines. And my baptism—the water in the
baptistery was frigid.

I enjoy being in the sanctuary during early evening, especially when the lights are off; the
sanctuary is quiet then. All I can hear is the thunder of the CSX railroad cars coupling behind the
church to begin a long trip hauling boxcars over the mountain into North Carolina; often, during
a service, the cars bang together in the middle of prayer. Erwin is a railroad town—railcars
overflowing with coal come in and out twenty-four hours a day. Usually, when I’m in the
sanctuary alone, I sit in the second pew to the front and watch the sun shine through the stained
glass. Each window is dedicated to a former church member or family—the names are in silver
lead in the bottom pane and are usually preceded by an “In Honor of” or “In Memory of.” I don’t
recognize many of the first names, but the last names—Love, Price, Morgan—are familiar.
Sunlight streams through the glass casting diamonds of colored light onto the sea-green carpet
and the dark wood of the pews. When the sun sinks behind the mountains, the colors slide across
the floor, bleeding into one another, the reds and blues becoming a deep, royal purple.

* 

Pastor Kent of Union Church is preaching about Zacchaeus. Apparently the Greek wording is
vague as to whom the adjective “short” was meant for. I’ve always assumed, always been taught,
it was Zacchaeus—that’s why he climbed the tree, to see better. But Pastor Kent says “short”
may have been meant for Jesus. Perhaps Jesus wasn’t the blond, blue-eyed perfection of a man
pictured in our Sunday school classroom. Perhaps Zacchaeus was climbing because Jesus was the one hidden in the crowd.

Jesus saw him, spoke to him, went to his house for dinner. The crowd whispered and criticized. *Why is he visiting a tax collector, a sinner?* But Zacchaeus understood. “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” Jesus knew examples come from everywhere, even from tax collectors in trees.

“Everyone is an example,” says Pastor Kent. “Even if they are a bad example, they teach us what not to do, what to do differently.”

He closes his bible on the pulpit and smiles. “Today, to celebrate All Saints Day, we will be honoring those that came before. Soon, you will be writing the names of your own teachers and mentors on the strip of tissue paper handed to you at the door. Be thinking about who you want to include.” I sit, rubbing my fingers over my red strip of tissue paper, remembering.

*

Nearly two years ago, Mom called to talk about our home church in Erwin. I often wonder how things are going, whether they found a volunteer to take the four to six age group for Sunday School, whether everyone is healthy.

“Have you heard?” Her voice was excited.

“ Heard what?”

“Well, apparently some man in Florida had our church in his will.”

She then told me about Harry Franklin Boone, who had visited our church in the 30s. Apparently, the people had an impact on him, even though he didn’t stay long.

“Did anyone remember him?” I asked.
“Well, A.R. Morgan said he did faintly, but he’d been a kid at the time.”

“So what was in the will?”

“Well, the church now has 1.2 million dollars.”

I was shocked. This money would either strengthen the church or tear it apart. Who would determine how the money was spent? The elders? The board? Despite the fact that our congregation is home to people I have faith in, we have a record of not working well together; some members make all of the decisions, leaving the rest of us to complain.

“What are we going to do with it all?” I asked.

“Well,” Mom said, “The board is talking with the rest of the church to figure out the best, most efficient way to use the gift. We’re going to bank it, then just spend just the interest.”

That took some weight off of my mind—at least in the beginning, the money would not be wasted or spent all at once.

*

A parishioner stands to the side, next to a homemade clay bell with a blue-green glaze hanging from a hook on the wall.

“As the Peace Bell rings,” says Pastor Kent, “think of those who have gone on before us. Write their names on your tissue paper strip. We hold in our prayers the memory of each and every loss suffered by members as we commend them to God.”

The parishioner rings the bell, slowly, three times, letting each ring echo in the sanctuary until all is silent. After a pause, Pastor Kent motions the congregation to begin the All Saints Day liturgy printed in the morning’s bulletin. We follow along as he reads aloud.

One: We remember those known in our lives who have died in this last year. Please stand and remain standing if you have lost a grandmother or grandfather in this last year. Your mother or father. A spouse or partner. A child. A brother or sister. An aunt or uncle. A
close relative. A classmate. A dear friend. A member of your work or school community. Anyone who has ever touched your life.

The whole congregation is now standing—we have all lost someone. Each one of us has been changed and shaped by the example, good or bad, of those that came before.

One: Let us not grieve as those without hope, for the Spirit intercedes for us, and Christ is Lord of the Living and of the dead. For all the saints who went before us who have spoken to our hearts and touched us with Your fire, we praise You, O Lord.

All: They will hunger no more and thirst no more; and every tear shall be wiped from their eye.

*

I’ve not lived in Tennessee for nearly seven years; I miss First Christian and my small church family. There are only about fifty of us and most are over the age of seventy. Watching them age reminds me of lying beneath a ginkgo tree, looking up at beauty only to see the calm, spiraling leaves falling down on me all at once. These people have known each other for years. They grew up together, got married together, and raised children together. And I was part of that mix—I was Margie and Jack’s granddaughter; Ed and Norma and Bob and George’s niece; Robert and Jennifer’s cousin. Because I’m so isolated from it all, the death and the sickness doesn’t seem real half of the time. I read the church’s weekly Broadcaster that I get in the mail, telling me what activities are planned, who is in the hospital, who has passed away, but I am disengaged.

During my sophomore year of college, a woman in our church, Emma Smith, was diagnosed with cancer. Despite being in her early sixties and raising her grandchildren, she possessed more life in her than many of the kids in the youth group. Every Sunday, Emma and her husband Junior sat behind my family—First Christian congregants always sit in the same spot in the same pew. Emma whispered the sermon to her mother, Doris, who still looks like Elizabeth Taylor with sparkling violet eyes, royal blue clothes, and hair the color of Clairol Black Velvet. The hearing aid system that the church supplied didn’t work too well—the people
using the system always turned the little speakers up as loud as they would go, producing a high-pitched squeal. Emma’s commentary was more entertaining than the actual sermon, punctuated by loud whispers of “whaaat?” from Doris. Junior just sat there listening with his hint of a smile. Emma’s voice was always a little bit louder and a little bit faster than it needed to be—when talking to her, she would grab your shoulder so you knew you had her full attention saying, “That is so true, Sugar,” or “I know exactly what you are sayin, Darlin,” nodding all the while.

I remember a Mother’s Day luncheon one year after the service when the members of the youth group, me included, chose a smaller child out of the audience to hold in front of the dining mothers as we sang. I was about eight and was the last to pick a child. Everyone else in the youth group had toddlers holding their hands. The only child left was Jade, Emma’s first granddaughter, who was only weeks old; I knew no one would let me hold her. I remember fidgeting, trying to figure out how to handle being the only youth group member without a little kid holding my hand.

And then Emma caught my eye and held Jade out to me. I was scared. I’d only held babies when the mothers were there to grab them if something went wrong. But I walked over to Emma and soon felt Jade’s weight in my own arms. I could smell the slight scent of baby powder on her smooth skin. She had such tiny fingernails. Emma smiled and her bright brown eyes caught mine as she moved my arms to show me how to hold Jade—she trusted me.

Just months after Emma was diagnosed, Mom called to say that she probably wouldn’t make it until Christmas. I had grown up with Emma around; not having her at church was a loss I couldn’t comprehend. An elder set up a twenty-four hour prayer vigil and I requested the 10:30 to 11:00am slot. During a break between classes and lunch, I went go back to my room, sat in my empty floor, and prayed that Emma would be all right.
During a weekend trip home that semester, I dropped by Emma’s house before driving back to school. Junior guided me into their dark living room where Emma rested on a hospital bed; it took a moment for my eyes to adjust. She looked awful. Her stomach was swollen and her face was thin and shadowed. I sat with her for a few minutes, holding her hand. I didn’t know what to say. When I told her I had to go, she reached for my arm and pulled me close; I could smell the sourness of her breath.

“I have God right here in my heart,” she said, pointing at her chest.

I nodded at her, tears filling my eyes, my throat closing up.

“Don’t you ever change, ok? Don’t you ever change.” Her voice cracked.

That was the last time I saw her. Mom called a week or so later to let me know Emma had passed away. Apparently, she was dozing off and Junior heard her say, “I was special,” almost whispering to herself. Then she was gone.

I read that the ginkgo is the world’s oldest species of tree. Ginkgos have been known to live thousands of years so that generation after generation has the opportunity to admire them, to sit in their shade. The same goes for the church, in a way. We’re losing members like the ginkgo loses its leaves—all at once—but the tree will stand as a whole. Emma may be gone, but my church and its history in the community remain. I just hope our new endowment will be used in a way that would make Emma proud.

Sometimes, though, when I am alone in my apartment thinking about home, a panicked fear washes over me that the church will give up hope of growing the way it used to when my mother was a child. I’m afraid I won’t get the chance to say goodbye to the others who mean so much to me, afraid that the church will crumble around itself over insignificant issues.

*
Pastor Kent stands behind the pulpit, his glasses reflecting the sunlight shining through the clear windows. “Let us pray,” he says. “We are called to be your peacemakers, to hunger and thirst for what is right, and to show mercy to others. For all the saints who live beyond us, who challenge us to change the world with them, we give you thanks, O Lord, and acknowledge your call.” The congregation responds, “Here we are; send us.”

I write *Emma* on my tissue paper. I see Dad has done the same.

*When I was younger, Mom dropped my brother and me off at Mamaw and Papaw’s house on Sunday mornings. Samuel and I rode in their green Accord to Sunday school and Mom showed up in time for what we called “big” church. Dad didn’t start coming with us until I was in high school. I loved those Sunday morning drives with my grandparents. Mamaw always let me put on a little lipstick before we left and Samuel and I each got one Certs mint with green speckles. I loved the speckles.

I also loved Sunday school. I remember being downstairs in the preschool class with the small, colorful plastic chairs and the flannel board with Bible characters frozen in odd positions as if they were playing “Simon Says.” We still have the same set, though they are a little frayed around the edges.

After Sunday school, I attended big church. I would sat with my friends in the alcove to the left of the pulpit or with Mamaw and her friends in the back row. Papaw was usually busy being an elder, so he sat up front. Every once in a while Mamaw would let me have a cup of grape juice when the shiny communion tray came around, if I promised not to spill it on my dress. Holding the miniature plastic cup carefully between my little fingers, I stared at the maroon liquid, swirling it to get rid of all of the bubbles on top.
If it was Mamaw’s turn to fix communion for the shut-ins, I followed her downstairs to the kitchenette next to the Booster classroom after the service to help fill more little cups. I’d hold the cups while she poured the grape juice, and then we’d put them in the special travel cases, along with the tiny, tasteless communion crackers, to be taken to people’s homes. At Halloween, she let me take the used communion cups home to turn upside down, paint white, and pass off as little ghosts. At Christmas, we painted them silver and gold and made them into bells to hang on the fake Christmas tree we put up in her living room every year.

* 

I write Mamaw opposite of Emma, trying to make it dark enough to be seen without tearing the red tissue paper with my pencil. I can think of other names to write, but most are still among the living.

* 

Louise Harvey had a birthday not long ago. I sent a card to Mrs. Harvey, whom I have always known as Pete. She and her two sisters, Mary and Norma, were indispensable in our church. None of them were over four foot seven. I liked Pete in particular because she adored my Mamaw. I also admired her because she had once dyed her very white hair a light shade of lilac. My brother loved her, too. For a couple of years he went through a phase where he announced he was collecting jokes. Each Sunday, he ran up the sanctuary aisle to Pete’s usual seat so he could share his latest find. “What is the difference between an African elephant and an Indian elephant?” Of course, she never knew the answer. With a proud look on his face and a puffed-out chest, he would say, “3,000 miles!” She would laugh, throw him a smile, and give him a new one to memorize.
Now Pete is in a nursing home and her beautiful white hair has been cut short. It is still strange for me to visit the church on the weekends and holidays when I am home and not see Pete’s smiling, wrinkled face or her delicate hair barrettes. Last time I was home, I visited her at Pine Oaks Assisted Living; I knocked on the door and her nephew answered. Without saying a word, he went back to the armchair next to Pete’s bed and picked up the newspaper he had been reading. I walked to her bedside, smiling.

“Hi, Pete.”

She looked up at me and I could see her searching her memory for a clue as to who I might be. I didn’t know what to do so I said, “I was just stopping in to say hi and see how you’re doing.”

“Oh, I’m just fine.”

After a minute of the kind of small talk made by strangers, I said goodbye.

* 

Pastor Kent is at the pulpit, his stole blowing in the breeze from an open window.

One: God cares for us in ways of which we are unaware,
All: and we love God with all our heart and soul, mind and strength.
One: We have much to give and offer—
All: our time, our talents, our experience, our faith, our forgiveness, and our work
One: As we plan with joy our work together, let us give as we are called and ask God to consecrate all that we can bring in love, in care, in whatever means we are able, knowing that giving brings healing and gives God’s love hands and feet in this place.

The organ begins playing and the voices of Union Church rise, filling the high ceiling.

We praise thee O God, our Redeemer, Creator
In grateful devotion our tribute we bring.
We lay it before You, we kneel and adore You,
We bless Your holy name, glad praises we sing.

I look up from the hymnal and see people smiling to themselves; some know the hymn by heart and have their eyes closed, their heads slightly bowed.
Time and stress seem to be gaining the upper hand at First Christian. Overall, the average age of our members keeps rising while death and relocation whittle away at our congregation—we are now only thirty or thirty-five strong. Here at Union Church, most are elderly, just like back home, but there is a sprinkling of young families as well; and everyone is happy to see new faces. Of course this is a different community than Erwin, but I think a major difference is the peace, the sense of coming together for a common purpose. Sitting between my parents, listening and watching, I feel differently.

I remember one particularly rough winter in Berea when Pastor Kent asked us to keep our coats on so they wouldn’t have to turn the heat up so high, due to the expense. People were happy to oblige. Back home everyone would have complained; our organist has grumbled about having to go to church when Christmas fell on a Sunday. We’ve lost focus and purpose.

These people choose to help, choose to take responsibility. I wish I could transport the remaining members of First Christian Church here so they could feel the difference and see the love and devotion. I’m afraid that, to survive the lack of members, priorities at First Christian will shift even more. The endowment can’t make the congregation grow physically or emotionally—that is the job of the people.

A new family recently moved into our community in Erwin and began attending First Christian. A single mom with three kids. That triples the youth group. The middle child, a girl about thirteen, has serious health issues. Since the endowment, some members of the church have become suspicious of anyone new who walks through the door—especially someone with needs. Instead of welcoming them the way Christ would, they whisper and cast quick glances, accusing them of coming only for the money. Other members, however, join together and help.
They drive the child to the hospital; they prepare food when the mother doesn’t have time to cook. The doctors finally prescribed the girl a medication that seemed to help her pain, but the mother couldn’t afford it. When the pharmacist in our congregation found out, he made sure the medicine was on the family’s doorstep the next day, free of charge.

People are still fighting over how to use the million—one group wants an elevator so the elderly can easily reach their classrooms, while another wants a new stereo system. The goodwill of the church has not ended. I am hopeful.

* 

As the organ sounds its last notes, Pastor Kent says, “Please rise as the closing anthem is played and join me in the memorial garden, where we will remember and be thankful for those who have gone on before us.” Quietly, I follow my parents out of the pew, out of the church, and around to the garden. A gingko tree stands nearly bare, the golden leaves raked away. The congregation huddles in the wind, surrounding the small tree. One by one, people approach it, tying their red strip to a twig, to a branch. Mom has tears in her eyes. Dad is covering his slip with more names. I find a small twig that has yet to be decorated and tie my tissue paper tight. The penciled names of Mamaw and Emma flutter in the breeze. Soon, the tree is rustling with red leaves of memories. Pastor Kent begins to sing “Amen” softly. I stand against my parents, watching. Voices join together. I don’t know most of these people—they never knew Emma’s eyes or Mamaw’s hands. They’ll never know Pete or the way the sun shines through our stained glass in the evenings—but they understand loss and blessings. We sing together, watching as the names of those we love, of those who taught us to be better people, flesh out the tree giving it new life. In this moment, our separate communities have become larger and will not pass away.
i & is & her

if there are any heavens my mother will (all by herself) have one. It will not be a pansy heaven nor a fragile heaven of lilies-of-the-valley but it will be a heaven of black red roses

my father will be (deep like a rose tall like a rose)

standing near my

(swaying over her silent)

with eyes which are really petals and see

nothing with the face of a poet really which is a flower and not a face with hands which whisper

This is my beloved my

(suddenly in sunlight he will bow,

& the whole garden will bow)

—E. E. Cummings

When I think of my mother, I don’t think of flowers. The first image that comes to mind is a square photograph my father took with a thin white border and a water-stained back, dated 1981; in it, my mother is in her early twenties, newly married, with long brown braids. She stands at the edge of pine and tulip poplar woods, with handfuls of tangled brush and branches dragging
behind her. She is headed toward the burn pile; her grip is tight. The foundation for her new house has already been dug as she clears what will be her yard, a small clear-cut area in thirty acres of forest. She wears a blue bandana as a headband and a pair of cut-off overall shorts. Her tan skin shines with sweat in the afternoon sun. Happy to be outside working, she can see progress, see the branches piling up. Though busy, she takes a quick break to look into the camera’s eye. She is content. Her brown eyes smile and, at first, I wish I could tell her to be careful with herself, but then realize it is unnecessary. She is stronger than I am.

* 

Though poetry was Edward Estlin Cummings’ forte, painting was a passion most are unaware of. His canvases, thick with color, reveal a stormy sunset, a vase of wildflowers against a deep black background, or the geometric faces of the various women in his life. Just as his poetry used space and form on the page to convey more than the words alone could, his paintings—with bold colors and angles—followed the same aesthetic principles.

By 1931, Cummings was thirty-seven, twice married, and well traveled. The same year, he published a collection of new poems, ViVa, at his own expense; “if there are any heavens my mother will(all by herself)have” was number 43. By the time ViVa was released, Cummings had already published several volumes of poetry and an autobiographical novel. It was in ViVa that he pushed his experimental side and allowed the influence of painting to show through, using words on the page like strokes of paint. Having witnessed so much raw human life, Cummings began expressing his pain and wonder in his poetry.

Cummings’ mother, Rebecca Haswell Clarke, lived until 1947, having survived the 1926 car crash that killed her husband. It was snowing that day as Cummings’ parents drove in their new air-cooled Franklin to New Hampshire from Cambridge. His mother was driving and his
father insisted she stop for a moment so he could wipe the windshield clear. She paused long enough for him to complete the task and drove on, but snow quickly covered the windshield again. Unable to see the road, she continued driving, hoping to make out a landmark in the blur of white. Without warning, the car was cut in half by a train. His father was killed instantly.

When the railroad brakemen ran down the tracks to the accident, they saw Mrs. Cummings standing beside the car in the dirty snow, her head “spouting” blood. They tried to lead her away to a nearby farmhouse, but she refused until the body of her husband was covered. Only then would she leave. She was sixty-six years old.

While Cummings obviously adored his father, whom he considered to love him more than any father could ever love a son, he said his mother was “the most amazing person” he’d ever met, describing her as “completely and humanly and unaffectedly generous.” The day after the accident, E. E. Cummings and his sister visited their mother in the hospital. The neurosurgeon was flabbergasted she was still alive. “She wanted one thing only,” Cummings wrote, “to join the person she loved most. He was very near her, but she could not quite reach him.” As they spoke to their mother, she gradually realized what her death would mean to her children. As Cummings put it, “She decided to live.”

During her hospital stay, Mrs. Cummings kept telling her children that something was wrong with her head. They soon discovered that the emergency surgery had been performed in complete candlelight since all the electricity in town was out due to the snowstorm. Once the storm passed, she was transferred to a larger hospital in Boston. During the ambulance ride, she refused to lie down because “by doing so she’d miss the scenery en route.” Once arrived, she insisted on watching the procedure via a hand mirror as the “great brain-surgeon” removed the bone and dirt and grime the first doctor had missed. Mrs. Cummings carried a bottle of the brain
debris out of the emergency room with her, saying, “You see? I was right!” Just months later, fully recovered, she became a volunteer for the Traveler’s Aid in Grand Central Station.

* 

The poem “if there are any heavens my mother will(all by herself)have” paints a love, a marriage, that I don’t completely understand. Cummings’ mother deserved more than “a pansy heaven or / a fragile heaven of lilies-of-the-valley.” It must be a “heaven of blackred roses.”

Pansies evoke “wimp,” but they also bring to mind nearly every decorative garden I’ve seen. On my walk to work in the mornings, I pass at least four or five pansy patches, often in window boxes. They are commonplace. Lilies-of-the-valley recall the small white bells that blossom in spring next to our outhouse back home. They are beautiful, but dainty. A good rain tears their petals until the dark green leaves beneath them are littered with white spots. Cummings’ mother deserves something sturdier, a garden that will last eternity. Blackred roses are his answer. Such a dark rose is a deeper flower than the commonplace Valentine’s Day gift; its petals cause you to pause before picking.

Seeing his father like a rose in the blackred rose garden, suggests that heaven for her would mean being enveloped by her lover. He seems so quiet, standing near her, swaying over her—even before the word “silent” consumes line nine. And then we find that his eyes are blackred rose petals, seeing nothing because the words render him a rose. His face is that of a flower, and his hands whisper, “This is my beloved my,” and fall silent. Then the father flower, “suddenly in sunlight,” making black glow red, bows and with him, the rest of the roses follow.

* 

When I was eight or nine, I remember walking past the burn pile toward the swing set. I knew, as I crunched the dry grass, that I never wanted to marry, that marriage was boring and dull and
exhausting. I wanted to date lots of different people so that I would never get sick of anyone and they would never get sick of me. I knew these things, of course, from my own parents’ marriage, in which everything was an argument. When two people are building a house together, there are lots of opportunities for fights.

Dad says their first real date was a trip to the theater to see *All the President’s Men*. She was 21; he was 24. They met through a Dad’s sister-in-law. Mom worked at Publix Grocery at the time and was going to East Tennessee State University for a degree in drafting. Dad was working for the sign department of the city of Kingsport. Nine months after the movie, they were married.

Dad has always been the more affectionate of the two; it is clear he adores my mom despite the fights. He’ll rub her back or sneak a kiss on the cheek every so often, though she always rolls her eyes, as if he is joking. Embarrassed by the attention, Mom reacts by poking fun at his word choices or how he pronounces ‘napkin’ or ‘egg.’ I used to jump to and defend him until he pulled me aside one night and told me to shut up, that he could defend himself.

A rainy evening in late summer of 2002 opened my eyes. I was an hour away being a camp counselor and my younger brother was at karate lessons, when Mom answered the phone. Every Tuesday during decent weather, Dad and his Tri-Cities Road Club friends race their bicycles around local country backroads. That Tuesday, a minivan filled with woven baskets sped around a curve in the rain, sliding into the opposite lane. Dad and two other guys were leading the pack of bicyclists coming down the hill. The van hit them head-on—Dad’s right hand took the brunt of the force and then his shoulder clipped the driver’s side mirror, nearly flipping him over the van. After stalling in a ditch, the van sped off up the hill. The riders with medical backgrounds tried to help until an ambulance came, while another group chased the van to see
the license plate number. They never caught up. When she got the news, Mom hung up the phone and left the laundry wet in the washer.

I met her at the hospital the next day, when I could get a ride out of camp. As I rode up the elevator alone, I wasn’t sure I wanted to see Dad in a hospital bed, wasn’t sure I wanted that memory. I knocked before pushing the heavy wooden door to his room open. Mom was sitting on the edge of the hospital bed, holding Dad’s hand. Her mouth smiled, but her eyes exposed her worry. My brother, Samuel, was on the far side of the bed, touching a small water-soaked sponge to Dad’s cracked lips. Dad was bruised badly, his left hand wrapped in gauze like a giant white mitten. I kissed his bandaged forehead, telling him how much I loved him, telling him he had to get better. Then the nurse came in and rolled him downstairs for another surgery.

I spent most of the evening in a cold waiting room, but could barely stand it. I wanted to go outside. I kept seeing Dad broken in a hospital bed; it was suffocating. I glanced over at my brother, sideways in his chair, reading a book. Mom chewed at hangnails as she stared at the corner-mounted, muted television. I sat, crossing and uncrossing my legs, glancing through parenting magazines without seeing anything on the glossy pages.

After half an hour of silence, I cleared my throat and asked how I would get back to camp. Mom turned and stared at me incredulously. I met her gaze and the air thickened. She explained that she hadn’t been home in two days, that the laundry in the washing machine was probably moldy, that she was afraid she’d forgotten to turn the stove off and would come home to an ash pile instead of the house she and Dad had built together. I bit the inside of my jaw, riding out her anger. And then her brow loosened and she began to cry.
“You couldn’t know what it was like, Rachel,” she told me, wiping the tears off of her cheeks until her skin was red. “He looked like himself when you saw him. When Samuel and I got here, he still had dirt in his wounds and grass in his hair. I didn’t even know if he was alive.”

In the hesitation between her words and sobs, I remembered that he was her husband. I gathered her into my arms and held her as she heaved.

* 

E. E. Cummings was well known for his love poetry, especially “somewhere i have never traveled, gladly beyond.” In it, he is a flower, affected by his lover: “your slightest look easily will unclose me / though i have closed myself as fingers, / you open always petal by petal myself as Spring opens / (touching skillfully, mysteriously) her first rose.” He is vulnerable and fragile, opening and closing at the mercy of this person. In the last stanza, the poet recognizes the lack of explanation: “(i do not know what it is about you that closes / and opens; only something in me understands / the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses) / nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands.” I picture his father, bowing to his mother as a glowing blackred rose in the sunlight.

E. E. Cummings was married three times. His first wife was Elaine Orr, who had been the wife of Cummings’ mentor, Scofield Thayer, editor of The Dial. Thayer and Orr had married in 1916. Cummings was asked to write a poem as a wedding present; he wrote “Epithalamion.” But within three years, in 1919, Cummings and Orr began an affair. In December of that year, Orr gave birth to Cummings’ first and only child, Nancy. Thayer eventually moved to Vienna, where he had a mental breakdown. In 1924, Cummings and Orr were married. Nine months later, Orr divorced Cummings, leaving him for a wealthy Irish banker. She moved to Ireland with Nancy
and though Cummings was granted partial custody, Orr blocked any communication, telling Nancy that Thayer was her real father.

In 1932, after separating from his second wife, Anne Minnerly Barton, Cummings met Marion Morehouse, a fashion model and photographer. Morehouse lived with Cummings the rest of his life as his common-law wife. The new relationship ushered in a happier poetic tone than his previous poetry. With Morehouse, he spent more time at his New Hampshire summer home, which probably recalled his time on his family’s farm as a boy—memories he recaptures in some of the poems from these later volumes. Instead of dwelling on society and its issues, these books show Cummings living happily as a lover, a reader, a watcher.

In 1948, Cummings found out that his daughter, Nancy, was married to the grandson of former President Theodore Roosevelt and was spending her summers very near his own summer home in New Hampshire. Nancy knew only that he had been married to her mother in the past, and regarded him as a family friend. She agreed to have her portrait painted by Cummings. After the portrait sessions were finished, Nancy asked him about the days he had spent with her mother, including what he thought about Scofield Thayer. Pausing, Cummings asked, “Did anyone ever tell you I was your father?” The news shocked Nancy, but father and daughter and grandchildren were finally reunited.

In one portrait of Nancy, she stares off to the left with blue eyes that are a little lighter than her blue dress. She has short brown hair and delicate pearl earrings. Though the face-shape, the color of the eyes, and the dress are different, it is much the same expression as Cummings’ portrait of his mother.

*
Growing up, I was always told I looked like my mother. Thumbing through cardboard boxes of old photographs, I came across a few of her as a child, and I see that we have the same eyes, the same jaw line. Not long ago, when home in Tennessee for a visit, I was mistaken for Mom by an elderly woman in our church. I had stopped Edyth in the hallway to compliment her jeweled elephant brooch; she patted my arm and said, with a tear in her eye, “Oh, Kris, what a wonderful person you are, always giving, always loving.” She was confused when I said thank you, but I am not my mother—I am my mother’s daughter.

A few months ago, Mom, who never has the time or energy to travel, suggested that she and I get out for a weekend. I jumped at the chance, knowing she needed a break. She would drive three hours to Beckley, West Virginia, halfway to my apartment in Morgantown, and I would drive the three hours to meet her. We spent the weekend ordering dessert—something we never do, sitting in the hotel’s hot tub, and perusing the crafts at the Tamarack artisan center. That trip was one of the few times my mother and I have spent together just to enjoy each other’s company.

*

Cummings painted several still lifes of flowers, but I have yet to see one of blackred roses. Most are blurred paintings of colorful bursts with solid backgrounds. Still, the influence of painting and colors is easy to see in “if there are any heavens my mother will(all by herself) have.” The line breaks and use of white space make the lines seem like strokes of a brush across the page, using the blank space to say as much as the words themselves. Lines nine and thirteen, “silent)” and “hands,” are small quick sweeps. The closing parenthesis of “silent)” pushes toward the inside margin, as if the word is hiding quietly behind the punctuation. And “hands,” such a short, emphatic line, makes me picture tiny hands, perhaps the leaves of the flower folded together to
protect the stem and blossom; “hands” is also surrounded by “w” sounds, which let the reader hear the whisper that reveals itself in the next line. Line sixteen, “(suddenly in sunlight,)” is separated by white space on all sides like a bright yellow stroke on a blank page; it is as if the opening parenthesis pushes the words out, unprotected, so sunlight can warm them, bless them.

The poem moves from a traditional-looking stanza, despite the unusual use of punctuation, to a more free-flowing shape when the poem transitions into surreal imagery and we see Cummings’ father, “(deep like a rose / tall like a rose).” Soon his father is swaying gently in the breeze of this heaven, and the poem sways across the page with him, moving back and forth from shorter lines, “(swaying over her / silent),” all the way out to “nothing with the face of a poet really which” and back in again. At the end of the poem, the visual movement between the repetition of “bow”—“he will bow, / & the whole garden will bow)—imitates the dropping of a head in adoration.

And it is no accident that, in lines seven and fifteen, where the word “mother” or “wife” should go is, instead, white space followed by a blank line. With the noun released into the emptiness, Cummings seems to give the reader a deep breath that knows the end of the sentence, but also knows that it is unnecessary—or perhaps too important—to say aloud.

* 

There is a still life hanging in Papaw’s living room that Mom painted as a young woman. It is a cutting board with a copper teakettle and a bright yellow lemon in thick, clumped strokes against a dark green background. Even with that surge of yellow, the painting has always struck me as needing sunlight. At first I thought it was due to its placement on a dark wall, but then I realized that even on the brightest days, the picture is just dim. The copper reflects the lemon in a vague, cloudy way and the dark green of the background spreads to the patina of the kettle.
I don’t know much about my mother’s childhood. I’ve been afraid to ask. I do know that, while Mamaw and Papaw have loved my cousins and me, they were distracted and frustrated parents. As a little girl, Mom often went to school with her legs covered in switch marks. And I know that Mamaw’s mother, Mom’s grandmother, lived the end of her life with them. She and Mom were very close companions and because there was never much money, they shared a bed. One night, my sixth-grade mom woke to realize her grandmother, lying next to her, had passed away in her sleep.

Mamaw and Papaw never approved of Dad. He hadn’t grown up in Erwin, he had a strange sounding last name, and he had no real goals. People called him her foreigner. They got married at the Justice of the Peace. I don’t think I’ve ever seen photos; I don’t think anyone was there to take photos. Dad moved her out of Erwin—which had become claustrophobic—to a red farmhouse in the country. They gardened and found steady jobs and, in their spare time, made toys to sell at craft fairs. Soon they moved out to thirty acres they bought the next county over: she would design the house, he would build it.

It was a big project; by the time I came along, the house was still not finished, and Mom had ran out of time to paint. Instead, she worked ten hours a day drafting for engineering firms and worried about money, despite Dad’s consistent paycheck from a woodworking shop in town. Yet, she homeschooled my brother and me, because the county schools were mediocre. She drove us to homeschool meetings to meet other kids our age and allowed us to help choose our textbooks each year. She let us take art and karate lessons, join the Girl Scouts and play tee-ball.

I knew she had once drawn and painted, having seen her pencil drawings and pen and inks around the homes of family. She also designed and colored family trees that she gave as gifts. One Christmas, I decided I would give her a sketchbook so she could start again, now that
my brother and I were grown enough to occupy ourselves. I picked out a sketchpad wrapped in green-gray leather with a photo slot in front. I slipped in a black and white photo of her and me, laughing. The leather casing unfolded to show the pad of paper, a set of charcoal pencils, and a small silver sharpener. Under the Christmas tree that morning, I was most excited about her gift. When she opened it, she smiled at the photo and untied the leather strings. When she saw the sketchpad and pencils, she paused for a moment, and then said, “I can’t see well enough to draw anymore.” She closed the leather cover and laid it aside. The gift has been stacked on her bedroom bookshelf ever since.

A few years ago, I found one of Mom’s old paintings down in Papaw’s musty basement. I brought it upstairs and begged Mom to hang it in our living room. She gave in, surprised, I think, to see an old memory. It is an oil pastel of a woven basket filled with cut flowers, reminiscent of Andrew Wythe’s work. In front of the basket, on a wooden surface, lay two gardening gloves. The background is fairly dark, but the woven shadows of the basket and the bouquet of flowers make it seem happy, relaxed. It helps that there are no clumps of paint, thick on the canvas—everything is smooth. Dad found a frame for it and hung the oil pastel over our frog aquarium.

* 95 Poems, Cummings’ last book of poetry published during his lifetime, is filled with poems that admire the natural world, that record his outrage at the outcome of the Hungarian revolution, that remember childhood, and that reflect on life and birth and death. He called 95 Poems an “obvious example of the seasonal metaphor… a statement of the secret which every mystic tries to tell.” The book combines many of his past poetic stages in a final collection that shows his gratitude for, and acceptance of, whatever life presents.
Three years after *95 Poems* was published, Cummings died of a stroke in a New Hampshire hospital. He was sixty-seven. He had been outside on his farm splitting wood in the early September heat, preparing for winter. When finished, he sharpened the axe head as he had been taught to do by his father and went inside the house and up the stairs. Moments later, Marion heard a crash and came running, only to find him unconscious in the hallway. She called an ambulance. He died of a brain hemorrhage the next afternoon.

The last entry in his journal was about flowers: “M’s new delphiniums (which I have preserved, with a wire cage, from woodchucks & alas! chipmunks) have long since lost their blue-glorious blossoms & gone to seed. But yesterday I noticed a lovely light-blue (& far smaller) blossomer who’d come to her beauty all alone.”

*I*

I suppose I do think of irises when I think of my mother. She has a small patch of them growing among a bunch of shaded limestone where the trail to the stream meets the edge of the field. Each year they sprout up in hues of purple, between dark green waxy leaves. She doesn’t need to tend them, but when she mows, her once-white tennis shoes covered in grass clippings, she always stops in that corner of the field to check on them, to make sure they came up. I’ll hear the mower engine stop with a loud shudder, and will look out the dormer window of my bedroom down to the edge of the woods to see my mother bent over the blossoms. And then Dad will appear, crossing the blue gravel driveway toward her with a glass of water.
I am home in northeast Tennessee visiting my family for the first time in months. On my way into town, I stop by Papaw’s to say hi. He hears my car pull up his gravel driveway and is at the door, waiting, as I walk down the broken sidewalk to his porch.

“Well, well. What’re you doing here?” He’s looking thin, but much healthier since his heart attack two years ago.

“Hey there. Mind if I visit for a bit?” It is good to see him.

“Of course not, come on in.” He pats me hard on the back as I pass through the doorway. “Sit down a spell.”

The pine mantle above Papaw’s unused fireplace is covered in family photos and railroad memorabilia. On the far left are family trees Mom designed in AutoCAD and shaded with colored pencil; next is a framed Olan Mills collage of us four grandchildren. His wooden bow, saved from his childhood, hangs against the brick above the mantle. A small, unused cd player sits on the end of the mantle, closest to the kitchen; Papaw doesn’t know how to turn it on.
Toward the middle is a brick shaped like a house that Mamaw painted before she got sick. Framed and centered is a large painting, taken from a photograph, of my great uncles riding the Clinchfield Engine No. 1 around a green mountain railroad curve, their conductor caps tilted in a playful way. Engine and caboose trinkets Papaw has received as gifts over the years fill in the gaps.

“You’ve got a lot of railroad stuff in here Papaw, you should open a museum.” I join him on the couch, moving a newspaper to the leather footstool.

“I suppose so. How much do you think I should charge? I could supplement my retirement.” He grins. “Did you know that in nineteen and thirty-five everyone on the railroad had to pay out three and a half percent of their wages into the retirement fund? Well worth it, as it turns out. Down at the credit union, they accuse me of breaking them up since I’ve been retired going on twenty-five years.” Leaning his head back, he laughs with his mouth open wide.

The CSX railroad is still one of the town’s biggest employers, but there hasn’t been a passenger train running in the area since the early fifties. Coal-laden cars still rumble through Erwin daily, though, stopping impatient traffic. Papaw can remember the heyday of the railroad; when he began working in 1947, men who had started in 1901 hadn’t yet retired. The train depot, empty for a long time, was renovated and turned into the Unicoi County Public Library a few years back. These days, high school graduates crave places outside the little bubble of Erwin and the railroad.

Because it is such a small community, tucked away in the mountains of Appalachia, change has come slow since residents are often resistant to it. Outsiders are treated with caution. Despite the fact that I have familial ties that go back generations, I never went to school in
Unicoi County or lived there, so I fall into the outsider category more often than not—unless I have my mother or Papaw with me to prove my roots.

I grew up on the other side of Unaka Mountain, just north of Unicoi County, but my mother was born in Erwin. She and my grandparents lived in a small house at the end of South Main Avenue, just across from the baseball fields. The red clay diamonds used to be their family garden. The four-redlight stretch of South Main houses most of the downtown stores are: the two-screen movie theater, Erwin National Bank, Keesecker Appliance and Furniture, and at least two drug stores. My family has attended First Christian Church of Erwin for decades. My brother took karate lessons from soft-spoken Tony Baker next door to Baker’s Tannery and Leather Shop for more than ten years; my Girl Scout meetings were held at the Methodist church on Elm Street; and Papaw still sits at the counter of Clinchfield Drugs for coffee and news every morning.

The ancient mountains surrounding Erwin both shelter and isolate. When driving east on Interstate 26, the rolling hills covered in tulip poplar, maple, and pine glow when the light is just right. Locals call it “the valley beautiful.” But Erwin has the reputation of being close-minded when it comes to politics and race. The Hispanic population of Erwin has grown in the past ten years due to migrant workers hired seasonally on the local farms. There are several tiendas selling Mexican spices and crafts. African Americans are still a rarity. According to Papaw, in the early 1900s there were a fair number of African Americans in the area. In 1912, though—four years before the incident with Mary the elephant—a white girl went missing. She was found when an African American man waded across the Nolichucky River toward an island carrying her body. Though many people today think he was trying to save her, the first men on the scene
didn’t hesitate to come to their own conclusions. All African Americans in the area were given twenty-four hours to leave town. The boxcars were packed. Such are the sad stories.

These days, Erwin isn’t known for much, a lot of history has been forgotten or hidden, and most people have never heard of the town at all. What’s left of the Blue Ridge Pottery collection draws a crowd; the factory used to be in Erwin—Mamaw worked there for years painting vases, plates, pitchers, and salt and pepper shakers. And during the annual Apple Festival, the first weekend of October, Main Avenue is lined with booths of homemade crafts and baked goods—still-warm pies, breads, and Rice-Krispie treats melted to their plastic wrap package. A stage is assembled on one end of the street with clogging and singing, and parking lots are filled with inflatable play areas. I went for a couple years as a kid, once because Uncle George was selling daisies to raise money for POW/MIA, but I was bored. There are only so many birdhouses and kitschy front-door nameplates I could take, even at ten years old.

The tale of Mary the elephant, however, is a bit of history that most Erwinites would be glad to erase. There is no definitive version of the story, but, in all of them, Erwin is known as the town that hanged Charlie Sparks’ world famous circus elephant.

Just down the street from my church, near the intersection of Love Street and Main Avenue, a corner consignment shop has swinging children painted on the windows. For years it was an antique shop called “The Hanging Elephant.” Back then, the windows were lined with brass vases and white pottery cats. Etched onto each pane of glass was the single image of Mary’s hanging. Papaw says the photograph came out blurry because of a late afternoon rainstorm. I passed the store often—on the way to Girl Scout meetings or church—but I never thought about that image of Mary hanging from a railroad car. It belonged to a story Erwin was infamous for, yet no one talked about.
Sitting with Papaw on his couch, I’m hoping to hear some stories. Though he talks a lot about the fourteen months he spent in the Pacific on the USS McCoy-Reynolds during World War II, the Clinchfield Railroad was his career. Curious, and a little nervous about his reaction, I ask the taboo question.

“I was wondering what you remembered about Mary the elephant and the railroad.” I fidget beside him, crossing and uncrossing my legs. The pile of newspapers next to the floor lamp looks like it is about to topple.

“Oh, no one really talks about her anymore.” His hands, lying in his lap, are black and blue from the blood thinner coursing through his veins. “No one likes to talk about her.”

I nod, disappointed, and try to think of some smooth segue back to a normal chat.

“But, if you sit right here a minute, I’ll go get my railroad scrapbook.” He pushes himself up and off the plaid couch that Mamaw picked out before she passed away more than thirteen years ago.

As he walks around the corner and up the three stairs to his bedroom, I follow, wanting to make sure he doesn’t overexert himself. His bedroom is neat and spare, the bed made and covered in a quilt Mamaw pieced; on his nightstand, a tissue box and an old beige rotary telephone are arranged side by side. After moving a small cardboard box from the top shelf of his closet, Papaw pulls out a thick, three-ring binder and lays it on the bed. It is bursting with papers and the cover, decorated in 90s-era geometric neon lines, is dusty. I touch the corner, not knowing what to expect.

“Well, here she is!” He is excited that I am interested, willing to listen.

“This is great, Papaw, how long have you been keeping this?”
“Oh, years and years. Let’s take it into the living room where the light is better. Can’t hardly see back here.” He runs a hand through his pure white hair, and I follow him through the house back to the couch, carrying the binder.

Tugging his Tennessee football sweatshirt down, Papaw opens the scrapbook across his lap. The life-alert necklace that Mom and Dad bought for him after his heart attack bulges beneath the sweatshirt. He is good about wearing it every day, better than I thought he would be.

“Eh, law. I’d forgotten some of this stuff was in here.”

The pages, covered in protective plastic sheets, are filled with old postcards, black and white photos of engines and boxcars, railroad roster lists, and newspaper articles. “See this list here?” He taps the page he’s turned to with his index finger. “This shows that I was on top of the seniority list. By this point—what year is this, oh, nineteen and eighty-three—I’d been there the longest, so I had my choice of shift and location. I made sure I got seven to three, five days a week, down at the Erwin yards. When I first started, they had me all the way up in the Kingsport yards. That’s, what, forty miles or so north?”

I nod, smiling. “How long did you work at the railroad?”

“Well, let’s see. Thirty-seven years and five months. I was a brakeman and a conductor on the yards.” He points to a photo of himself and a man in plaid pants I recognize as A.R. Morgan from church. My cousin Josh, about age four, hides behind Papaw’s legs. “A.R. didn’t believe me when I told him I was retiring the first of June, then he decided to retire that very same day.” He laughs as he turns a few more stiff pages. “Oh, and here is an old income tax form, one of the first. Let’s see, says it’s from nineteen and thirteen. What’s that say?” He points to some fine print under the title, and tilts his head back so he can see through the bottom half of his bifocals. “Twenty to one thousand dollars fine upon failure to return this form to IRS by
March first.’ Well, what do you know.” He looks up at me as he turns the page and I grin. “Now, this is what you were wanting. See this here? It isn’t that old, maybe a few years, but it tells all about the elephant.”

As he pulls the photocopied article from its plastic sheathing, I remember what Mom told me when I asked her about Mary.

“You’ve got to be careful because everyone has a different story. Even the newspapers.” Aside from getting the facts right, I think she worried I would bring up an uncomfortable topic. I’d already noticed that the main points between articles were generally the same, but the details changed from teller to teller, depending on what the author’s parents or grandparents had passed down. I knew from growing up in the area that the story was both a sore spot and perverse point of pride.

“Stick with family,” she had said.

“Well, what about you?” I watched the contours of her face and saw a memory come floating back.

“When I was a girl, and we lived down on South Main, my friends and I dug holes around the railroad—where Mary was supposed to be buried—to see if we could find any elephant bones. Can you imagine? Elephant bones in the middle of Erwin.”

“Does that look like it will be of some help?” Papaw asks.

I nod. “Yes. Thanks a lot.”

The article from the *Bristol Herald Courier* is titled, “Erwin resists its claim to fame: 1916 elephant hanging still haunts town.” Papaw’s copy has the date cut off. Taking up the top portion of the middle two columns is a familiar image. Mom has a newspaper article from Chicago, with that same photo, framed. It must have gotten packed during the renovations of our
house, because I haven’t seen it in years. I remember the paper was yellowed behind the glass, but the huge creature could be distinguished clearly, legs dangling, high above the sepia railroad tracks. It was as if Mary was performing part of a circus act, floating in the air with ease.

September 13, 1916. A Wednesday.

*

The Sparks World Famous Show—a railcar circus—spent September of 1916 touring Appalachia, moving through Kentucky and Virginia before making its way down the tracks to the northeast corner of Tennessee. Charlie Sparks, the owner of the circus, called it his “100% Sunday School Show,” clean enough for all ages to enjoy. He had many acts lined up to wow the crowd, including the Conners Troupe on the tight wire, trained ponies, Captain Tiebor’s seals, and a Wild West concert. But the headliner for the show was Mary, a massive Asian elephant. Most people in the area had never seen an elephant before. The newspaper from nearby Johnson City ran an ad claiming Mary was “the largest living land animal on earth.” The posters for the show said Mary weighed over five tons and was a full three inches taller than P.T. Barnum’s elephant, Jumbo.

Charlie Sparks had grown up around performers. By the time he turned eight, he was the drummer for the Jack Harvey Minstrels and had earned the title of World Champion Clogger. After Charlie’s father passed away, he used his talent for singing and dancing on street corners, doing well enough to support himself and his mother. Charlie and his mother then met John Weisman, a vaudeville performer traveling with a circus. They became close friends. When Charlie’s mother was diagnosed with tuberculosis, she made John promise to care for Charlie. He agreed. After she passed, John adopted Charlie, going so far as to take the boy’s last name, as it sounded more circusy. Charlie lived the circus life with his adopted father until 1901, when
John decided he’d had enough of the constant traveling and settled down in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. He left the circus to Charlie, who decided to make use of the railroads criss-crossing the country and converted the show into a railcar circus.

I have no idea what Charlie actually looked like. I imagine him a roundish man on the short side with a slightly receding hair line, just enough to notice. His dark hair is combed straight back and he meticulously maintains a huge handlebar mustache that is always shiny and smooth. During shows he wears a full three-piece suit that includes a brilliant red vest and a black coat with tails. His gold pocket watch is his prized possession, the only object of his father’s that his mother kept.

Mary the elephant was Charlie’s star. Because John bought Mary when she was only four years old, she’d grown up around their makeshift family, right in the circus. Charlie treated her like a close pet, or even a child. Mary was the first undomesticated animal Sparks’ circus had taken in, and by 1916, she had been with them for more than twenty years. Mary’s celebrated performance included twenty-five tunes on musical horns and a batting average of .400. She drew crowds.

“I wish I could have seen her perform,” Papaw says, clearing his throat, “She was a pretty famous elephant as elephants go. Though I don’t know, it’s all hearsay nowadays.” I nod, not wanting to interrupt his memories, and follow his finger down the first column of text.

While the Sparks World Famous Show was in St. Paul, Virginia, a small town in the southwestern corner of the state, Walter “Red” Eldridge approached Charlie about a possible job. He had been working in the Riverside Hotel in St. Paul, but had no family there to tie him down. He wanted to travel. Despite his lack of experience, Red—nicknamed for his flaming hair—was hired as an elephant handler. He was assigned to water the elephants and prepare them for
parades and shows. Charlie Sparks spent a good deal of time showing Red how to handle Mary with a patient and gentle hand, as he had always done.

Red left St. Paul and traveled south with the circus to Kingsport, Tennessee, for his first full day of work. Sullivan County was holding its annual county fair on September 12th and Kingsport was decked out, ready for a celebration. Circuses did not come around often; the mountains proved a formidable barrier. The muddy streets were crowded with wagons and excited families on foot. One of the main events was the parade, featuring “Mighty Mary,” and her fellow elephants from Sparks’ World Famous Show, linked tail to trunk. Hundreds of people lined the streets in anticipation.

Accounts vary, whispered among locals at Erwin’s Clinchfield Drugs counter or the laundromat, but the most common is that Red, new to the job, was leading Mary along Center Street toward a watering hole. Mary stopped when she saw a watermelon rind in a ditch. She reached out her long, sensitive trunk for the rotting red fruit. Forgetting the tender-care approach Sparks had insisted on, Red prodded hard with his bull hook to bring her back into line. Without warning, Mary turned on Red; she curled her trunk tight around the man’s frame, lifting him into the air, and then flung him into a concession stand on the side of the road. Red was sprawled on the ground, motionless. And then Mary stepped on his head, crushing it like a melon.

“Eh, law, I suppose that feller had a pretty rough first day.” Papaw laughs at his own joke, eyes squinting.

People screamed, people ran. In the chaos, the stunned crowd began to chant, “Kill the elephant! Kill the elephant!” A local blacksmith tried to take the matter into his own hands. Before Charlie could stop him, he shot at Mary, but the bullets bounced off her thick hide. Charlie, trying to spare his beloved Mary, did his best to calm the raucous crowd. He talked them
out of killing her right then, but knew he would have to face the situation before long. The crowd dispersed and the circus went on as usual that evening. Mary was allowed to perform her normal routine and she did so just as she always had.

“You know,” Papaw says, “I’ve heard it said that the elephant had an abscessed tooth and when the feller hit her with the stick she just couldn’t take the pain. But most think her teeth were just fine. Who knows?”

After the show finished, some sources say Sullivan County officials arrested Mary, staking her next to the county jail, since she couldn’t fit inside. Charlie spent the evening deliberating about what to do. News of Red’s death spread around the region quickly; the morning papers covered the story, adding in fabricated accounts of other brutal killings Mary had committed. The elephant that had once been known as “Mighty Mary” was now dubbed “Murderous Mary.” When Johnson City and Rogersville, the Tennessee towns next on the circus’s rail route, heard of the incident, they refused to allow the show to continue with Mary. A rumor began that angry Kingsport citizens were planning to borrow a Civil War cannon to kill Charlie’s elephant.

Charlie realized there was no way to save Mary, so he focused on finding a humane way to take her life. Her hide was too thick for bullets, as the afternoon had proven, so the possibility of electrocution was brought up. In 1903, Thomas Edison had electrocuted Topsy, a rogue elephant in the Forepaugh Circus on Coney Island. Initially, Topsy was sentenced to hanged, but the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals protested. Instead, Topsy was fed carrots laced with potassium cyanide just before 6600 volts of electricity were sent through her body. She was dead in seconds. Edison later released a film of the execution called Electrocuting
an Elephant. Unfortunately for Charlie Sparks, the region did not have a large enough source of electricity, and he knew Mary was too smart to eat poisoned food.

Charlie understood that if he didn’t cooperate, he might be financially ruined. He resolved the only feasible, and quick, way to put Mary down was to hang her. Being the entertainer he was, he decided to take the execution a step further and make it a public spectacle; it would take place just after a matinee performance at no additional charge. Now Charlie was faced with the task of finding something strong enough, and tall enough, to hang an elephant. There was no equipment in Kingsport that could handle Mary’s five tons, so a plan was hatched to travel southeast to the railroad boomtown of Erwin, the home of Clinchfield Railroad’s repair facility and the area’s only derrick car, a 100-ton railroad crane. Because of the torrential downpours earlier that summer, a lot of track over the mountain in North Carolina had been washed out and railroad officials refused to send the derrick car forty miles north when it might be needed in an emergency. The circus would have to come to them.

The next morning, September 13th, Mary was transported by rail to Erwin for one last performance. The Sparks World Famous Show drew a crowd that afternoon, despite the fact that Mary wasn’t under the Big Top. Her part would come later. Between the matinee and evening shows, Mary was paraded down Love Street in the rain. Charlie Sparks decided that to keep Mary calm, the rest of the elephants should join her, walking trunk to tail as they always had. Charlie hoped Mary wouldn’t suspect anything out of the ordinary. They crossed Main Avenue, past the corner shop where The Hanging Elephant Antique Store would later open shop, and were led down to the Clinchfield Railroad yard behind my church.

All of Erwin, more than 2500 people, showed up for the hanging. The crowd watched in wonder, and perhaps shock, as a seven-eighths inch chain was looped around Mary’s solid neck.
The derrick operator was signaled to lift. He pushed the handle forward and the chain tightened, slowly raising Mary’s enormous feet off the ground. Mary struggled against the machine, thrashing her thick legs.

When Mary was five feet off the ground, something went wrong. Several witnesses claim those in charge forgot to release the chain from Mary’s ankle, others say the chain around her neck just wasn’t strong enough. There were cracks and pops and ripping sounds as Mary anguished in the air. And then, in a loud rush, Mary fell, sending a tremor through the wet ground. The chain around her neck had broken. The crowd scattered backwards, afraid Mary, angry and confused, would try to escape or attack. But Mary sat quietly, unmoving, in pain. The drop to the iron track had broken her hip. One of the circus workers climbed Mary as if she were a slick boulder and placed a new, thicker chain around her neck. As she was hoisted over the heads of the spectators for a second time, Mary—broken and wet—resisted less. The chain held strong and in a few minutes, Mary’s fitful body calmed and she was pronounced dead.

The crowd, with nothing left to see, wandered back home in the rain. According to some witnesses, as Mary’s fellow elephants were led away without their leader, they trumpeted, calling for her to join them. It took several shows for them to get used to working without Mary. Mary’s body was taken down from the derrick car and buried in a makeshift grave along the railroad tracks. No one remembers quite where. No stone was placed to mark the site. Charlie Sparks’ World Famous Show went on to perform in Johnson City the next night and then in Rogersville as planned, before traveling out of the region for good.

* 

As Papaw and I skim the article together on his couch, he sometimes reads a sentence or two aloud. “See this here? *When the elephant stopped to nibble on a watermelon rind, Eldridge hit*
her head with a stick. Suddenly Mary lifted him with her trunk and threw him into the side of a wooden stand. That’s the version I always heard.”

I follow his swollen, tired finger with my eyes. The article mentions several times how the citizens of Erwin would like to forget Mary. Hilda Padgett of the Unicoi Historical Society is quoted as saying, “It made people from Erwin look like a bunch of bloodthirsty rednecks.” But Ruth Pieper, a local who has argued with City Hall for years to recognize the story of Mary and acknowledge its place in the town’s history, says, “[City Leaders] want to keep it quiet, but it’s part of our history. And if it’s told correctly, people will understand and won’t blame Erwin.”

Papaw and I sat in silence in his dim living room, staring at the article.

“People here have argued about this since it happened, ninety-two years ago. I’d be careful asking what they thought of it all, they’d probably get angry.” Papaw touches the grainy gray photo of Mary, stationary in the air.

“Yeah.” I smile at him, wrinkling my nose. “That’s why I asked you. I figured you wouldn’t get mad.”

He grins. “Eh, law. I suppose that was smart.”

Most people, even in neighboring towns, have never heard of Murderous Mary. The single photograph of the incident, the same image etched on the windows of The Hanging Elephant Antiques and faded to sepia in my mother’s Chicago newspaper article, was apparently submitted, not long after Mary’s death, to the magazine Argosy. The staff at Argosy rejected the photograph, calling it a phony. Only Erwin knows what really happened that day.

I’ve learned that knowledge of the hanging induces an aggressive pride; people claim the story as their own, asserting, “I’m from there,” when overhearing any discussion of the incident, often correcting the speaker with the version they learned from their family. And yet, when
asked directly about Mary, many people will just shrug, not wanting to talk about it—especially to outsiders. Mary is their hushed secret.

I sometimes wonder whether Charlie Sparks ever came back to Erwin to find the unmarked grave of his beloved elephant in the railroad yards. Did he regret taking his show through Tennessee? Did he know Mary had an insolent streak in her, or was he just as surprised as the crowd? Was he angry at the railroad in Erwin for agreeing to kill Mary, or was he resigned to lose his oldest pet for the sake of a paycheck? It seems history—and legend—have painted Mary as a curiosity, an exotic animal that meant the world to one man and death to another. For Erwin, she was just a favor to Charlie Sparks.

I tell Papaw I’d better get going and begin to stand up.

“I’ll get you a photocopy of this here article and mail it to you. Sound good? And let me know if you want any more information about that elephant. There’s no one left that was there, but I’ll see what I can find.” He struggles to his feet to see me off; I watch, ready to catch him should he fall.
THE PRINCIPAL SOUND

I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes
In a Cathedral Aisle,
And understood no word it said—
Yet held my breath, the while—

And risen up—and gone away,
A more Bernardine Girl—
Yet—know not what was done to me
In that old Chapel Aisle.
—Emily Dickinson

It’s been raining for days and I am afraid we will be stuck. Standing in my Velcro lion shoes, I stare out the loading dock garage door, watching the little bit of sunlight catch strings of raindrops against the dark gray clouds. Squinting, I measure the closing gap between the water level and the concrete pad of the garage; clumps of red clay wash down the hill toward gravel. The oak trees across the street swing in violent whips of wind. I am maybe eight. It is the weekend and Dad and I are at his company’s shop building my younger brother’s birthday present, a wooden dragon with wings that spin. Behind me, a table saw stops its whine and I can faintly hear Dad whistling as he sands the dragon’s edges. I know I should be inside helping, but instead I shiver, worried we will be flooded. And then Dad is at my back, his rough hands smelling of wood stain on my shoulders, his arm hair dusty with curls of sawdust. I look up at his
face, leaning my braided head against his chest. “We’ll be fine,” he says, grinning. And I believe him.

* 

My father has been building pipe organs since before I was born. He is the floor manager of R.A. Colby, Inc., whose company motto is “Sounds Like Art.” I still haven’t figured out what that means. The company designs and builds the organ console—which houses the keyboards, pedals, and drawknobs—as well as the wooden casing that contains pipes. These pieces often must match the woodwork already in the sanctuary, down to the stain of the wood and the detail of the decorative molding. Dad is a craftsman; he knows whether maple or oak will look most appropriate in the project at hand, and he knows where to accent with exotic pieces, like rosewood or ebony, to bring a console alive. He spends his time carving the more intricate pieces, first letting the CNC machine flesh out the design and then going over every detail himself to smooth the sharp angles and rough curves. He sands until the wood is glossy and soft, and sprays stain one layer at a time to get just the right shade. He knows how to dovetail corners and hide joints to make his work look as if it has been carved from a single block.

Often, Dad’s job requires him to tune pipe organs in the area. When I was younger, I would spend the afternoon with him key-holding at Milligan College. I always looked forward to those days; it meant just the two of us would go out to lunch at the restaurant of my choice. As Dad climbed around in the chamber between pipes, I would hold down a key or two at a time under his direction. After the first attempt, I realized it was impossible to read a book while holding down keys, so I would spend the time looking at the stained glass windows of apostles and old testament stories or watch the shadow of Dad behind the chamber screen climbing over and around stands of pipes. The sunlight in the chapel was always bright, illuminating the wood
grain in the stage, in the organ bench, in the organ itself. Meanwhile, Dad would find the sounding pipe and adjust the cap on the top until the vibrations were correct. When satisfied, he would call out for me to move down the multiple keyboards to the next note. Dad doesn’t read music. He sang baritone in high-school choir, but he doesn’t know music theory. He just hears when he gets it right, when the vibrations match to become one yawning sound instead of clashing notes.

Honestly, I’d always considered my mother the more artistic of the two. She grew up sketching and painting, capturing in stillness the beautiful curves and angles of ordinary things. Sure Dad built stuff, but he was more of a musician in my eyes, singing when no one else was around, teaching my younger brother to play guitar. Art, to me, was a hobby, something for spare time. Dad’s work, cutting and carving, staining and nailing, is beautiful, but I had always considered it just a job. As if obligation made it less inspired. But Dad is patient and works until the lumber has just the right curve, just the right gloss, until it has become something more than wood, glue, and nails.

*

The scent of sawdust or lacquer immediately recalls Dad. He has worked with wood my whole life, building not only pipe organs, but toys, our house, even most of our furniture. His hands are strong, but damaged—he’s missing the top two knuckles of both the pinky and ring finger on his left hand from an accident with a table saw, causing years of phantom pains. Dad maintains a perpetual farmer’s tan from spending his lunch hour bicycling through the suburbs of Johnson City, Tennessee: dark olive arms, pale shoulders and torso, and sometimes a nice tan oval on the back of his hand from his riding gloves. His left shoulder angles sharper than his right because of a cycling accident.
just after his fiftieth birthday. The strange slope causes his t-shirts to hang funny, but he doesn’t care. He is small and muscular but balding; he possesses the Roman nose of his father. His beard and mustache are dark gray, except along his cheeks where the hair grows in snow white. He looks over the rim of his wire-frame bifocals, leaning in, when focusing on small details. He is easily startled. He constantly whistles.

I think Dad has had the same apron since he started working at R.A. Colby. It is a full apron, with a loop around his neck and long ties in the back. The little chest pocket usually holds a pencil for marking measurements; lately he’s been carrying a small notebook around, too. I don’t know what color the apron used to be. Now, it’s dark gray, stiff, and cracking from years of lacquer and glue; the fabric doesn’t move when he blows off sawdust with the pressure blower at the end of the day.

The only easy way to describe Dad’s workbench is ‘well-used’: it is a simple plywood board sitting on two-by-four shelves covered with wood scraps, clamps, little silver washers, often a sweating can of Dr. Pepper, and Dixie cups of glue with toothpicks sticking out. He hovers over and around his ripped green naugahyde stool for up to ten hours a day. Behind him, on his cabinet, sits the dusty radio that, for years, has been tuned to WETS, the public radio station. It is so old I’m not sure the station can be changed any more. That same radio used to play cassette tape lullabies and the “A- A- A- Apple” song in my little brother’s room at night. Just above the radio, on a shelf, sits the nameplate reading “Larry Rosolina” in careful block lettering that I woodburned for him in art class. On the wall hangs a bulletin board that Dad has taped various photos and notes to: the Australian finch card I drew to raise money for a trip abroad is covered in thick, brown dust, giving it a faux antique finish; there is also a photograph
of my brother, Samuel, aged four or five, running full throttle through our yard with a kite in tow.

*  

When I lived at home, I visited the shop frequently to see whatever job Dad was working on. Every project is distinct; sometimes they are beautiful—unstained pipe cases like a play palace with high arches coming together at sharp points, consoles with intricate beading along each edge like wooden icing, or phrases such as “Soli Deo Gloria” carved into the back panel in simple sarifed letters. Other consoles are gaudy. Dad built the show organ that went in the El Capitan restaurant on Hollywood Boulevard, where Disney premiers its films. Every surface of that console is gilded, making Dad’s carvings nearly disappear without proper lighting. It has four keyboards stacked one on top of the other. Along with the normal set of stop knobs framing the keys are sound effect buttons that produce anything from birds chirping to the belch of a tugboat horn. I remember playing with those buttons in Dad’s dusty shop, feet dangling from the gilded bench, just before the console was taken apart and shipped to California to be reassembled.

For a long time, the largest drawknob pipe organ console in the world—it has six keyboards—was built by R.A. Colby for a Methodist church in Hurricane, West Virginia. About two years ago, the shop passed their own record when they built the Naval Academy Chapel organ. It has only five keyboards, but when you sit on the bench, you are surrounded by walls of drawknobs, over 500 of them; it is what I imagine sitting in a space shuttle cockpit would look like. Dad walked me around the console when everything was nearly finished. The console ended up being over five feet tall, eight feet long, and four feet wide; the pedals had yet to be attached. The designs around the top edge look like rolling waves outlined in gold leaf. Side
panels open to allow access to the intricate wiring behind the stops. The back opens, too. Carved
on the lower side panels, near the pedals, is a mythical fish-like creature, each scale separated,
but with the wood grain flowing in and out of them all. In gold-leaf script around the fish’s
twisting body, are the words, “Praise the Lord with stringed instruments and organs. Psalm 150.”

My family was invited to the premier of the Naval Academy organ in Annapolis,
Maryland. It was a Halloween show and the eerie cathedral was strung with thick spider webs.
Whitewashed zombies wandered the center aisle, lunging for people’s faces or playing with a
child’s toy and staring relentlessly as guests passed. We were given reserved seats in the front of
the sanctuary, near the organ. As we sat, I glanced at Dad and saw him staring ahead at the
console. It must be strange to see a piece of work you know every intimate detail of displayed
before a crowd. Leaning over, he whispered to me that he and his coworkers had hidden a
roughly carved pirate bunny inside the belly of the organ. We both grinned at the secret.

The show was incredible, it stopped the audience in their seats; the organ belted
everything from Phantom of the Opera songs to The Addams Family theme. Naval Academy
students sang in costume from various places within the cathedral—sometimes on the stage,
sometimes from the thin walkway high in the dome. Giant spider puppets crawled over our
heads. Glancing around me, everyone’s faces were wide-eyed, perhaps out of both fear and
admiration. The rumble of the organ filled the entirety of the space, until there was nothing but
sound. Afterward, people asked to photograph Dad with the organ; I could tell he felt
uncomfortable with all the attention—he would smile and shake hands, laughing off their
compliments—but I was proud of him. It reminded me of the little console at the Hands On
Children’s Museum back home, with the plaque I always pointed out to friends: “Restored by
R.A. Colby, Inc.” This time, it was more than just a restoration.
The shop has recently branched out to help decorate sanctuaries with their woodwork. Dad sometimes has a hand in creating these “environments.” For a Catholic church in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, his shop replicated a five feet tall carving of Christ from around 1920. The replica had to be eighteen feet tall. On either side of the giant Jesus are wood and plastic panels that remind me of veiny, blue lungs. There is also a small carving of Mary. The job was enormous. Dad has one of the incorrectly carved giant legs—from the mid-thigh down—sitting beside his bike. The leg alone is five feet long; it has been bleached white and looks dead.

I remember walking into the shop one evening when most people had gone; I could see Dad across the room, working away at his bench. The lights were off on my side. As I rounded the corner into the main space, I saw someone towering over me, arms reaching to grab. I let out a mottled scream. Dad looked over and laughed. When I regained my whereabouts, I realized this figure was Jesus himself from the waist up, sitting on someone’s workbench. He was huge, staring down at me with tired, worn eyes, arms outstretched. I have no idea where his bottom half was, or if it had even been carved yet. Dad told me that the guy working on cleaning Jesus up was having an interesting time. Apparently the rough CNC machine cut had made Jesus’ nipples a little too perky, and the guy had to sand them down while Jesus looked so forlorn. The worst part of the job, though, was drilling a hole through Jesus’ hands and feet.

In a recent rainstorm, the ceiling leaked above the original 1920s Jesus; he got soaked and his arm fell off. Dad said he is sitting in the corner of the shop with blue tape around his cracks to keep him together while the glue seals.

Despite the difficulties in getting the job finished, Dad said seeing the faces of the congregation after the job was installed meant the most. “Those moments,” he told me, “make me feel like I’m doing something important.”
The art of organ making at Dad’s shop has changed over the years. For a long time, the organ consoles—called track organs—were connected to the pipes by a series of levers that linked the depressed key to a valve, which allowed air from a hand-pumped bellow or a water wheel-powered bellow to blow out of the wind chest and through the chosen pipe. Now it is all done with solid state switching; wires connect the keyboards and the drawknobs to the pipe chamber using electromagnets to seal off or release pipes.

There are four basic families of sound on a pipe organ: principal, strings, flutes, and reeds. The principals produce a stable, full sound; these pipes are used in tuning because they are the true sound of the organ, they aren’t imitating other instruments. The string pallet sounds like a string section with cello and violin; the flute pallet is made up of tiny, delicate pipes that are sometimes wooden; and the reed section includes the sound of oboes, trumpets, and bassoons. The drawknobs, or stops, choose which set of pipes to allow air through. Without a stop pulled, a depressed key will make no noise. Organists pull different combinations of these stops in each family of pipes to achieve different registrations of sound. That is where the phrase “pull out all the stops” comes from, Dad’s favorite pipe organ anecdote.

The console keyboards used to be made of ivory; now they are made of cow bone or some synthetic material. Just before the switch to cow bone, Dad carved a tiny turtle out of some scrap ivory. It was perfect, its little fins cupped for water. He carried it with him everywhere, and often, I would ask him to take it out for me to look at, to feel the smooth shell. We think it fell out of his pocket during a yard sale at my grandparents’ house. Every time I walk up the sidewalk to the porch, I have the urge to look for a little white turtle, half-hidden in the crabgrass.
My granddad, Dad’s father, was in the air force, so the family—with five kids—moved often. They once had to drive a station wagon from Florida to Alaska before there were interstates; it took weeks. Somewhere there is a home movie of the trip; Dad says his sister Kelly has it, but she disagrees. I picture sepia scenes of the back seat full of tired children. Based on the one photo I’ve seen of Dad as a boy, he would have had a blond buzz cut. In my mind, he sits in the middle, his sleepy head lolling over onto his brother’s shoulder. He wears a t-shirt that is a little tight for him and his legs stick to the seat. Dad doesn’t remember too much about the drive to Alaska, but his older siblings have recounted the gravel roads, driving through territory that had yet to become a state, and the time they had to stop because moose surrounded the car.

When Dad was eleven, his mother, Mary, was diagnosed with breast cancer. She was pregnant with my Aunt Patty during her radiation treatments. When Mary died, the eldest child, Kelly, took over the motherly role until she was old enough to get married herself. Without his wife around to balance things, Granddad fell into gambling and left his kids alone for days at a time. Dad and his younger siblings hid from creditors and learned to fend for themselves without electricity, a phone, and sometimes food.

When I think of Granddad, I remember him dancing at his seventy-fifth birthday party, sliding around his hardwood floor in dark leather shoes. I remember him playing Santa Claus at Christmas, letting me sit on his lap just to touch his fake white beard, or the time, around fifth grade, when I phoned to ask about whether he used lights on his Christmas tree as a child—he snapped that they had no electricity and used candles. And I remember Dad crying over the kitchen sink when we learned Granddad had passed away before getting to see his beloved Redskins play in the Superbowl.
When Dad was old enough to leave home, he floated around the country doing odd jobs. He was a dishwasher in Colorado for a while, and he puttered around Northern Virginia where he had gone to high school and where some of his friends still lived. For an afternoon he was a golf-caddy, despite the fact that he knew nothing about golf and had forgotten his glasses. The country club assigned Dad to a Mr. Fink, a little man with a tiny mustache and a golf beret. Mr. Fink played only nine holes and left disgusted, having cussed my father out. After that experience, Dad vowed never to caddy again. As Mr. Fink was leaving, he threw Dad ten dollars; Dad spent the evening with his friends at the theater watching 2001: A Space Odyssey.

Dad also played music when he could with his friend Harry Daley. They once opened for Alice Cooper where they played Crosby, Stills, and Nash tunes thinking Alice Cooper was a female folk singer. The audience hated their act, but apparently Cooper was impressed. In the end, Dad wound up living with his brother in East Tennessee where he met my mother picking strawberries. He never left. He went to vocational school for woodworking and had a couple of cabinetry jobs around Johnson City. For a few years he worked in a shop that made wine racks and cutting boards, but they went out of business in the early 80s when the economy plummeted. He spent his unemployment time building the house. Just as his funds were running out, Dad decided to buy a paper—something he rarely did. In it was an ad from R.A. Colby for a cabinetmaker.

* 

Organ music is often haunting—bursts of air through tall pipes that vibrate the sanctuary. All of those rumbling, deep notes unnerve me, perhaps because of the stereotypical Halloween sound. The vibrations demand attention, if not respect. Notes tripping over one another as they rush down the scale, from the hands to the soles, are impossible to ignore, especially when the sound
is bellowing from behind you, or beside you, rather than from the console itself. It’s like ventriloquism. I don’t pretend to understand. I recognize when Dad has created something beautiful, just as I hear in the music when the organist is playing something, though I don’t always know what the something is. I just feel that shift into the inspired.

Dad doesn’t even like pipe organ music. He prefers sixties folk like Joni Mitchell or Joan Baez. Though the radio beside his workbench is always tuned to NPR, when the show “Pipe Dreams” comes on, Dad switches the radio off. He prefers to hear the constant buzz of the shop, the fans blowing hot air around. The music isn’t what keeps my dad making art; it is more about crafting an instrument or even helping to create an environment that pushes people to become aware of beauty so they are ready for worship or entertainment.

Spending long hours in the shop, Dad often works overtime to complete a project to his satisfaction. I think he enjoys working with the wood to see what he can create with its grain and color. Each piece is different. After more than twenty years in the business, he knows how to avoid knotholes, or even work them into the design. Everything he builds—whether it is a pipe organ console or our kitchen cabinets—has his handprint on it. Dad’s spot is most often behind his workbench, but I think he enjoys meeting people interested in his craft. He said it gives him chills to see people’s reactions when there is now beautiful pipe casing on what was once a blank wall.

From the stories he’s told me, one of Dad’s favorite parts of installing a pipe organ or refurbishing one is talking to the organist. They, too, are artists and they appreciate every detail of his work in a way that most people can’t. The console he delivers is something they will sit in front of nearly every day. One of his favorite jobs was for a local church; because he liked the organist, he put his heart and soul into the work. Earlier this year, he took two trips to Bermuda
to work on a pipe organ. Most of what he talked about when he came home was the elderly 
woman he stayed with, Alma, who would feed him oranges for breakfast, picked from a tree in 
her backyard. To thank her for her hospitality and kindness, he made her a small, wooden box. 
She later sent a copy of the newspaper showing Dad, in color, on the front page with both the 
organ and the organist, a gentle man. He talked a lot about this organist as well, about how 
caring he was. Somehow, these people understand my dad the best. They see what beauty 
patience and commitment can achieve, they understand the message beneath the music pouring 
from the pipe chamber.

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Whenever I travel and visit churches or cathedrals, I always photograph the organ for Dad. This 
began when I visited the National Cathedral in Washington DC with my Girl Scout troop as a 
kid; I spent nearly half a roll of film trying to capture the console in the light of the stained glass. 
I have photos of organs—usually the pipe chamber—from Germany, Switzerland, Austria, 
Australia, and New Zealand. The postcards I send home usually feature a pipe chamber as well. 
The summer after my freshman year of high school, I got to peek at the Grand Organ in the 
Sydney Opera House—a tour guide let my group in the main hall despite the fact that the 
symphony was practicing. Dad would have been amazed at the 10,154 pipes with 200 ranks. The 
smallest pipes are the size of a pinky finger, while the largest tower over sixty feet. And then 
there was the tiny pipe organ I saw in the Hapsburg Palace in Munich, Germany; it was bedecked 
with jewels in a jeweled room, and had a handful of golden pipes.

A couple from our church, misjudging Dad’s love of organs, once “donated” their 
electric, two-keyboard organ to my family. Like Dad, I can’t read music despite taking two years 
of piano. No one knew what to do with the thing—though it did have nifty light-up letters
beneath an octave on the top keyboard illustrating which note was what. Soon, Samuel and I learned to make sound effects with its various tones: the alien, the steam engine, the alarm. Then Mom found a box of materials that had come with the organ: orange and green sheets of organ party-planning ideas complete with sixties’ clip art. My favorite was the “Men’s Night Out” party; the sheet had invitations that could be photocopied as well as a list of possible theme songs for the evening, such as “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad.” Also included was a menu, though all I remember was that the sheet suggested serving coffee in tin cups. The poor organ sat unused until my parents sold it earlier this year. We kept the party-planning material, just in case.

* 

Dad doesn’t like to talk on the phone, but every once in a while he’ll call on his lunch break to check in. I look forward to these unexpected conversations, though they are never more than a few minutes long. A couple of months ago he called to tell me about a dream he had. Usually—and we make fun of him for this—he dreams about everyday life. He’ll sit at the kitchen table for breakfast and tell us his dream about going to work, about riding his bike at lunch, about mowing the yard. But this time, he told me he dreamed that I was about four and Samuel was just a baby.

“I held you both in my arms and smelled your hair, your skin,” he said, his voice distant. When he woke up, he wanted to cry because he had remembered those early moments so clearly, because he had gotten a chance to relive them for a night. I felt my eyes burning as he told me; and then we were both silent and it was time to go back to work.

Since my birth and then my brother’s, Dad has written prayers with our names deep inside the bellies of pipe organs going across the country. I don’t know exactly what he writes—perhaps prayers of protection—but when I think of my name in different corners of the United States, I am comforted. They are hidden moments of adoration, a father silently loving his
children. I wonder what the next repair guy will think when he pries off the back panel to find a prayer written in messy handwriting, half lowercase, half caps, for a little girl and her brother.

* 

It is winter. We are in Paty’s hardware store and Samuel and I have been fighting or mouthing off. Dad is fed-up. Embarrassed and tired, he grabs us right there in front of the sample stone fountain and spanks us. We are shocked and stiff, having never been spanked in public before. For the next half hour, Samuel and I hold the edge of the buggy as Dad guides us through wide aisles without speaking, picking out two-by-fours and nails to frame the walls of our new bedrooms. We were supposed to choose our ceiling fans and paint color, but that will have to wait until next time. On the drive home, Dad switches off the radio so that the old blue hatchback is silent; the back smells of treated lumber, and Samuel and I sit with our foreheads pressed against the cold windows, watching sleet slide down glass. I worry Dad will tell Mom, who is working night shift, when she gets home in the morning.

Once the lumber is unloaded in the garage, Dad sits Samuel and me down in the living room on the tattered blue couch with tiny flowers. He sits on the coffee table, facing us, his cheeks red from the cold. “Don’t fight.” His eyebrows are raised in exhaustion. “You don’t know how many moments you have left with each other or with me. Why waste them fighting?” Hot tears fill my eyes, and I hug him until he has to go fix dinner.
FARTHER

[fahr-ther] adverb, adjective

– adverb
1. at or to a greater distance
2. at or to a more advanced point
3. at or to a greater degree or extent

– adjective
4. more distant or remote than something or some place nearer: the farther side of the mountain.
5. extending or tending to a greater distance: She made a still farther trip.
Running my fingers over the smooth, papered outside, I picture the cigar box high on a dark office shelf. A shadow of a person crouches, curled against the metal desk. A window shatters, unable to bear the pressure of winds gusting over 140 mph; the water continues to rise.

The cigar box is simple—white with a yellow and red striped border inscribed *flor fina seleccion especial*. It once contained La Aurora cigars from the *Republica Dominicana*. In the center, a regal-looking lion rests in front of golden rays. Metallic golden crowns are embossed on either side of the lion. I know nothing of this box’s days in the Dominican Republic; but I can imagine it before the storm, holding office supplies in the St. Anthony Head Start on Dauphine Street in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans. St. Anthony, named for the Catholic patron saint of lost objects, the poor, and travelers, was once a cheerful building with pink trim in different shades and delicate white borders on the eaves. Little scooters with streamers spilling from their handles cluttered the large green yard. Children filled the small, Victorian building with colorful crayon drawings—sometimes on paper, sometimes on tables, sometimes on walls. But, during the February after Hurricane Katrina, I saw a very different St. Anthony. The small, pink building stood empty.
I flew into New Orleans that February for a three-day Service-Learning conference. Six students from across the country had been chosen to discuss Service-Learning with professors and administrators from Tulane University and the UC at Berkeley. During my time at Berea College, I had taken every Service-Learning class my schedule allowed and had joined the Service-Learning Advisory Committee as a student representative. My goal at the conference was to share Berea’s commitment to service outside the classroom as a way of enhancing lessons learned inside the classroom. I also planned to take notes on how other schools approached Service-Learning to improve Berea’s understanding and implementation.

My excitement about the conference disappeared as I flew in; peering out the small, oval window, I couldn’t look away. Six months after Katrina had ravaged the city, whole neighborhoods still glistened with water and mud. Roofs protected only by bright blue tarps. Swamplands and bogs covered in brush. The place looked wounded. Trees had been snapped off. Haphazard puddles the size of city blocks saturated the ground. After the storm, it looked as if the earth was catching its breath.

From August 28th, the day before Katrina hit the Louisiana Coast, until weeks later, every television set in the United States was broadcast with images of the destruction. Rooftops being blown off, flooded streets, weeping mothers and children, the Superdome filled to capacity; the devastation was unreal. In Berea, I donated money. I donated clothes. I helped organize a coffee house where others could donate. But slowly I forgot. Classes continued and homework piled up, and I went back to my everyday life. Now, flying over the ruins, those images came back. The floating bodies and the screaming babies came back.
Downtown New Orleans’s seemed unaffected. My hotel was on Canal Street, which was thick with tourists even in early February. On the taxi ride in, I’d stared through my own reflection to shops filled with jewel-toned, feathered Mardi Gras masks and tin replicas of the “Rou Bourbon” street sign. A couple in matching pink jackets and cowboy hats stopped to look through t-shirts at a street vendor’s booth. Shoppers filled the sidewalks, paying no attention to the rusty scaffolding that lined most streets.

Vincent, a member of Tulane’s Service-Learning faculty, met me at the front desk of the hotel. I recognized his tan, Polynesian skin and dark hair from the Service-Learning meetings he had facilitated in Berea. It was nice to see a familiar face. “Here’s a schedule for the next few days.” He handed me a sheet of paper. “We’ll all meet in one of the conference rooms upstairs in an hour or two, so settle in.”

Walking to my room, I wondered how I had signed up for this conference without considering the weight of the news reports from just months before. Those images were more than striking shots of destruction and pain; the world they depicted was real, with real people, some of whom were probably working at this very hotel.

That evening we gathered in an elegant conference room with a spread of organic hors d’oeuvres of fresh vegetables and fruit, and delicate sandwiches. Wearing my nicest sweater, I deliberated over how I would word my life-changing service experiences to make the biggest impact. My attention shifted when I overheard Vincent talking about his own experiences weathering the storm.

“Yeah, I live right on Lake Ponchartrain.” He wiped his mouth with a cloth napkin.

“So what happened to your home?” someone asked.

“Nothing, actually. Not even water damage.”
“How is that possible?” I leaned into the conversation, curious.

“I’m not sure. My land happens to be just enough higher than the rest of the neighborhood. Houses a couple blocks from mine were completely ruined.”

Later that night, I curled up on my bed with the TV on and looked over the schedule. Meetings filled most of the slots, but on the final day we would be doing a service project in the Ninth Ward, one of the most devastated neighborhoods. I couldn’t help but wonder how it would have felt to be spared when the houses next door were destroyed.

The next few days were spent in the conference room sharing our community-building experiences. My fellow Service-Learners described helping Filipino communities outside of Seattle, creating unconventional schools with no grades in Texas, and writing pamphlets for non-profit grassroots organizations in Kentucky. On breaks, we walked out onto the windy seventh floor patio and watched the lines of traffic weave and merge below us in a muddle of honking horns. From up there I could see what the tourists on Canal Street couldn’t; I could see the high-rise windows to the south still dark with plywood. A couple of blocks away, the BellSouth building was missing an “e.”

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On the final morning of the conference, Vincent asked us to gather outside the hotel in the clothes we’d packed for the service project, clothes we “wouldn’t mind ruining.”

“What will we be doing?” I asked.

“Serving and learning.” He smiled.

We piled into the van wearing bleached, torn clothing and worn sneakers. I climbed to the back and sat by the window. Yawning, I leaned my head against the cold, vibrating glass as the van pulled out. Within minutes, we were free of the skyscraper shadows and were driving
through crumbling neighborhoods. My forehead grew numb from the morning chill of the window, but I couldn’t pull myself away. Instead of the perfectly manicured lawns of the Garden District, I saw heaps of litter. I felt like I was intruding, staring at someone else’s private pain. As we slowed down to avoid the debris that still blocked the roads, I saw a faded school bus, its opaque windows thick with dust, and houses missing walls and roofs. The houses made of brick still stood on their foundations, but many of the frame houses had been washed away. One had slid into a tree; the porch crumpled around the trunk. I could see straight into most rooms — there were piles of mud-steeped, crusted furniture and wilted ceiling fans that bent down like dead flower petals. The walls were dark with mold.

As we drove deeper into the affected neighborhoods, the destruction claimed even the roads. At one point, Vincent pulled the van over to allow a rusty pick-up past us. There was room for only one vehicle at a time, if that.

“We’re in the Ninth Ward now, guys,” he said, almost whispering. “They re-opened this to neighborhood residents only a couple of weeks ago. There’s still a lot of grieving to be done.”

Here, in place of homes, there were piles of splintered, weathered lumber. Sometimes I could make out a section of roof or pieces of a door or window. On the opposite side of the van, a chain-link fence that once had surrounded an elementary school had been twisted like a piece of ribbon, wood, clothing, and trash were trapped in its links. NBC and CNN had stopped showing images of the storm months ago. I knew things weren’t completely cleaned up, but it seemed that nothing had been accomplished, that these people had been forgotten.

“The families who lived here couldn’t afford the higher, safer ground than downtown and the Garden District are built on,” Vincent told us as he began to drive again. I recognized his tone of voice from Service-Learning lectures at Berea — professional, distant. “Their houses were
simple frame structures and, unfortunately, once you own a home here in Orleans parish, you’re not required to buy insurance—many of these families couldn’t afford it, so they won’t be compensated. Another thing to remember is that since this is low land, these houses have been flooded before, which means the nails were already rusty and the boards probably rotten in places, making it that much easier for Katrina to wash it all away.”

Though I knew Vincent was trying to prepare us and inform us, I felt as if I was on a “disaster tour,” seeing destruction as a spectacle rather than as a lived reality.

The van pulled to a stop again, this time in front of a Victorian house painted pink with white trim. In what used to be the yard, stood a sign on a wrought iron pole: “St. Anthony Head Start.”

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On the sidewalk, a pastel plastic kitchen sink stained with mud rested against a large tree branch. The wrought iron fence surrounding the property was tangled with splintered wood and garbage. I crossed the yard and climbed the stairs to the front porch. They shook under my weight.

“Good god, there is a lot of mold in here,” someone said. “Make sure you have your face mask on tight.”

Even with the warning, the smell nearly knocked me over. Through watering eyes, I glanced down the dim hallway. The carpet felt soggy under my feet. To my left, just inside the front door, I saw the children’s faces for the first time—faces I would find myself pausing to look at throughout the day. Nine photos lined up neatly on a bulletin board with the letters “Dad’s Corner” stapled to the top, the apostrophe upside down. Each photo depicted a child and a father, grinning for the camera. They had been taken in this very hallway.
“Most of them made it out,” a voice behind me said. I turned to see a middle-aged Hispanic woman. She introduced herself as Rosa, the St. Anthony Head Start director. As she scanned the photos, her dark brown eyes focused on the middle photo of the bottom row. “This one, though,” she said, pointing to a boy who was leaning into his father, “this one lost his older brother. The brother went back into their house six or seven times to save family members, the grandparents, uncles, everyone, getting them out onto the roof during the flooding, but he didn’t have enough strength to get himself up there. He washed away, drowned.” Rosa hesitated for a moment, put the weight of her palm on my shoulder, and then walked into one of the classrooms.

I stood there in the half-light of the hallway staring at their still smiles, and then looked out the open door to the street. I felt as if I was underwater, my hearing muffled. There were no cars. There were no children. There were no doors slamming or dogs barking. Not even any birds. I could feel myself straining to hear something. Anything.

Turning back to the musty hallway, I tightened my facemask. Teddy, another girl on the trip, and I waded through garbage to the office. “Nice mask,” she said, laughing. I snapped my blue latex gloves and grinned back as best I could. The stench coming from the end of the hallway was nearly unbearable. Decay. Watching the hurricane coverage from Kentucky, I had forgotten there were more senses than sight and sound. Television images don’t smell. The scent of cat urine stung our eyes. Burger King wrappers littered the floor and the desk.

Peeking into the office, I saw Vincent already hard at work. “Where did all of these food wrappers come from?”

He looked up from tying a black garbage bag. “Rosa told me that a family from up the street escaped to St. Anthony when the water started rising.” He reached for a new trash bag. “The family lived here for weeks, scavenging food, trying to keep dry, so I guess the wrappers
were theirs—they probably dug through the trash. A stranded cat must have joined them.” He stuck his nose into the crook of his arm as he picked up a large piece of damp cardboard.

“How perfect is it that this place was named after the patron saint of lost stuff and the poor.” Teddy began poking through piles of soggy paper.

I tried to imagine being a refugee in my own neighborhood, abandoned. Taking a deep breath, Teddy and I attempted to ignore the thick smell and began bagging the papers piled on the office floor. I kept picturing the Garden District with its manicured lawns and cut-glass front doors. They had experienced the wind, but had escaped the flooding. The people living there could afford higher ground. They could afford to fly out before Katrina hit. They could afford to restore their homes. The people of the Ninth Ward didn’t have so many options. They were stuck watching a son save everyone in the family but himself. They were stuck going through the garbage of the local daycare to keep from starving.

“Rachel, this is Kim.” I looked up from the filing cabinet to find Rosa standing with a stout African-American woman dressed in navy blue sweats. She looked tired. “Kim worked in here so I figure she’ll know what to keep and what to throw out. Oh, and Teddy, can you help me with some shelving in the room across the hall?”

Kim walked around the room.

“I was known for my messy office, but it was never like this.” She tried to smile. “And, of course, I kept the unimportant stuff, like cigar boxes full of extra pens, on the top shelves.” Her gloved hands pulled dripping papers from the mangled drawers of her desk. “I just don’t know what to do about these tax records. They’re all soaking wet. You can’t read any of it.” Her eyebrows furrowed, worried. “They expect us to fill out their damn tax forms when it’s their fault we can’t. You know,” she said, her voice a low laugh, “most of the damage here in the
Ninth Ward isn’t from Katrina at all, it’s from the levees breaking. And who contracted out to the cheapest bidder? The government.”

I stood silent, waiting for her to continue, watching her eyes scan her ruined office.

“Hardly anybody in this neighborhood had insurance. And even if they did, it wouldn’t cover this. For this, you need flood insurance. Like we could pay for that. We can barely feed our kids.”

On my way into the city days earlier, my cab driver had told me that, of the 1600 cab drivers in the city, only 260 had chosen to return. His family had been evacuated to Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Right after they arrived, Katrina hit there as well. During the storm, he and his little girl watched through a window as the roof of the apartment building across the street was peeled back and ripped off by the wind. For a month and a half they were stuck with no electricity or water in a tiny apartment; then the government moved them to Baton Rouge where he met up with his extended family. All of them temporarily crammed into another small apartment only to weather Rita when she passed through. Now back in New Orleans, he considered himself blessed; his house had only three feet of water damage. The other end of his neighborhood sank under nine feet of water.

“These rich folks don’t understand.” Kim said, holding out a stack of wet papers, “Without us poor folk there isn’t going to be any New Orleans. We are the ones that clean the hotels and wait tables. We are the ones bagging their groceries and pumping their gas. Hell, we’re the ones selling them souvenirs. We’re as much a part of the city as they are.” She paused. “This is home for us, too.”

I tied up a garbage bag and opened another. She dropped a handful of papers into it; they felt like lead.
My muscles burned from carrying cubbies and tables onto the porch, down the shaking stairs, and out into the empty road. Unscrewing the cubbies from the wall was hard work. The drill was always a little too big to get at the screws in the corner. Or the shelf, along with its laminated label reading “Keisha” or “Tyler,” had to be removed. We were a sweaty mess by the time all of the furniture was in the street.

Just to be sure everything was out, I walked through the building one last time. The rooms stood empty and quiet, even the office. There were light spots on the walls where bright-colored posters and shelves full of blocks had been just moments before. I paused, wanting to hear children running in the hallway.

Back out on the street, the afternoon sun cast long shadows onto the cracked pavement. Armed with rags soaked in a bleach solution, we began scrubbing. The brown-gray grime gave way to crayon marks.

“What’s going to happen to all of this stuff, Vincent?” I asked.

“When we’re done here we’ll take it to a Head Start closer to downtown. They have a lot of the children from the devastated neighborhoods and need more supplies.”

I took some solace in the thought that at least children would use the furniture—that’s what it was made for. Perhaps familiar tables, already stained with paint and glue and glitter, will make a displaced child at the other Head Start feel at home, or at least closer.

Our heap of rags grew, each covered in dark mold and mud, but the furniture shone in the afternoon sunlight, slick with bleach water. My already worn, bleached clothing had new spots where I had brushed up against the furniture or my rag. The smell of bleach, stronger than the stench of rot, burned my nose, but I ignored it. A couple more cubbies and a few little plastic
chairs and we would be ready to load up the truck and drive to the other Head Start. A breeze caught my hair, cooling my face. We’d worked only half a day, but I was tired, ready to go back to my hotel room.

The silence of the street was getting to me. It was getting to everyone, I think. No one talked or joked like they had when we first arrived. Instead, we leaned into our work, scrubbing harder, lifting faster. I stood up from the miniature stove I had been scouring to stretch my calf muscles. The house across the street from St. Anthony boasted a purple flyer. “We are coming home!” it read, with the traditional New Orleans fleur de lis below it. I hope so, I thought.

* 

Soon, we’d packed all of the children’s furniture into the moving truck. On my way out the door, Rosa turned to me. “Rachel, you want one of the cigar boxes from the office? Kim said we have to do something with them, and they were up high so there isn’t any mold. Maybe you could keep photos in it.” She smiled, handing me the box. “Though I suspect photos won’t do this justice.”

I rode in Rosa’s SUV, behind the truck, with my window rolled down so I could feel the cool breeze against my sweaty forehead. My hands rested on the empty cigar box in my lap. I wondered, who am I to have an untouched piece of this place? As we drove, Rosa talked of a family friend whose grandmother hadn’t made it through the flooding.

“They found her days later, lying in the floor just below the ladder to her attic. She had pillows under each arm and a cell phone in her hand. We’re guessing she thought the pillows would float her up to the attic. She was so fragile she couldn’t climb the ladder by herself.”

I held my breath; there was nothing to say.
“So many people in this part of the city blame the government.” She wiped her forehead with her upper arm. “It’s difficult to deal with the red tape, but, you know, I’ve been impressed with just how many people are coming back in. This is where we grew up, after all. This is where our memories are. To a lot of people, leaving behind memories is as bad as leaving behind family.” She pointed out my window, “Look.”

A sign hung from a front porch just like the one I had seen across from St. Anthony. I smiled back at Rosa. The sign said, “We’re home.”

*  

St. Anthony was small enough to fit inside the downtown Head Start, which was a normal inner-city building with brick walls and a little patch of brown grass between the door and the sidewalk. But the side of the building where the truck pulled up was colorful, covered in a mural of flowers and blue skies. Close to the top of the mural, the words “Read more, learn more… change the world!” had been painted. Behind the building stood a small, fenced-in playground. I walked through the chain-link gate toward Teddy, who was helping a group of kids plant seeds in their new garden. Each wore a pair of oversized gardening gloves, impatient to stick his or her seed into the dark dirt. Another group worked on weeding an overgrown garden on the opposite side of the fenced-in area; they were throwing grass at each other.

“Hey, Rachel,” Teddy said, “can you help me? We’re planting peas here and pansies over there.”

I pulled on a pair of dirt-stained gloves and knelt by the garden’s edge.

“Do I stick the seed in there?” a little girl asked, cupping a seed in one hand and pointing to a shallow hole with the other.

“You sure do.”
The kids didn’t care about their clothing or about tired knees; they just wanted to bury their seed. Soon, shirts were stained and faces were streaked, but the children were proud of their garden.

“Can we water them everyday?” The little girl turned to her teacher.

“We’ll take good care of them.” The teacher reached out for the girl’s hand. The girl smiled at the garden, then at her teacher, and then at me. I smiled back, but wondered if she knew the little boy who’d lost his older brother. Perhaps she’d lost someone as well.

*

In my bedroom, 700 miles away, I run my fingers over the smooth paper covering the outside of the cigar box. I’ll never know, not really, how it felt to endure Katrina in the small building that held this box, a scared family, and a lost cat. When I came back from Louisiana, I gave a presentation on my trip to fellow Berea College students interested in Service-Learning. It was difficult deciding what to present; as Rosa said, nothing could do it justice. In the end, I barely mentioned the conference. Instead, I talked about St. Anthony, about Rosa and Kim, and about the children. I don’t think my audience understood; I felt like I was reporting, as if I was a newscaster on television. There was a slide show, photos, but that’s all they were. The destruction caught the attention of my audience, just as necks crane in traffic to see a car wreck, and I found myself wondering if it was real to them. It hadn’t been real to me until I saw it for myself, until I smelled the mold and burned my hands with bleach and heard the people who had lived it tell their stories. I had been given the dubious opportunity to walk through the television screen separating me from the images.

Opening the cigar box, I find a forgotten collection of shells, buttons, and bottle caps—memories from other times and places. I dump them in a clinking pile on my bedspread. Filling
the space with meaningless trinkets—or even photographs as Rosa suggested—seems to ignore the significance this box has for me, though it was a cast off, too. Somehow, I want it to be more than a simple memento of an eye-opening trip, more than a souvenir proving I really did experience the smell and the bleach and the tiny seeds. When the cigar box is empty, as it was when I received it, I can see past the decorative top with its regal lions all the way to its shallow bottom. As the evening light from my window illuminates the knotted grain of the wood, I am reminded of a silent, pale pink Head Start.
The stone is cold to my fingertips. For years it has been gathering dust in a bowl on my dresser, buried beneath forgotten bottle caps and chapstick. As I blow the dust away, I remember why I kept it. The stone’s smooth, shadowed blue-gray surface is marked with a ragged, thin white cross, scratched across its oval top. Running my finger over the cross, I can feel the threadlike groove. I kept the stone as a souvenir, I suppose, though souvenir isn’t quite the right word; it was more to remind me of the space between past and present. This rock once held heat.

* 

The ride to Dachau was stressful. Having spent the previous day touring Munich, eating Würst and drinking beer in steins at the Hofbrauhaus, Dachau seemed like a mood killer. But I couldn’t not go. Seeing the infamous concentration camp was an experience I felt required to take part in. With the help of a pocket guide, I’d translated enough of the bus schedule to figure out which bus went to Dachau, but had no idea what to pay, where to pay, or when to get off. I had long since stopped trying to look like a local, quietly unfolding maps away from the bustle of a busy street. Now, with the tattered bus schedule stretched across my lap and my travel purse clutched tightly to my stomach, I re-counted the euro coins in my pocket with my fingertips. Saving
money for souvenirs sounded stupid as I considered the numerous bakeries I had passed on the way to the station, all producing the smell of thick coffee, nut breads, and icing.

When my college advisor mentioned spending half a summer in Austria, my first thought had been how centrally located Austria would be for weekend traveling throughout Europe. Because of my Italian heritage, I was most excited about the romantic notion of visiting my “old country,” though I had only a vague notion of where my family came from—somewhere just north of Rome. It didn’t matter. Having traveled the previous summer to Mexico, I felt prepared and excited; learning different ways of cooking, entertaining, worshipping, and living, fascinated me. I looked forward to immersing myself in a new culture, even if the language barrier would be a challenge.

My first trip outside of Austria was north to Germany. It was a mandatory study abroad outing. We were expecting to learn how to decipher train and bus schedules, find hostels or cheap hotels, and generally fend for ourselves. I wasn’t thrilled—having been in Austria for a week, the reality that I understood no German had sunk in. I couldn’t even use an ATM or order food without looking like an oblivious American monoglot. The idea of spending a weekend in Munich sounded painful. Yet, as the train crossed the border, it dawned on me that, though I identify most with my Italian heritage because of my somewhat-olive skin and last name, the grandmother I never met was German. I picture her as a young woman in my father’s yellowed photos, smiling despite the stern look on her parents’ faces. Perhaps their frowns appeared because of her choice to marry an Italian. Growing up, my impressions of Germany included blue-gray mental images of war-torn families, shadowed rubble for streets, bomb sirens, and Nazis. I suppose I didn’t want to claim the connection. Italy—despite its own ugly history—is more romantic with Tuscan vineyards, warm sunsets, and homemade pasta, but I couldn’t deny
that my ancestry is just as much German as Italian. Guidebook in hand, I decided to make the
most of Germany.

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Each time the bus came to a stop, I looked around for location clues—both out the window and
on my map. I hoped the Dachau station would be obvious so I wouldn’t end up stranded and
hungry in the middle of the German countryside. At the fifth stop, I began to doubt whether I had
read the bus maps correctly as we rattled farther and farther from the city. Across the aisle sat a
family from Texas—the dad a walking cliché with his handlebar mustache, muscle shirt, and
cowboy hat. They talked to everyone around them in English with a deep twang. People smiled,
people moved. I stayed quiet, watching. Eventually, a garbled intercom announcement in
German burst through the speakers as the bus pulled up to a long walkway and the Texan tourists
got up. I followed, hoping this was the place. As I stepped down into the street, I felt the heat
seep through my t-shirt and stick, knocking the breath out of me. I knew I should have bought
water at the station. There was no sign of a concession stand anywhere.

Cameras poised, the busload of travelers huffed their way down the gravel road toward
the infamous gate. The Texan family stopped at a bench and began rummaging through their bag
of snacks and sodas. I kept walking. Following groups of people headed the same direction, I
overheard conversations about uncomfortable shoes, arguments about how much money had
been spent, and whispers between lovers holding hands. No one else seemed aware of the
hundred or so tourists surrounding them, moving toward a single destination. Clutching my
travel purse to my side, I fell in step with the crowd. My own sandals were beginning to rub
blisters from the pervasive dust.
The crowd quieted, narrowed, and pushed through the gate that read *ARBEIT MACH FREI*: work make free. The shadow of those words darkened the pebbles on the other side. I wondered how many prisoners, pushed and prodded into this compound, had believed those words. Believed they could earn their freedom back through work, even as their children were torn from their reach. Work hadn’t kept them free in the past, after all; it hadn’t saved them from their fellow human beings. And now they were ordered to obey these soldiers after being deemed useless, and even dangerous; they could pollute the perfection of the Aryan race. What would they have considered me?

Beyond the bars of the iron gate, a vast field of brown stretched ahead of me. Shimmering in the heat on the far side of the compound stood the guard tower and a tall fence of barbed wire, spiking up into the dull blue sky. To the right, the museum, to the left, barracks—both mute and weathered. The ground was a dusty, pebbled tan that had choked out anything green. As I gripped the gate to walk through, I felt sick. Perhaps it was just the heat, but I wanted to believe it was the place, the exact spot where thousands of people had stood not knowing whether they would ever see the outside world again.

Anxious tourists at my back shoved me through and I wandered toward the barracks, not knowing where else to go or who else to follow. Sweat dripped down the back of my neck. My stomach growled and I felt guilty as I pulled a squashed granola bar out of a side pocket of my bag. Glancing around me, I ate quickly, stuffing the silver wrapper into my purse. I ran my dry tongue over my teeth and walked up the steps of the barracks, already feeling the cool silence from inside the simple wooden structure. Stuck in the hinge of the door hung a stiff, wilted red rose.
Inside, bunk beds lined the shadowed walls in sections of nine across, three high. This was just the first building. Through the window I could see rows of barracks foundations looking like carefully outlined graves the size of railroad cars in the pebbled ground. I walked around the small building, the floorboards creaking under my sandals. Other people came in, silenced by the bareness of it all, and ran fingertips over the doorway, a bunk ladder, the windowsill. The empty bunks made the room seem hard. There was no bedding, no shelving, no other furniture. It was a wooden shell of what it had been. The only informational signs were black and white photos hung on the walls, calling attention to the starkness—men in stripes filling the aisles between beds, shaved heads sticking up out of the top bunk, rows of skinny legs dangling off the edge.

The museum was more graphic, more real. In the barracks I could feel the space between past and the present, but here, everything was so close. The walls and columns were painted black to make the displays stand out, to make them unavoidable. I’d heard the violent accounts before, but usually in the distanced language of history or social studies textbooks. As a child I had visited the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC. I remember being handed a replicated passport of a girl my age with short, dark hair sent to Dachau. Weaving through the displays—the enormous pile of shoes that belonged to children killed, railroad cars that had been packed with barely-breathing bodies, the photos of food lines, each person carefully holding a tiny bowl in their bony hands—I paged through the passport to see if my girl made it this far, staring at her huge eyes and willing her to keep going. Two thirds of the way through the exhibits, my girl died—if I remember correctly, she was part of a scientific experiment that her tiny frame couldn’t handle.
Walking around Dachau’s museum, I wondered if I would recognize the girl, wondered if she ever had a photo taken of her aside from the passport. I didn’t want to see her. Seeing the pale faces of gaunt men and women in the midst of torture felt like intrusion, their eyes either begging and pleading or stone-cold, emotionless, and detached. Next to a matte photo of a thin face with wide eyes, a woman’s scratchy voice whispered through a speaker attached to the wall. After years of surviving within Dachau’s barbed wire, she had looked into a window and had failed to recognize her own emaciated reflection. “This ghost is me,” her voice said. “This ghost is me.” Even in black and white, the pale gray of her skin appeared dead. I looked away, feeling embarrassed I’d seen someone in that state. No one should see that vulnerability. My mind spun, trying to comprehend how anyone could live through this.

I walked back outside when the urge to throw up wouldn’t leave. Inescapable heat radiated from the millions of pebbles beneath me. To my left, I saw a memorial stone that read Never Again in five languages, one on top of the other. In front of me, separating the two long rows of barrack foundations, was a cypress-lined avenue—the tall, thin trees looked out of place, as though they belonged on a painted, sunset-lit Tuscan hillside. Families with cameras around their necks stopped to take smiling photos. As I walked, trying to keep in the shade as much as possible, I wondered what it had been like, hurrying up the path to a bunk at dusk, meeting someone, slipping them a note.

At the end of the avenue stood a cluster of memorial chapels, each focused on a different religion. I slipped into the nearest one, and its coolness enveloped me, allowed me to breathe. The small chapel was unlit except for the open door shimmering with heat, an abstract stained glass window above, and the glow of memorial votive candles in rows on an iron stand. Their light burned blue in the shadows of the building. To the right of the door stood a small wooden
table. On the table was a box holding slips of paper. Instructions in several languages said to write a prayer; I wrote a line or two echoing the Never Again memorial, it was all I could do.

Pushing my way through a tour group entering the chapel, the sun blinded me. I quickly glanced down to the carpet of pebbles, blinking to regain my vision in the brightness, only to notice one bluish-gray rock. Leaning down, I saw what had caught my eye—a rough white cross scratched into the rock’s smooth surface—an ironic symbol to find in the midst of a place where hundreds of thousands of Jews died. I leaned down and picked up the stone. Its heat filled my palm and immediately reminded me of stones I had encountered the year before, on my only trip to Mexico.

* Everyone was asked to visit the rock altar at least once during our work week in Piedras Negras, Mexico. I was there with my church youth group on a mission trip, building houses. It was my first mission trip out of the country. The church we were sleeping in was funding the project, a small cul-de-sac of houses that could fit the needs of the community, allowing their neighbors a chance at a better life. We had seen the oblivious, or perhaps proud, rich living with destitute families in their backyard, pastel mansions that recalled Beverly Hills next to huts built of pallets. Here, I could put my physical body to work helping these families, I could measure the difference I was making.

The house I worked on was at the sheetrock stage. Stacks of the chalky boards covered the concrete floor. My friend and I measured and cut sheets of the stuff for the guys in our group to screw onto the newly insulated walls. These houses were being built for families who would be able to own habitable property—real rooms, real plumbing, real windows—for the first time in their lives. It felt like important work.
In the evenings, our only down time, women from the church cooked rice and beef and tortillas for us—real Mexican food—and taught us familiar American worship songs in Spanish. After dinner, we would talk about how the town smelled spicy as we walked to the corner grocery to buy cokes in glass bottles and try to decipher the Mexican gossip magazines. Or we would spend time in the park across town eating ice-cream and watching families out enjoying the expanse of green grass as the street lamps popped on one at a time.

Once the sun started to drop, young boys from the neighborhood played soccer in the dusty lot in front of the church; after the first evening or two, guys from my group joined in. Their games kicked up clouds of red dirt that made everyone’s eyes water. On the other side of the lot stood a worn playground where a small group of girls in pigtails basked in the attention we gave them. When cameras were out, they asked for a push on the swing and sang “Oh Susanna,” the only song they knew in English, at the top of their lungs until the sun set, their pigtails flying behind them. The next morning, we would rise from our cots early and ride in shaky vans down the highway to the building site.

Despite the care that went into the houses, the work was frustrating. The work groups that had come in before us, many of whom had never built anything, had all contributed to the structure. This meant that corners weren’t square, walls weren’t level, lines weren’t straight, all of which made sheetrocking difficult. If the sheet wasn’t cut or measured perfectly, it wouldn’t fit—often we had to sand down edges or patch with smaller pieces, hoping they wouldn’t shatter under the pressure of the drill. If it went up poorly, the next group would have a difficult time trying to smooth primer over the bumps and breaks. Over and over I had to figure out how to best use our limited supply of sheetrock so we wouldn’t run out due to mistakes. Tempers flared easily in the heat. Though no one ever yelled, voices were often curt and to the point—checking
measurements across the room, asking for tape measures and pencils. Outside of our little workspace, which was a bit cooler because of the roof’s shade, the 100-degree weather was nearly unbearable. I constantly drank bottled water, worried I would be overcome by the heat.

Towards the end of our stay, I couldn’t stand the tension any more, so I took a breather from the frustration of cutting perfect puzzle pieces of sheetrock. Emerging into the glaring sun, I walked across the new subdivision of half-finished houses toward a nearly overgrown path of stamped-down weeds and rocks that led out into a dry field buzzing with insects. Under the lone tree in the field stood the stone altar, built by other church groups. The shade from the willow soothed my burned skin as I knelt. Resting my hands and then my forehead on the warm rocks of the altar, I prayed without words. I prayed with my sweat to help these people, to help this country, to help those in power, to help me cut the damn sheetrock without getting fussed at for being an eighth inch off. Reaching down to the dusty ground below me, I picked up a gray rock that had soaked up the Mexican sun. Kissing it, I poured my prayers into it, then placed it on top of the altar as a sign that I would try to trust.

The heat from the altar moved into my skin and a breeze blew across my face. The sound of worship songs in Spanish pouring from the upper room of the local church filled my head. I pictured the banner above the doorframe inside their makeshift sanctuary: Orar Sin Cesar, pray without ceasing. My anger and worry and helplessness broke apart, just for a second. Long enough to take a good, deep breath. Suddenly, it was painfully obvious how little I knew, how little I understood. Church had been a habit of mine for years, I often participated without thinking, but in that moment I wholly believed that, even though I couldn’t, God knows all languages. God knows all hearts. How can He be limited by my incompetence? I felt whole, renewed, afraid to open my eyes and let go.
I held onto the crossed stone as I walked from the Holocaust memorial to the crematorium. The heat from the rock and my hand mingled to become one fluid temperature. As I followed the crowd ahead of me, my mind was caught up in a mix of memories of Mexico and the Dachau museum. Images and faces and thirst. That split second clarity came back and I felt I understood. Without words, I could see how the crucifixes in my Austrian host family’s house, the altar beneath a wiry Mexican tree, the rock in my hand, all suggested that something larger was happening. Something huge was connecting the dots. The momentum of that experience at the hand-made altar swept through me and I felt the same energy and excitement and wonder I had that day nearly a year before. The reality of Dachau stung. Real people with real fears and hopes and pain and hunger had walked through here, facing death in a way I can’t even imagine. It didn’t matter that they spoke German or Italian or Dutch, whether they were male or female, or even who or what they prayed to—if they prayed at all. Their emotions, their panic, would have been the same.

Holding tight to the rock, now in my pocket alongside clinking change, I followed the crowd over a bridge that crossed a dry ditch lined by barbed wire and guard towers. Looking back through the grid of the fence, I could see the foundations, the tree-lined walkway, the dusty pebbles, the museum. The path led away from all of that to a secluded building nearly in the woods. The gas chambers. On the floor of the chamber, just in front of a square opening in the wall, I saw another dried red rose like the one on the barracks door. Standing off to the side, I could overhear a tour guide explaining in English that the gas chambers never worked; the prisoners in charge of building them realized what they would be used for. They purposefully
made mistakes, never quite fixing the problems; they saved lives, perhaps at the expense of their own.

Glancing at my watch, I realized it was nearly time for my bus. Exiting the iron gate, I must have still been thirsty and hot, but I no longer noticed. I walked down the gravel drive to the bus stop in a trance. During the bumpy ride to the train station, I never took my fingers off the rock in my pocket. My brain was busy trying to wrap itself around everything, trying to enter back into the clarity of the heat. Now that the rock had cooled down, I felt as if I was waking from a dream—one that slipped away the tighter I tried to hold on. I felt as if I had stolen the rock’s warmth.

The moment hadn’t all left me—the feeling that the God I know is known around the world by different names. That the God I know understands the meanings beneath languages. That the God I know in the United States also sees the pallet homes of Mexico, the walk to the gas chambers in Dachau. All of that was still there. But the clarity of the moment had slipped from me as hunger came creeping back, as I began to worry again about which stop was mine. By the time I returned to my tiny bedroom in Austria, after stops in Munich and a visit to Neuschwanstein castle, the certainty of the moment had left.

* 

Two years later, I take up the rock and look closer. The thin, white cross is still there, though the rock is cold—such a contrast from what I remember under the burning sun at Dachau. For an instant, I half hope the intense clarity will return; I half expect the certainty of those moments to flow through my body. Instead, the rock sits in my palm, taking my heat. Without the rock’s warmth to push me into the past, I stand there on my own, trying to remember. I remember the
faces of Dachau and I remember the children of Mexico. I remember the hunger, the prayers, the eyes, the whispers, the sweat, the breeze.

The longer I hold the rock, the warmer it gets.
Empty Lungs

We whisper to one another or stare at the floor, waiting. The forty of us barely fit in this small, white room. Though jetlagged, we are awake and jittery, trying to figure out what time of night it is at home. Out the window, the air is hot and smells of seawater; it has made our skin salty, our hair frizzy. A door opens behind us and the room falls silent. I turn as a dark tan Aboriginal man struts past to the center of our folding chair semi-circle. Almost naked, he wears only a breach cloth and paint. White dots and lines cover his dark body, defining muscles as they glide and squirm under his skin. His upper left arm is encircled in white paint rings; I can’t tell whether they are separate or a spiral.

Without introduction he raises the long, hollow didgeridoo to his parted lips and blows. A great vibration fills the small room and I grip my chair tighter, squeezing my knees together until they turn white. I hold my breath until my lungs burn. Now the sound is a hum, a drone, filling every corner. Up and down, the buzz stretches and tightens. I hear the whine of bees, or a car motor, far away then zooming past. People clap. People exhale. The sound opens the room wide.

*
I remember sitting in that white room, my friends fading into gray periphery. While watching, I tried to quietly imitate the Aboriginal man’s continual breath, picturing the loop of air recycling, blue and ethereal. Instead, my stunted breaths evoked the memory of climbing on the dogwood tree next to my house when I was ten. It was a short tree, with one long, low branch that I often sat on just because I could. On one such climb, after a rain, my slick sneakers slid down the wet bark. It happened so fast. I grabbed frantically at the branch, but ended up stunned on my back with bark under my fingernails and no air. That’s what my attempts at circular breathing felt like—empty lungs.

I was at Girl Scout day camp the first time I realized I wanted to visit Australia and New Zealand. It must have been a day on travel or other cultures because we were looking at Oceanic guidebooks with glossy pages of turquoise water and coral reefs, Ayers Rock rising red from the flat outback, the white curves of the Sydney Opera house. I remember sitting on a splintery bench in the picnic shelter next to the pool full of loud, sunburned children and trashcans buzzing with yellow jackets. As everyone else opened their crinkled brown lunch bags and pulled out bruised bananas and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, I turned pages, running my fingertips over bright colors, entranced. I’d never wanted anything so badly before. I was fourteen.

That was August. In October I received a letter from People to People, a student ambassador program that sends American high school students in matching polo shirts all over the world to learn about new cultures. Somehow I had been nominated, the letter said by a teacher or a government leader, though no one I knew had ever heard of the program. There would be a group of forty students leaving from my area the coming summer, a three week trip to Australia and New Zealand. I applied immediately, writing the necessary essays, getting forms
notarized, and raising money. Each People to People excursion had an educational focus; the purpose of this trip would be to study the unique flora and fauna of both countries. I checked out every relevant—and not so relevant—book in the Johnson City Public Library and holed up in my bedroom to read.

In the spring, all of those accepted met as a group once a week to learn about traveling, immersion into a new culture, and each other. Because I was homeschooled, it had been a while since I’d spent more than a couple hours with so many people my age; three weeks was a long time to be away from home. I was nervous, filled with anxious energy, shy about knowing so little of the world.

* 

We are in a circle on the floor of Northside Elementary’s library and I know only one other person, Alicia—we went to science camp together three or four years ago. This weekend’s assignment was to bring three interesting facts about Australian or New Zealand culture. Those around me whisper to one another, looking behind them at rows of children’s books. Most of us have never left the country. I try to remember my three facts, try to picture the words on the index cards in my bedroom. Glancing around the room, I’m pretty sure no one else bothered with index cards. I wanted to share facts beyond the obvious, so I had read an obscure but intense book about Australian exploration. Now I finger the pages, wondering if it is even possible to fit all of the drama into short phrases.

The circle begins. With halfhearted shrugs and fingertips mussing the carpet, one by one these new acquaintances rattle off facts in bored tones. “They have wildlife indigenous only there.” “They eat mutton.” “They began as Polynesian communities.” I feel my chest tightening, my stomach churning. My words—about the failed Burke and Wills exploration,
miscommunication between adventurers, and surviving and dying in the outback—will not fit here. I’ll stick out before I’ve ever left Tennessee. Leaning over to Alicia, I slide my book under my crossed legs and ask her for three facts. “It is the smallest continent,” I hear myself saying. “Many farmers raise sheep.” “James Cook is supposedly the first European discoverer.” And then it is no longer my turn.

* 

If you had asked me back then, I would have told you that culture was everywhere but home. Like accents, I could hear anyone’s but my own. African culture. Australian culture. European culture. Culture was exotic. I knew American culture existed, but it was in bigger cities with subways and skyscrapers, or quaint midwestern towns where everyone knew everyone else, not in my rural corner of Northeast Tennessee. I needed to travel to experience culture. While other places had beautiful architecture, my neighbors lived in tiny frame houses, fixed-up barns painted blue, or, in one case, a school bus with black curtains. Cultured places had delicacies; we had deviled eggs. Cultured places had museums of art and history and science. The first museum that comes to mind in my area is the Hands On Children’s Museum about a half hour from my house, though it does have a pretty awesome indoor slide. People came to our corner of the country to get away from culture, to get lost on trails carpeted in pine needles and tulip poplar leaves, to see rhododendrons burst into sticky pink and white blooms on the Roan Mountain balds. I wanted to leave the winding back roads and experience Culture for myself.

When I got my chance, flying halfway around the world, the differences and similarities captivated me. Having never been out of the country before, I had no idea what to expect and I promised myself I would take in every moment, I would constantly be aware of the fact that I made it. By the time we landed and filed into the Sydney airport lobby, I had already forgotten
this promise, instead wondering why a new guy friend was paying attention to another girl. I barely remember riding around Sydney our first day. It was all I could do to keep my eyes open after the twenty-four hours of flying. At first—except for traveling on the opposite side of the road—Sydney seemed like it could be any city in the U.S., tall buildings, people milling around, traffic. And then I caught a glimpse of the Sydney Opera House.

We were across the Darling Harbor from the majority of the city. As we got out of our tour bus at an overlook, I saw the AMP Tower and then, down and to the right, the Opera House’s smooth lines. It took my breath away. It’s a beautiful building, of course, but its curved white outline against the cloudy sky forced me to realize how very far from home I was. I was actually in Australia. We all gathered in front of the overlook so a professional photographer from Boomerang Photos could take our picture. Behind a People to People sign reading 15 June 1999, all forty of us are standing in four rows with the Opera House behind us, small and white across the harbor. I am in the front row wearing my staple purple zip-up jacket, my nametag around my neck, my mind trying to wrap itself around my location.

After a day or two in Sydney, our group drove just north to a small town called Tamworth. We were told we would each be staying with a college student and their family. I worried whether a college student would be annoyed by my fifteen-year-old presence. I was assigned to the Rees family: Sam, Meridie, and their daughter Emily. When we met, I realized Emily was not college-aged at all, in fact, she was barely older than me. It took me days to figure out that high school to Australians is referred to as “college.” After unloading my bag in their back bedroom, which had been Emily’s brother’s room—he was off at university (their college)—Emily called all of her friends and had me talk to them over the phone. “You have to hear her accent!” she would say, shoving the phone to my ear. “Say something.” Overwhelmed
and still a bit jet lagged, I said, “Hi, my name is Rachel.” Giggling ensued from the other end.

One boy said I sounded cute. How could they not hear how much cooler their accents were? Mine was so plain with hard r’s, while their vowels stretched and yawned.

Emily then gave me a tour of downtown where we met up with my friends and their host students. On our way we compared vocabularies. She talked about my lack of fringe and laughed when I explained that we call them bangs. She asked if I wanted chippies, and was surprised I called them fries. As we crossed a bricked crosswalk, Emily stopped in the middle to tie her shoes. Horns honked impatiently. “They have to stop for pedestrians and they hate when I do this,” she giggled. The palm trees lining the street were filled with pink cockatoo-looking birds. She said they were Galahs and were pains in the butt because they poop everywhere. I told her the only birds equivalent in my area are crows and they aren’t nearly as pretty. “And those palm trees,” she said, “they brought those in from somewhere to make the street look more tropical, but this is Tamworth for gods sake. It’s much too cold for them.” She was wearing a heavy sweatshirt even though it was sixty degrees out. “This isn’t cold,” I said. She laughed.

*  

We’ve just met and I only remember a few of the eight or so new names, but I can’t stop smiling. Half of us are American. All are teenagers. We are in Tamworth in the furniture section of a place like K-Mart or Big Lots except next to the couches and armoires are bins of framed and matted calligraphy prints about “Mum.” Even back in Tennessee my friends and I wouldn’t dare hang out in the furniture department, wouldn’t dare to put ourselves in a situation where we might be fussed at by adults. Every time an employee passes, I hold my breath for a second, waiting for him or her to boot us out of the way of paying customers. My mother would kill me if she knew I was here.
I’m sitting on the far end of a very soft couch, careful not to touch anything if I don’t have to. One host girl, who has just come from some dance performance as evidenced by her exaggerated makeup and tight bun, has her boots on a footstool. I’m afraid a store employee will bark at us and I keep asking Emily if it is all right for us to be here. She nods and waves a hand in dismissal. I’ve only been in her house for a day, but I can’t picture her parents getting upset. They seem to mind their own business.

Quiet, listening, I watch those around me, forcing myself to remember each second of this experience, reminding myself to always be aware. Emily tells a joke, and I lean forward on my section of the couch to hear every inflection of her accent.

* 

When I first came back from the trip, I tried to live as the Aussies and Kiwis do. I ate cereal out of a serving spoon as my New Zealand host family had done. I asked when we were having “breakie,” in the mornings. I called fries “chippies.” I drove my parents crazy talking about how tiny kiwis are in the states every time we walked through the produce section of Ingles grocery store. “In New Zealand, they are the size of softballs,” I would say. I even talked my mom into taking mashed pumpkin—a dish I had near Wellington—to Geography Day at a homeschool meeting. Later that evening, we ended up dumping the orange contents of the still-full crock-pot in the back of the Target parking lot.

I had never been one to curse, but after being around Australians and Americans who did all the time, the words seeped into my vocabulary. I think it began on the night of Emily’s school dance. I only went to school through third grade; after that, my parents began homeschooling me, so a school dance was something out of a book or a movie. Especially a costume dance. A
“medieval disco.” I soon learned that a disco did not necessitate bell-bottoms or a disco ball. It was simply a dance. My host was a fairy; I went as myself having packed no alternative.

As Sixpence None the Richer’s song “Kiss Me,” came on, I wandered into the courtyard where a group of students, both Australian and American, had gathered. I recognized Reid. He lived about forty-five minutes from me back home and seemed almost as quiet as I was. I stood beside him, listening to the conversation.

“What’s the worst cuss word you guys have?” one of my friends asked. *Motherfucker* someone whispered.

My parents were shocked when, once home, I liberally added *damn* or *shit* in conversation. I quickly out-grew that habit. For the most part, my parents weren’t excited about the little bits of culture I tried squeezing into my life, and by extension, their lives. Or at least they didn’t understand how much I had wanted to be influenced by this new way of looking at life. It’s not that the people I met and the families I stayed with were so very different from my own. It was more about suddenly becoming aware of options outside my little world in Tennessee. Of seeing what life could be. I had seen the other side of the planet and found a new side to my own identity in the process. I just wanted to show that.

* I am hyperventilating. The wet suit they put on me is too tight and smells of someone else’s sweat. I try to think back to the pool in Tennessee where we practiced with snorkels and goggles. I did fine then, but I forgot to expect the obvious—deep water, waves, salt. My lungs are climbing up my throat to stay dry. But I came halfway around the world to see this, dammit, I’m not getting back on that boat yet.
I focus on my hands gripping the metal ladder leading down into the dark blue water. I can do this. Behind me is a now-familiar voice. Reid. “You’re doing great,” he says. “Come on out, I want to show you what I found.” Gulping air, I let go of the ladder and feel myself sink into the warm waves. Turning onto my stomach, I push my face beneath the skin of the water and, after a long hesitation that burns my lungs, tentatively breathe through my snorkel. It works! Through my goggles I see Reid’s boney ribs, then his face as he slides underwater himself. Smiling around the mouthpiece of his snorkel, he motions for me to follow.

Below me the coral rises. Now I understand why they call it table coral; it is like swimming above a tabletop, two feet from the surface. I feel Reid swimming next to me, guiding me. Parrot fish that shine the full rainbow of colors swim through my shadow. I see anemones, sea cucumbers, zebra-looking fish. The water is bright teal, like postcard beaches. We stop and tread, watching bubbles emerge from a clam with a fuzzy, green mouth. Then I feel Reid’s hands against mine, his fingers between mine. I almost forget to breathe—a boy is holding my hand. Pulling me to the left, he points. Between rocks I see a royal blue tentacle. Slowly, the tentacle grows, pushing coral and rocks away until the full starfish is visible. Reid’s grip tightens. A royal blue starfish.

* 

I can’t say I didn’t want the romantic overseas tryst, but I certainly wasn’t expecting it. Before we ever left Tennessee, Betsy, one of the chosen forty, had a party at her house to give everyone a chance to mingle outside of the elementary school library. I don’t remember much from that night even though it was the first real party I’d gone to without parents. The evening was calm enough, but romances began early.
Reid was the guy I didn’t notice until we were already in Australia. Perhaps because he was my height—and I am 4’ 11”—I avoided the jokes that had already begun. But he was cute and nice and had a calm, but raspy voice. The boy was fit—he had a black belt in karate and the abs to prove it. He kept his hair buzzed so that it was difficult to tell the color. He had piercing green-gray eyes.

The whole being-around-boys thing was new to me, though I had been through enough school to have crushes who had no idea I existed. After I started homeschooling, I still had guy friends I thought were cute, but being around a boy all day long is a different experience. Years later I would think how my hormones stole Australia and New Zealand from me. Instead of admiring the orange and blue crusted sulfur springs at New Zealand’s Waiotapu Thermal Wonderland, I worried why Reid chose not to stand with me through the tour. I faintly remember the bumpy four-wheel drive trip up the side of a hopefully dormant volcano, instead recalling the way another girl focused all her attention on Reid, petting his buzzed hair. Now I see that those moments have become an unavoidable, and just as beautiful, part of the landscape.

* 

His hand is on my thigh under the table, intertwined with my own hand, feeling each finger individually. We are in a large hotel ballroom having a bush dinner of traditional New Zealand fare: emu sausage, barbecued kangaroo. The sausage is greasy, but the kangaroo is tangy and delicious—until I realize what it is. Everyone is dressed up for the first time on the trip. Everyone looks stunning. I can’t concentrate on the food or the conversation because of the warm feeling sliding through my body, disabling my brain, my mouth. This is new.
Bonnie, sitting across from me at our round table with its clean white tablecloth, clears her plate and excuses herself to the restroom, as she does with every meal. I barely notice. Reid rubs my fingers harder as he says, to no one in particular, “I’m worried about her.”

Alicia, without looking up from her plate, says, “Don’t judge. You don’t know what it’s like.”

At first I don’t understand what they are talking about; my head is still in the cloud of Reid’s hand. I’ve never encountered an eating disorder before, never thought about someone I know being affected by that. Reid glares at his plate. I tighten my grip on his hand, and though I don’t know if I should, I quietly say, “That doesn’t keep us from worrying.”

*  

I’m not sure why that memory sticks out to me the way it does. When I think about Bonnie, that night is what comes to mind. Nobody I know is happy with their body. But until then I’d never met someone that unhappy. In reality, I probably just wasn’t aware of it. Bonnie made me aware. I’d begun to realize that I’d never eaten three meals a day with people outside my immediate family before. Despite all of the extra curricular activities I was involved in, I was a sheltered child. This trip blew the cover off. I was exposed, and it was uncomfortable at times.

Part of why that memory is so clear all these years later has something to do with my response. I feel guilty for saying we were worried. Not because I wasn’t worried—I was, and scared for Bonnie, too. I couldn’t imagine making myself throw up after every meal. What I feel guilty about is putting in my two cents to back up a boy I had known only a few weeks, instead of listening to Bonnie in a hotel room with just me and Alicia. I felt guilty for putting the “us” in that sentence, for feeling the need to defend him, or at least claim his side when something else
needed to be said. I’m still not sure what that something should have been. I hadn’t even noticed the pattern.

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I’m not sure what to expect. The People to People group from Oregon that we ran into earlier in the week said the Maori chief welcomes every guest by touching noses. It sounds extremely intimate for strangers. As we pull in, I see immediately that the Marai—the village temple—is breathtaking; everything is created out of an intricately carved, deep red wood. We aren’t allowed to take pictures of the Marai’s inside, the Maori—native New Zealanders—believe a photograph captures the soul. I snap a photo of the outside while I can, so I don’t forget the color of that wood against the green of the landscape. Inside, the walls are carved from floor to ceiling; the Maori chief sits in a chair at the far end of the Marai, waiting for our arrival. One by one, we file forward and greet the chief by gently touching his nose. When it is my turn, I lean in and smell earth. His nose is greasy against mine.

That evening, as we wait for dinner—roasted chicken and potatoes—to cook in underground pits, we sit in the floor in front of the tribe’s historian as he recites the story on the walls, which is passed down orally from one generation to the next. We hear of seven canoes sailing from Polynesia, each carrying a tribe. They land on the shore of New Zealand. The historian follows his tribe’s genealogy from one of those canoes through time. I trace carved lines on the walls and columns with my eyes as he speaks, wishing I could run my fingers over the emerging faces and hands and feet. Every surface is covered in this story.

After dinner in a nearby dining hall, the men and women of the Marai perform traditional haka dances for us. The men stomp with their legs spread wide, their hands on their upper thighs, like sumo wrestlers. They wear only a woven, grass skirt-like kilt. As they dance, their eyes roll
and their tongues stick out. They grunt and stomp to the beat in unison. And then the women take
the stage with woven tops and the same kilts, their Umbro shorts peaking between the strands.
They use strings with balls on either end, *poi*, which bounce and spin off their bodies and around
their arms.

At the end of the performance, a tribe leader explains it is the chief’s wife’s birthday.
Wanting someone to sing her happy birthday, he points at Reid. With a red face and a shrug,
Reid climbs the stairs to the stage where he is directed to kneel on one knee at her feet, while
holding her hand. Everyone is laughing, enjoying themselves.

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I had a hard time sleeping in the Marai. All forty of us were there together, lined up in cots next
to blood red walls with smooth, carved curves that I was afraid to touch. Lying there in the
darkness, I tried to remember the history, tried to recall some of the names the historian had told
us. Instead I tasted the green soup, the most amazing soup I’ve ever had, and pictured Reid up on
stage. I smelled the chicken roasting in bags in the rich earth and heard the conversations at
dinner. In the dark of the hall, whispers rose from various cots, but I lay silent. The wall would
not give me names, so I focused on the smell of the chief as I greeted him, the moment our noses
touched, until I fell asleep.

Most of what I remember from the visit to the Marai is sensory. Without a camera to
frame memories, my mind picked up on different details. I can still smell that dinner cooking
underground and taste the saltiness of the mysterious green soup. I see the deep reds of the Marai
surrounded by evergreen trees and grass that crunched under my sneakers as I stepped off the
bus. I hear the grunt of the dancing, and the hum of the *poi* zipping through the air. Perhaps it is
better not to have a camera, I remember more from that overnight than I do about a lot of the trip.
It’s our last night and I am sitting on my hotel room bed trying to write in my journal. I’ve been so bad about keeping up and now I’m surrounded by pamphlets, trying to remember everything we’ve done over the past week. There is a knock on the door; it is Reid. The group leaders are strict about guys being in girls’ rooms, so we stand in the doorway, fidgeting. Alicia turns on the television. She comments again about how fancy it is that we have a towel warmer in the bathroom while flipping through the channels. Reid puts on chapstick and I wait in silence, letting him think through his words. Behind me, I hear Alicia suck in air as she lays the remote on the comforter. Glancing over my shoulder, I see she’s found a porn channel. I’m embarrassed and my face shows it. Reid holds my cheeks, raises my eyes to his. They are so green it is distracting. He clears his throat, puts on more chapstick. “Will you go out with me?”

My first kiss was in the middle of the night on a 747 over the Pacific Ocean. It was messy and awkward, as I imagine most first kisses are. Everyone around us was asleep in uncomfortable positions, wrinkling their trademark red People to People polo shirts. I was glad no one was awake to watch. Reid excited me, but I was sad. Being so removed from my life in Tennessee almost made me forget I had to go back. All night, I kept a careful watch on the little plane emblem scooting along the dotted line on the big screen at the front of the cabin as it moved closer and closer to California, to ending the trip. And so I let Reid kiss me.

I wouldn’t see my friends for a long time; in some cases I would never see them again. But with Reid, I had a guarantee; he’d be around for a while. He had been with me on Bondi Beach in Sydney, he had ridden the luge in Rotorua, he sat beside me on the eight-hour train ride
all the way up New Zealand’s northern island. He’d experienced the magic of this place, he knew
the people I now held dear. I guess I felt that by dating him I could steal a bit to take home.

The relationship ended three months later over the phone. I’d seen him maybe twice since
we’d been back. We sent letters back and forth with funny memories written in the margins, but I
lost interest. I couldn’t lie to him anymore. What I wanted was Australia and New Zealand; Reid
just wasn’t enough.

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There is a rhythm to the Aboriginal man’s breathing, and I watch his stomach muscles move in
and out. Just when his lungs are nearly empty, he breathes in through his nose, so the sound
never stops. He is completely in control, lost in the motion. The white paint rings on his biceps
bulge as he holds the long wooden tube, breathing into it. The sound of the didgeridoo flows
until there is no room left. I feel the buzz in my head, in my chest. The vibration is different from
anything I’ve ever known—I want to exist in the sensation, live in its ripples. Something inside
me shifts.

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For years I dreamed I went back. It would be so real—on the bus looking out at the perfectly
sculpted trees, at Bondi Beach watching people surf, in the water snorkeling over blue starfish, or
horseback riding through the bush. And then I would wake up confused, in my own bed in
Tennessee, disappointed and tired. I often pictured the places I had been, and spent hours poring
over my photo album and souvenirs, trying to remember every detail of all twenty-one days.

Nearly ten years later, most of what I remember fits in the four by six confines of those
photo album pockets. Small, still shots of an earlier self with a koala bear at a wildlife park or
friends on a chairlift. For the most part, I look happy, energetic, uninhibited, innocent.
Sometimes, though, since I’ve seen those images over and over, I feel like I’m looking at someone else’s memories. I was just a child.

I still have the purple zip-up jacket that I wear in nearly every image, but I’ve thrown away the fanny pack. I have no idea where my Sydney Hard Rock Café shirt went. When I flip through the album, it seems like a dream that I have to reach for to remember. But each picture recalls small forgotten moments like trying to order a cheese pizza, the argument over make-up, the cold pumpkin soup. Sometimes the sounds come back too. I hear people’s voices, or laughter. I feel the buzz of the didgeridoo.

After the Aboriginal man’s performance, he let the guys in our group have a go at the didgeridoo. The girls weren’t allowed—it could make us pregnant. Leaning against the back wall, I scoffed at the boys’ attempts, but didn’t dare question tradition. Instead, I wondered what the smooth wooden tube would feel like in my hands. How heavy it would be. Whether the buzzing hum would tickle my lips. It was longer than I was tall and was painted like the man’s body, white stripes and dots and zig-zags. I could see nicks where the wood had been carved, and worn patches where the man’s hands rubbed the paint off. The sound still vibrated in my head. He had never stopped breathing, the buzz of the didgeridoo sustained.