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<tr>
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<td>rendition</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>this is not the whole story</td>
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<td>what keeps me up at night</td>
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<td>32</td>
<td>untitled</td>
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<td>38</td>
<td>touring</td>
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ryan cameron
audrey johnston
audrey johnston
liz windover
casey ross
rose howse
emma eisenberg
amy tarangelo
eve gleichman
casey ross
andrew ross
casey ross
rob harbison
andrew smith
amy tarangelo
rose howse
liz windover
amy tarangelo
andrew ross
madeline kreider-carlson
liz windover
sam kaplan
dominique de leon
adam subhas
marisa militello
briar patch
hunting
woman at a piano
blocks
last sunday with my sister’s . . .
reflection on a monastic life
untitled
painkillers
components
hamlet
david daise & thad eagles
justin danger-beast
andrew smith
anastasia nikolis
justin danger-beast
madeline kreider-carlson
evans raskin
kevin o’hollerin’
rob harbison
amy tarangelo
The way the flies
Thistle and kiss
The lamp each night
Salt the day’s
Echoing din
And empty space.

untitled

This evening
I am as silent
as a brush on the page.
What’s left of the ink spins
into the water. A vase of flowers
on the table
in the shadow dust
whispers
a lingering prayer.
When we spun out on the way to Nashville, the track marks that my father's truck made on the highway had perfect radial symmetry. The pure class of this was unexplainable to anyone who hadn’t seen him carve peach pits into slender brown cats. He once told me that a trout was alive despite the startling evidence of its gills pricking the surface of the Green River. He said it must have craved the atmosphere, that it could smell the lemongrass. Once a dead spider hung like an ornament in his orange beard, and I told him so. I looked too hard at his pupils that day. When my own caught his, he choked on his cornbread. As he cleared his throat, I sensed a rapid staining of the years past. I’d somehow trapped them in sepia. He refused a sip of my lemonade, instead gripping the table until he stopped coughing. The unwavering white of his knuckles reminded me of how he held the steering wheel like he expected it to start writhing, wrenching itself from his grasp.

When we spun out on the way to Nashville, we stayed in the Mountain Vue Motel until the truck could be fixed. He had always wanted me baptized. Here was a chance; March had thawed the leaf-filled pool. My head fit in his hand like the right-sized bowling ball. When I was submerged, his yank on my hair reminded me which way was up. I rose from the water laughing, but he only shivered, his pupils blending oddly into his irises like the Smokies fading into storm clouds. He pointed upward at a peeling billboard proclaiming Jesus’ love for me, and handed me his jacket so that I could dry myself. The contents of the pocket tumbled out onto the crumbling pavement. As I bent down to see what had fallen, I was distracted by the beginnings of a dandelion that sprouted from a crack in the concrete. In these seconds he grabbed the jacket back, stuffing the items into its pocket. I pretended to watch the flower fixedly, and he picked two slimy leaves from my back. His big toe is as long and ugly as a thumb, and he accidentally crushed the dandelion with it. I laughed, knowing that we’d hear the scattered rhythm of Nashville come morning.
In the night, there will be a sound like a beating heart and it will be your own.

In the bunk below yours, the girls are up to the usual shit. Tracy has stolen a bracelet from Ms. Jenkins who does rounds and is trying to sell it for fifteen dollars. Later, Tracy discovers that the head of her Justin Timberlake poster has been torn off, and you rub it in your palm under your pillow. She shhhs the other girls and gets up to see if you are awake. Stare into her ugly, fat face. The state-issued window bars make patterns like geometry on her skin, and orange steam rises outside from the heater in the basement as if from a kind of hell. Pretend not to be scared of her.

“Hey, Hope,” she says, and puffs up her fat cheeks, and then punches you one, hard, right between the legs.

After a time, realize the sound is coming from down there, a dull ringing you can almost hum. Touch yourself there and the skin feels numb and thick and dead. Later, when you get up to pee, terrified that Tracy will grab your ankles as you climb down the ladder, you will find a used tampon in your shoe. The things you use as weapons.

Wear short shorts to school, jean cutoffs that show off your thighs. On the long bus ride to the public high school, goose bumps appear there suddenly like a secret you tried to hide. Sit with your legs spread apart during algebra and biology. In history, Jason who sits two rows behind will give you the eye, staring at your breasts, your legs. You know how it will go. He will pass you a note: “Check one: 1. chem lab, 2. parking lot behind building C.” There will be square boxes. Some things get easier, others harder; which is which? You have next period free anyway.

After Jason is done, he will take your hand, and ask you if want to do it again. Toss your frizzy blond bangs out of your eyes and consider. His hands are soft and hot and clammy on your neck and you cannot see for a moment through the pins and needles and those hands do not belong to Jason any longer, but to him, that other boy, afternoons after school when your foster mom wasn’t home. He would corner you by the plastic kitchen table where he would take your arm and press into you saying, “please,” asking so politely, you almost felt in charge. Or he would take you outside, down to the secret waterfall, heaving and wheezing into you, then offering you his hand, so clammy and hot, up out of the pile of leaves. Leading you back towards the house, he would warn in a high, whiny voice, “Don’t step on the red ones! They’re poisonous. Don’t step on them or you’ll die,” pulling you faster and faster.

Once, you made up your mind to tell her. Your foster mom was watching the morning soaps.

“Pat,” you said, finally, after minutes of working up your courage.

“Shhh,” she holds a finger to her lips like a cross, “Don’t wake your brother. You know what the doctor said.”

Get caught the second time by Mr. Howard, coming to clean the lab. The school principal has a new secretary, a thin stupid woman who wears suits that are too big for her. Feel superior as you wait, and swing your feet like a child, savoring the loud thuds they make against the linoleum wall. Jason is there too, looking bored, and playing with his cell. Look at him and decide he is very good looking, that you could’ve done worse really, that he is really pretty hot and not all that pushy and what was the big fucking deal anyway?

The secretary smiles at you gently, from behind her beige metal desk, as if you might be easily broken. She will imagine, and she will pity, and her pity stinks, a smell like something dying. She puts her hair up in a ponytail, making sure no strands are left astray. You are almost touched. Decide she is definitely a virgin.

The principal opens his door. “Hope, we’re ready for you.”

Who’s we? you think as you get up, and saunter through the doorway. Focus on the terrible job he is doing of combing his hair over, the strands clumped and oily as paint. See Mr. Howard in the corner in a corduroy suit the color of mustard.

Suddenly you feel tired, so very tired from a place that is hard to locate, like the core of you, the back of your back, but bigger, deeper. Your body is exhausted, can’t sleep at night, terrified that Tracy will get her hands on the few good things you still have: a silver crown for being second runner up in a beauty pageant, a bottle of cherry lip gloss, a walkman from Pat. Slump down in the chair the Principal points to.

“Hope,” the Principal says, in a painful molasses way, clasping his hands together and bringing them down over the crotch crease in his blue dress pants. He always was a pervert.

“In the night, there will be a sound like a beating heart and it will be your own.”

This is Not the Whole Story
At the end of class, Ms. Campbell hands back the last paper to the class. She makes a face like regret, tight but kind, when handing you yours.

“Anyone who got below a C, has to stay and check in with me,” she says, and takes a seat at her desk. After the bell, a line of students forms near her desk. You were supposed to meet up with Jason, but you dutifully wait your turn. There are two boys in front of you who are clearly pissed, digging their hands into their jackets and sighing.

The girl speaking to Ms. Campbell now, chews gum and says “uh huh,” every so often. Your eyes are tired, so tired. Sit down in one of the chairs in the front row and cover your eyes with your hand, letting your eyelids rest. Open them, after a time. Look down and see that your hands are trembling, not from cold, but from something else. But you see also that you have two hands, one to tremble, and one to cover the trembling one with.

“Hope?” Ms. Campbell puts a hand on your shoulder and you jolt out of sleep. “What?” you say sharply.

“What?” she says, flipping through it. “The ideas are good – it just needs a lot more development. It needs to be pushed farther….” There is more, but this is enough. Focus on her oval face, and the solid heavy jaw, almost like a man’s. Her hair is cut short just past her ears, not straight across, fashionable. Know that she is from a big city. As she speaks, imagine she is your friend, imagine you are at a restaurant and it is dark and noisy and she is trying to tell you a secret, but it is hard to hear.

“You’re smart,” she is saying, you can just make out over the loud music.

“You’re really smart, Hope,” she says again, the words vibrating in the empty classroom.

“Yeah, well,” you say grinning, but you wish she’d kept it a secret.

In the coming weeks, pay more attention in Ms. Campbell’s class. Come to understand that Emily Dickinson was not simply crazy, this is not the whole story. Sometimes, hide a flashlight at the foot of your bed, and after Ms. Jenkins has made the rounds for lights off, take it out, pressing the book into the wall. A poem reminds you of telling a story, the way

“I really don’t want to have to suspend you again, but you aren’t leaving me much choice.”

“Shh,” you say, “the doctor said.” Or perhaps you say nothing at all.

Last period is English with Ms. Campbell. She’s only been here a couple of months, and rumor has it she’s only staying two years, some special program. She is young, that is true, and there isn’t the same boredom in her, ending class early, assigning coloring books for Christmas. These things don’t mean much to you. There is still a barrier there, and you are still on the wrong side. But sometimes when you look up suddenly, you catch her looking at you, straight on. Once, she called on you and you knew the answer.

While she’s writing on the board, some of the boys in the back make cracks about her ass and mime grabbing motions. She writes a poem on the board.

“After great pain, a formal feeling comes.” She reads the poem slowly, lingering, with a toss of her short brown hair. “As freezing persons recollect the snow—” Turn towards the window that looks out over the asphalt parking lot, the mountains in the distance. It is fall again, chilly in the breeze and too hot in the sun, but soon there will be snow covering those mountains. The snow came rushing at you all of a sudden. It was the first time, and you were eleven. One moment you had been making a snowman, running and bending over to collect the best snow patches, and then an icy white wetness in your hair and his hand slapping your face. There was a pain in your chest, the heart breaking is more than an expression. You looked down and saw blood, shocking on the white snow. Remember how bright the air was that day, how clear and bright, and how hungry you were afterwards. You went back to the house and ate six donuts, fast, like an animal. He squinted at you, as if through a telescope. “I have to lie down now, my head hurts” he said. He went to his room and closed the door quietly, click.

December will make one year in the home for girls.

“…then the letting go,” Ms. Campbell reads. It is hard to know what to wish for, to let go, or to hold on. Ms. Jenkins, the counselor from the home, tells you that it is not your fault: your brother was a very sick boy, that Hank from McCAul's gas station had done that to other girls before. She repeats this over and over again as if it were an answer, or a prayer like a hail Mary. Say it, say it again.
in your face.

“What the hell are you staying in there for?” Slam the locker door closed in his face and keep walking. Work on it for four nights in a row, with the flashlight, scribbling into a marble notebook, crossing things out, scribbling again as the other girls in your room make their moves, exchanges, threats. Mary from the next bunk over will offer you a pack of cigarettes for your notebook, and you almost take it, but change your mind at the last minute. Commit yourself. Feel it getting worse each night, feel what you had unraveling. Once when you have it close to the way you want it, Tracy will tear it up and leave the scraps in your bed. Be unable to tell your own voice, your own way of speaking from Emily Dickinson’s. Catch yourself speaking more slowly. In the big bathroom mirror in the group home, be surprised to see your own skin, your own hands. Fall asleep the last night, head on your notebook. In the morning, the flashlight will be dead and your paper will be seven pages of loose-leaf.

After class, wait for Ms. Campbell to be free. You will explain the situation. As she finishes talking to a girl with a ponytail, begin to doubt her understanding. You could turn and run.

“Hope?” she says. “What’s up?”

“Well,” you begin. But there is no beginning and no end, there is only the same boring story, not even told in a complicated or clever way. She looks at you, almost fearful, and you think that it is too bad you are not trying to fool her this time, this once, for she would surely believe you. There is a ringing noise in your ears like what is left over when you stand too close to a stereo speaker.

“Are you alright?” she asks. Have trouble breathing, feel as if your mouth is on fire, hate all that which you are, all the stories that have been told about you, even the ones that are true.

“I tried, I really did to make this one better than the last one. I made notes and I brainstormed and I underlined, all like you said, I –” That is it, for the hot tears roll down now though you are not sad, only furious.

“Whoa, hold on, Hope. It’s ok, really. We can talk about this – how about an extension your grandma used to tell it, confusing as hell, but more and more familiar the more times you hear it. It comes to remind you of itself, of something else, of yourself.

See Ms. Campbell in the hall sometimes, in loose fitting jeans and a wool sweater like a sailor. She will be coming out of the teacher’s lounge, or getting a drink from the water fountain. She will smile wide and say, “Hi there, Hope!” Once, she placed her hand on your shoulder as she passed you. “Whoops!” she said, weaving by.

Another time she keeps you after class and gets carried away lecturing you on thesis statements, and you miss the bus. She is flustered, apologetic, and the sun has already disappeared behind the mountains. She insists on giving you a ride, though you resist, not wanting her to see the yellow cement block building, the bars on the windows, not wanting her to think you belong there.

“Whatver,” you say, following her to the parking lot, but as you get into her old black convertible, your cheeks burn. It is a clear, cold evening with a biting wind, and the trees etch black skeletons against the dull sky. She shifts gears smoothly, her fingers surprisingly thin and delicate on the wheel. You talk non-stop to choose your awe, chattering of boys, of cars, of music videos, and she will nod and smile a big, toothy smile. To fill a silence say, “I was raped, you know,” tripping over this word that they have taught you to say, that you say all the time now. Say it, say it again. She will turn her head from the road and look at you as if it mattered.

“No,” she says, “I didn’t.”

“Yes,” you say. “Twice. Well, that’s not really right. Two different men anyway.” She keeps driving, more slowly now.

“I’m sorry,” she says, with feeling. “I really am. That is not how it should be. It is not ok for it to be like that.” Then a Rihanna song that you love comes on the radio.

“God, I love this song,” you say. She reaches over and turns up the knob, and puts a hand lightly on your shoulder. Squeezes. You smile and turn away.

When the next paper is due, take some of your free periods in the library. Jason will be pissed, and Jason’s friend Hank who works at McCaul’s and who you still see sometimes anyway, will get in your face.

“What the hell are you staying in there for?” Slam the locker door closed in his face and keep walking. Work on it for four nights in a row, with the flashlight, scribbling into a marble notebook, crossing things out, scribbling again as the other girls in your room make their moves, exchanges, threats. Mary from the next bunk over will offer you a pack of cigarettes for your notebook, and you almost take it, but change your mind at the last minute. Commit yourself. Feel it getting worse each night, feel what you had unraveling. Once when you have it close to the way you want it, Tracy will tear it up and leave the scraps in your bed.

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“Whoa, hold on, Hope. It’s ok, really. We can talk about this – how about an extension

‘til Monday? How about you just sit here and breathe a minute.” She guides you towards a chair near her desk. She sits down at her desk. “Now just breathe for a minute, go on.” Imagine there is blood and it is running down your leg and pooling in your shoe, then spreading to the carpet, bright as blood on white snow. Imagine there is a pain and it starts in your heart.

She will lean in close to you, looking in your eyes, straight on, and take your trembling hand between hers.

“It’s ok, Hope, really. It’s not the end of the world.” She looks as if she is somewhere far away and you try to go there too but you can’t because the room is too loud, so loud, roaring in your head like a bell. And you do not know what this wanting is, to be close to her, for the lines seem so blurry, bodies so soft, and your heart so vast and empty.

In a swift move, close your eyes, your face is upon hers and she tastes wet and like nothing at all. Feel yourself pushed off, your name called. Keep your eyes closed because you know when you open them there will be nothing left and that which she has said will not be true anymore, and all that there will be is a sound like a bell ringing, and then a silence.

At dinner, after Ms. Jenkins has said prayers, Tracy will come over and rest the top of her belly fat on the table in front of you.

“Heard you got a little sexy with the teacher,” she says, lingering over the words, sexy, teacher.

“Shut the fuck up,” you say, looking her straight on.

“You’re a little slut, that’s all you are,” she says, and though you’ve been called that hundreds, millions of times before, it seems true only now, in this last crossing of the line, this last act of blanketing. There is one body on another, the warmth of flesh colliding, slapping – what else is left? Staring at Tracy’s fat, oily cheeks, vow that this is the last time you’ll be back in the home. That the next foster placement they find you will be the one. Pat had been the one, or so you thought. You and your brother had been placed with her when you were ten and he was thirteen after your mother got arrested for the third and final time. Pat had made jello cups with whipped cream and let you and your brother eat them in front of the T.V. She’d liked that you were pretty, entered you in the county middle school beauty pageant, bought you shirts with fake jewels on them. She’d yank a brush through your thick, mangy blond hair, no matter how many times it took.

But soon she started getting headaches, took to going to bed before it was dark out, watching the soaps on T.V. all day long. Sometimes you’d come home from school and she wouldn’t have moved since you left that morning. Your brother really started to push her buttons. She hated the way he stuttered, his ticks – he wouldn’t eat red foods: no steak, strawberries, red peppers, definitely no ketchup. Shrimp were a challenge. Beets would push him over the edge.

“Oh just eat it,” she’d say, shoveling beets onto his paper plate. But he’d just sit there blinking. By then, he spoke only in exclamations.

“No way, José!” he cried back.

It was during your second month of high school that they took you from Pat. One of your brother’s special education teachers noticed that he was coming to school in dirty clothes, his hair unwashed for days. On the home visit, the social worker opened the door to your brother’s door and nearly passed out from the stench. There were jars of curdling milk on the table, yellow and watery and thick, candy wrappers and Styrofoam takeout containers littered the floor, all mixed in with endless scribbles on scraps of yellow paper. Great scott! said one. Believe you me! said another. There were mice in the holes in the walls, moldy pieces of pizza between the sheets. Pat put out a hand to steady herself on the couch. She claimed she hadn’t known how sick he was.

After dinner, you debate carefully. You’re sure Tracy has something planned for you. Walk down the hall to the pay phone and check the slot on a whim. Shockingly, your finger feels a piece of loose metal in there, grabs a hold of it, a rusty quarter between your thumb and index fingers. You’re sure it’s a sign, and you dial Hank’s cell phone number in a frenzy.

“Hey asshole,” you say when his scratchy voice comes on the line. “Wanna pick me up?”

He will say yeah, and you will walk calmly to the bathroom, stand on the toilet seat and pull yourself up to the ledge, your arms hard and strong, and then weasel your way through the opening where one of the bars was sawed off. Jump down with satisfaction onto the dusty gravel. As you wait for Hank, wonder if you haven’t made a great mistake.
“So he raped you?” Ms. Jenkins had asked, in one of their sessions.

“Well not at first,” you said, “but then…yeah, I guess. I wanted to stop. He pushed me up against the garage wall.”

“That’s rape, Hope,” she’d said. You shrugged.

“Shhh, sweetheart, you don’t want to do that,” he says, and the light of the parking lot floodlights reflects off something shiny, the blade of a big swiss army knife. “Easy now, girl,” he says, taking the knife and making a light surface cut on your right breast which is exposed where your shirt’s been torn. Be unimpressed, you’ve done worse yourself, but when he takes the blade with his thumb and presses it into your neck, saying, “Come on now; you don’t want to do that,” you stop to consider. Your arm’s been twisted, your favorite shirt torn. You’ll have bruises on your face for weeks. Where is left to go? You’ll be locked out of the group home, maybe have to sleep outside. You’ve been raped, over and over. The body seems just a place to put things, to stuff up and plug, to bandage, dab, repair, to bleed and bleed. Think of Ms. Campbell, of her telling you that you’re smart, of her saying that is not how it should be, it is not ok for it to be like that. Think of Tracy and her fat, pimply face, but the only friend you’ve got, her heavy sighing in the night your lullaby for a year now, maybe your lullaby forever. Think of your brother, locked somewhere too, spending his days in front of a T.V., writing on his little slips of yellow paper. Last month a letter came from him. Greetings from the loony bin! was all it had said, and there had been a little picture of a palm tree drawn in pen. Smile, thinking of it now.

“So, what’ll it be?” Hank asks, gyrating his crotch a little bit, and pushing the blade harder into your throat. Breathe in hard and prepare. Spit in his face, and brace yourself to make a fist. Then, squinting, punch him hard in the nose. Scramble for the car door handle, your body falling hard onto the cold asphalt, but get up and run for your life. He is swearing and shouting after you, and you hear the car door close and his footsteps behind you, but you keep on running. For if life were all pain and logic, who would want it? But you want it, god, do you want it.
We have been urged, since we marched with tube socks and Trapper Keepers into kindergarten, to be who we want to be, to invent, to impress, to remember that the sky is the limit (for even if we miss the moon, we’ll land among the stars, or something like that).

On airplanes, should my neighbor insist upon sharing some sort of conversational bonding, I leave them thinking they have struck gold by the time we say our amiable good-byes at the gate. There is something beautiful about how little consequence is tacked to the lies you tell to strangers. You can be an ass, a pervert, a prodigy, a princess, an orphan, a psychic, an idiot savant, a hero, an addict, for two hours, five hours, layovers, delays, turbulence, landings. I have been a Harvard freshman en route to her solo premier at Carnegie Hall, a deaf person with impeccable ability to read lips, Roald Dahl’s slow granddaughter, a millionaire, a paranoid schizophrenic, and that girl whose mother was consumed by her boa constrictor, you may have heard about it on the news. And then it’s over, everything whitewashed, just a memory for some loquacious executive who will have such a story to weave at his dinner table.

I don’t want you to think I am a liar, because there is a big difference, I think, between lying to someone you’ll likely see another time, and sculpting some wild or touching or jarring masterpiece for a stranger. To do the first routinely requires a better memory and worse esteem than I have. There is jealousy, or, at least, insecurity, in the habitual liar, and their tricks are inevitably trapped in conflicting webs until they can’t open their mouths to anyone without getting a raised eyebrow. The second, though, is merely a harmless – and yet endlessly exhilarating - game of imagination. Here is a loophole in the teachings of honesty.

To the phocine bride on the aisle on a plane to Boston, I am on my way to meet my future husband, the tragic result of a familial tradition of arranged marriages constructed by my converted-Hindu guru parents. So long as I don’t get it as bad as my sister Pia, who got fixed with a chain-smoking homosexual with an allergic reaction to sunlight. And while my aisle friend later snores with her fat fingers locked on her lap, I am nudged by my window-neighbor, a bony teenager with dried acne meds forgotten on the creases of her red brow. She wants to know if I listen to Korn. I want to know what she thinks my chances are of finding true love on the set of MTV’s Real World: Boston, where I’m headed. She says they’re high as long as I keep the drama to a minimum and my hair straightened. She gives me her number in case I need to someone to call from the set (I fold the paper and stuff it into my pocket gratefully) and asks me to autograph her plane ticket.
I should mention that I have had a rather strong fear of flying, and transportation in general, ever since a plane I boarded from Washington to Providence had to make an emergency landing just after take-off. The problem turned out to be a rather harmless issue related to the air conditioning system, but there I was, behind an eight-month pregnant woman, sliding out of an airplane onto a private runway in New Jersey with a face pale as recycled air. I remember saying, “I love you” to the stranger next to me a few times before we touched down; it is certainly the closest I have felt to death.

As a rule, I steer clear from talking to religious nuts, white supremacists, pubescent children, garrulous old men, or city hipsters; in general, bad listeners. Should anyone from this crowd try to strike up a conversation, I usually become a narcoleptic or mute. I welcome grandmothers, Republicans, potheads, heavy accents, mid life crises, black lipstick, vegans, musicians, and politicians for the most intriguing discussions about photographic memory or being an ex-gay or having a heart transplant.

I recently took a train to Montreal and back, and quickly found I had done an exceptionally poor job at choosing my seat. To my right sat the alleged score composer of Oliver Stone’s first film, an ancient man with an impatient Mac-book Pro and a love for the jazz violin. Behind me was a teenaged thug with a buzz-cut on his way back to Long Island (“The City”) to see his baby and his baby-mama. Happily, Middlebury College had agreed to give him a 2-week personal leave, which he admitted was generous, but boy would he miss that Vermont Kush. He showed me four of his five tattoos (to show the fifth would have been indecent) and asked if I could tell that he had had trouble with the killer clown on his calf scabbing over. Ahead of me, three graying Canadian women who appeared to be on some sort of ya-ya sisterhood adventure via Amtrak began loudly discussing their own poetry, artwork and husbands, who I can only imagine to be poor, helpless and endlessly regretful creatures. The poet smartly disclosed that her work was better than Leonard Cohen’s—whoever that is—while the other two giggled and tossed their hair at the grumpy customs agent who asked the purpose of their travels with such resign I almost second-guessed my decision to answer, when he asked me the same, “I have fallen madly in love with my sister’s fiancé, and I’m on my way to break up what will surely be a short, unhappy marriage.” He took my passport and ticket and chuckled, “Bless you.” I thanked him and he handed back my forms. He said, “Boy, do I got stories tell.”
A figurine, bending the links of a chain letter, comes alive. There are also chains in a sweater, running down the sides like streams of water. These too are broken, sending a slaughter breeze through the open pupils of the armpit, blinded to its blindness and its musk. It is this same secret kindness that blinds the figurine to its objectentity, one revealing wood as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Ironically, the dream was broken by a link of the letter, which, in Cassandran think, impaled its own truth in the telling: The defaced wood was an illusion. Like all illusions it replaced another. We are layers of paint; oak congeals to skin and the truth hums like a kaleidoscope within. Yet the musk remains, but musk cannot be seen by those pupils once blinded by their own sheen; I wonder, if we scraped the layers off the figurine, would we find wood, fresh flesh, or a layer machine?
colors

she’s got a rainbow umbrella
when the skies are gray,
coloring outside the lines,
you might say.

Look here:
between the rocks
with a little water
veined with light
a skinless fish
as pale and milky as bone
is making arrows.

———

Face

rob
—— harbison

Just This

———

colors

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Just This

———
Last Afternoon

They swing from the crystal-gum trees
their gobbling skins in sick tiles
their loony eyes inside fur whirlpools
knees click in their sagging sockets,
the gelatinous tree branches ooze
through their fingers, but nothing breaks
and nothing falls.

Their teeth are polished as semi-precious
stones, displaying fattened reflections
of my glands, my follicles.
Through the kitchen window
beneath the hanging bundle
of thirsty sage, I watch
the flitting of their untamed irises.

Emissaries of curvature, my fingers
stretch like peapants at dawn
around this potato.
I know they want it.
In my hand I feel its' captive swelling.
I see the peels in the steel sink.
I imagine the acrid coma of the apocalypse.
I hear the sound of their nails on the window.
Unlike painting or learning a new equation
sleep does not come easily.
At 1 AM I listen to the footsteps on my ceiling
as if they were the treadings of nomadic soldiers
storming my brain.

At 3 there’s a howl outside
and my body hears wolves.
When we domesticated our dogs
we couldn’t tame our instincts.
We still sense hunger with our thighs.

I try warm milk. I anoint my pillow in lavender oil.
I listen to the guiding voice of a
thick-lipped guru who tells me:
I want you to imagine red and black roots
diving deeply into the earth.
These are your roots.
Green, silver, blue.

I wonder if this somnolent parade is the same
for my distant kinsmen oceans abroad.
I think that they spun rugs with those
veins and taproots of so many colors,
so many names and kingdoms.

The birthright of immigrants is a state of lacking.
For want of heirlooms, our grandparents bring stories.
For want of memory, we invent heroes with our names.
For want of tapestries, we write about the
stars and octagons, the horses and apricot trees,
drawn in the veins of our hands.

If only I could follow this map
burned into my body.
If only I could trace a root back through the centuries
following the turns of my mother’s varicose vein.

As violet sleep at last rises
I hear the murmurs of all those years and tongues.
If I saw those ancestral places—the
deserts and forests, the cities and ruins—would I even know them from a dream?
Would I understand my forebear when he says, “This is your homeland”?

What Keeps Me Up at Night

tarangelo

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deserts and forests, the cities and ruins—
would I even know them from a dream?
Would I understand my forebear when he says, “This is your homeland”?
I do not love you in those words, but until the poetry of my soul is ground into light, I must walk naked among you, ungirded by a shield or stolen night.

I love the thing I glimpse through the cracks in the floorboards that you wear so well, suits you are in a girl of armor, toward me loving naked green into hell.

You are a house. You have your shutters and upholstery. You have your garden of earth. You have closed rooms dearth of window-light, and for these you steal the night.

Your room wears darkness like a shawl; the sun strains in vain to flood through nonexistent windows. My footsteps fall for groundbreaking to the hall, but fail.

I dare not love you in those words, but I am match red maker for day and night; I bridge the gap between with girds of sleep and love, housebreak and soul’s light.
i have always known snow or the ocean

i used to never stay home on weekends.
a burnt tree, a fireplace, a coal mine—
all a few hours from each other.

picture the arctic:
flat white snow and ocean melding together into one.
it might be nice to live somewhere else but i am waiting for god to say where.
when you get here, you will not understand.
you will not see the footprints, the etchings,
the bitemarks laid out across the land.
all the world will be under a blanket of snow,
and what is under it, you will never know.
and you will be alone.

to those who will come: I have made a path for you.
it is over the roots and under the sun,
above and below you, within and outside of you.
struggling under the weight of you, it will collapse,
and where it leads to, you will never go
as long as you are alone.

to those who will come: I have not deserted you.
I have not abandoned you, I have not tricked you.
the things that will sustain you cannot be found
beneath the trees or among the rocks.
I came before you and could not wait for you,
and so, for now, you are on your own.

to those who have yet to want or to yearn:
I have left you in a beautiful and desolate place.
unshielded and alone, you will scatter and burn
unless you search for me. your eyes will not find me;
instead, reach for me. cry out and I will envelop you.
my hands will find you, and you will not be alone.
“Twas in the deepest, darkest hour,
’Neath the maiden fair
“Twist her luscious, lovely thighs
‘Midst moldy muffin men.
‘Ere the stallion shirked his noble steed
Muster her thighs chafe?
“Twasn’t him that took the thorny thicket
O’er elegance and greed!
Ne’er the goatee rare-
‘En the good sir could not move her sin-
‘Fore his eyes stood her naked tunnel,
‘Erelong her hands had him in her
‘Nd her in him as was before.

“Tisn’t lonely despair that drives her
“Tis the night.
Hsk hsk,
dream the sailors,
asleep on their trip down the coast.

Cush cush,
sing these whalers,
although they’ve got little to boast,
as they cut through the seas
holding their wheel with their knees,
and their eyes swinging off towards their host.

And he,
with a laugh and a smile,
stands atop the main deck at ready.

At ease,
spotted the sailors an isle,
and they whoop and they hold the wheel steady,
as they pull in their sails,
and they look out for whales,
which they envision in each wave and eddy.

At long
comes the flip of a tail,
and the sallow long swath of a creature.

A song,
then they’re hot on its trail,
using past experience as teacher,
as they ready a harpoon,
and they pray for a boon,
and they watch for that unmistakable feature.

And then,
what a sound, what a growl,
as ambitions are pulled from the throngs.

Strange men,
all in orange, on prowl,
have been searching to halt all such wrongs,
as they circle for whaling,
on a save-the-whales sailing,
saying, “No mammal to any man belongs.”

And hurrah! shout these soldiers,
slapping at each others’ shoulders,
and they herald their success with such songs.
a dream about the darkness just before dawn
some calendar number in may, the world fresh
and wet and hopeful; a newborn day.
she played the piano with the screen windows open
so the soft cerulean tint of the sky
and the hushed birds chirping, and the ocean
would hear what key the morning would be in.
she always started slow and peaceful.
the notes would echo through the house,
and come together in chords that would resolve
and then dissolve, sending sounds adrift
like balloons moving excelsior
to take the brilliant colors,
to greet the light,
to open the door.
When the Young family woke up, the dog was dead. It had gotten into Mr. Young’s painkillers, which had been left on the kitchen counter the night before. Frankie, the youngest of the three Youngs, was the first to see the dead dog. Frankie, like most seven year olds, did not wait for the sun to rise before plopping barefoot into the den to watch his favorite weekend cartoons. Of course, he first took a detour into the kitchen, opening the refrigerator for anything that was pre-packaged or served chilled. That’s when he found the dog, cold as the leftover pizza Frankie had exhumed from the fridge.

Frankie wasn’t sure the dog was dead at first, just sleeping like the rest of the family on an early Saturday morning. It was not the first time Frankie had mistaken the dog for things it wasn’t. Sometimes Frankie thought the dog was a pony. Far more frequently, Frankie thought the dog was an ottoman. Once, he thought the dog was a skateboarder. All those times though there was someone to correct little Frankie. “Frankie, sweetie, leave the poor dog alone,” his mother would say, or “Goddammit, Frankie, get off the damn dog!” his father would command. But that morning no one was awake to tell Frankie that the damn dog was dead.

Frankie plopped down next to the dog, exposing his rear from the pajamas that were at least two stripes too small as he sat in a contorted cross-legged position only a small child could achieve. He rubbed the dog’s plump stomach, which was rigid and motionless except for the loose skin that still glided along the dog’s underbelly underneath the child’s small hand. Frankie shook the dog harder. Nothing. At 6:23 AM, Frankie Young saw death for the first time in his life.

“Dennis, how could you leave your pills right on the counter!”
“Oh for Christ’s sake Kristin, how the hell would I have known the goddamn dog would get it?”
“What if Frankie got a hold of them first, what then?”
“For crying out loud!” Dennis took the car keys off the counter, next to where the little orange bottle once was.
“Where could you possibly be going now?” barked Kristin
“The pharmacy,” said Michael, his voice chased by the sound of the door slamming shut.
Frankie wandered into the kitchen and tugged at his mother’s bathrobe. She turned around and looked at his puffy red eyes, streaks of dried tears on his cheeks.

“Mommy,” he started.

“Yes, sweetie?” she replied, stooping to one knee while wiping a fresh tear from her own eye. She attempted a smile, but only managed to give her son an uncomfortable grimace.

“What’s going to happen to Sammy?”

“He’s going away, honey. To someplace else, but don’t you worry. I’m sure he’s very happy wherever he is.”

“Did I kill him?”

“Oh, sweetie, don’t say that. Of course you didn’t.” Kristin took her son into her arms and held him. “This wasn’t anyone’s fault.” She paused. “It was an accident. There’s nothing you could’ve done.”

Frankie wasn’t sure his mother was lying at first. It was not the first time his mother had lied to him.

Six months passed and Frankie was well into the second grade. He was making a diorama of a scene from My Father’s Dragon when his teacher told him to pack up his things—that his mother was picking him up early.

“Hi, sweetie,” Frankie’s mother said as he climbed into the back seat of the car. He had outgrown his booster seat a year ago, but his feet still dangled inches above the floor. Frankie didn’t respond to his mother, rather stared at her. She was wearing sunglasses Frankie had never seen before. It sounded like she had been crying, but Frankie wasn’t sure.

“Where are we going?” Frankie asked. “Am I going back to school today?”

“No, you don’t. You love it there, remember? You’ll get to see Max—you love Max, remember?”

“Hey, Frankie! Jo beamed. Frankie looked at his grandmother as he trailed closely behind his mother, kicking the back of her shoes every seldom time he took his eyes off the ground. Jo was young for her age. Though she was nearing eighty, she could still swipe little Frankie right off his feet and into her arms. Frankie hated this. He cringed when she trotted down the stairs and shuffled over, giving him a wet kiss on his cheek that left him smelling like perfume made out licorice.

“We're going to Grandma Jo's. Doesn’t that sound like fun, Frankie?”

“No, you don’t. You love it there, remember? You’ll get to see Max—you love Max, remember?”

“I know, honey. Me too. But he’s gone—you know that”

“I know.”

The trees turned to green as the car accelerated onto the highway. Frankie stared out the window, his nose pressed against the glass, fogging it with the warm air that came out of his nostrils.

“Where’s daddy? Is he coming to Grandma Jo’s too?”

“No, sweetie. Daddy’s gone too.”

“What did he go?”

“Where did he go?”

“Away.”

“I miss Sammy.”

“Like Sammy?”

“If only.”

The rest of the ride was spent in silence with the exception of the soft murmur of the radio that faded in and out, but was often too low to discern any song. Frankie fell asleep to the hum of the road, and his mother’s crying did not stir him.

Mother and son arrived at Grandma Jo’s in the early evening. Jo lived in a small one-story house near Poughkeepsie built in the early 1970s with dark brown siding that blended into the dirt and dead pine needles surrounding it. The shingles on the roof had turned to green from the patches of moss surfacing from between the cracks. Following the loud creak of the storm door, Jo emerged.

“My little Frankie!” Jo beamed. Frankie looked at his grandmother as he trailed closely behind his mother, kicking the back of her shoes every seldom time he took his eyes off the ground. Jo was young for her age. Though she was nearing eighty, she could still swipe little Frankie right off his feet and into her arms. Frankie hated this. He cringed when she trotted down the stairs and shuffled over, giving him a wet kiss on his cheek that left him smelling like perfume made out licorice.

“Hey, Frankie, guess what? I’ve left you a whole bowl of Goldfish to munch on, why don’t you head on inside. I’m sure Max is excited to see you. We’ll be in in a minute, I just gotta talk to your mom for a minute, ok?”

“Go on sweetie, we’ll be right in.”

Frankie dragged his feet up the porch stairs to the creaky door. He glanced back and
saw his grandmother holding his mother who revealed to her the black eye that had been hidden by the sunglasses. He turned back around and hurried inside.

Frankie's mother had replaced the sunglasses on her face when she entered the house with Jo. Frankie was watching television in the living room, fending off the dog that was trying to get Frankie to share his Goldfish. He didn't tell either relative what he had seen under his mother's glasses, nor did he ask why his mother hadn't removed them in the house.

The dog returned to Frankie's side, attempting another have-at-it with the bowl of Goldfish. He started licking the side of Frankie's face, to which Frankie replied with a solid smack across the dog's snout. The dog ran across the room with a yelp.

“Frankie!” his grandmother scolded. “Why would you do that?”

The dog stood behind Frankie's grandmother with its tail between its legs and its head to floor. “He wouldn't leave me alone!”

“You don't hit anyone, Frankie, even if it is a dog. Look how upset you've made Max. Come here, boy.” Jo rubbed the side of Max's head to comfort him. Frankie's mother went to him and kneeled down by his side. She removed her glasses.

"Do you know what this is?"

Frankie nodded.

"Do you know how this happened to me?"

Frankie shook his head.

"Someone hit me, Frankie. Someone hurt me."

"Who?"

"Someone very near to me," she paused, "to us."

"Who?"

She hesitated.

"Daddy hit me, Frankie. He got angry and hit me, sweetie."

Frankie didn't say anything.

"Listen, sweetie, don't worry, okay? Mommy's fine. Everything is going to be all right. We're just going to stay with Grandma Jo for a couple of days, okay? So you don't have anything to worry about, okay sweetie?"

"Are we going to see Daddy again?"

"I don't know, Frankie, I don't know."

Frankie and his mother spent the weekend at Jo's house. Frankie slept in a small guest bedroom off of the living room while Kristin stayed with Jo in her bed. Kristin's eye was healing slowly and she stopped wearing the sunglasses, but Frankie did not like to look at it. He told his mother it scared him. “Me too,” she said.

It was Sunday evening when Kristin told Jo that she and Frankie had to leave the next day.

“Frankie has to get back to school, Mom. We can't stay here forever.”

“I know Kristin, but are you sure you should go back just now? Have you called the police?”

“The police? No, Mom, I'm not calling the police”

“Well, why in the hell not?”

“Because—well what's that going to do?”

“Put him behind bars, stop him from do this to you, or worse.”

“Mom, I can't do that.”

“Yes, you can!”

“No, Mom, I can't, alright? Dennis needs me right now and Frankie needs Dennis! I can't have him growing up without a father.”

“You can't have him grow up without a mother either, Kristin.”

“Christ, Mom, stop exaggerating! He's having problems right now, I know. But the doctors say they may be able to alleviate his pain through surgery. They say he won't need the painkillers much longer and he can get back to work. He won't be in pain anymore, we won't be in pain anymore.”

“Kristin, please”

“No, Mom, we're going. There's nothing else we can do, not now at least.”

“Please, Kris, he's not stable right now—just stay a few more days at least.”

“I've got to put Frankie to bed.”
Frankie had been sleeping for a few hours when he was awoken by the loud scraping of car tires against the gravel driveway of the house. The lights in the living room were out, and the rest of the house clearly had gone to bed. Frankie heard a car door slam shut and the sound of footsteps grinding against the pebbles. He heard the storm door squeak open and the thud of front door against the wall. Frankie wondered if this woke his mother and grandmother too.

“Kristin!” a man slurred. Frankie knew it was his father’s voice. “Kristin, I know you’re here!” Frankie didn’t dare leave his bed.

“Hello?” Jo responded from the other bedroom.

“Jo is that you? Where’s Kristin?”

“Whatever you do, Kristin, don’t leave this room. It’s Dennis—he’s here.” Jo got out of bed and walked into the living room.

“Where’s Kris?” he said still standing by the doorway.

“She’s not here”

“Don’t bullshit me—I saw her car outside.” His breath smelled of whiskey and sour milk.

“She isn’t come home now”

“That bitch stole my son!”

“You shut the fuck up! I’m his father! I have a right to see him—you can’t keep him from me!”

Dennis marched towards Jo and shoved her onto the floor. He proceeded towards Kristin’s bedroom, kicking the door open.

“What are you doing here?” she shrieked.

“Where’s Frankie?”

“Frankie! Where’s Frankie?”

“Bitch!” And with that he swung. He hit Kristin on the side of the head with his wedding band, knocking her down, a stream of blood beginning to trickle down her temple. Frankie heard this through the paper-thin walls and tried to suppress his scream.

“Frankie!” Dennis yelled, “Where are you?”

“Frankie! There you are! Come here!”

“No!”

“No? What do you mean, no?”

“No! You hit Mommy! You hit Mommy! I’m not going with you!”

“Frankie, get over here you little shit!”

“No! You hurt Mommy—and—and—you killed Sammy!”

“What the hell are you talking about, I killed Sammy?”

“He ate your medicine—I saw the bottle! It was your fault!”

“How was that my fault? Your stupid fucking dog jumped up and ate them!”

“No—it was your fault!”

“You little shit!” He seized Frankie from his bed and carried him over his shoulder into the living room.

“Grandma!”

“Let go of him!” Jo tried to get up, but her age had caught up to her in the fall. Frankie tried to writhe out of his father’s grasp, but his father was too strong and drunk to let him slip away.

Dennis threw his son into the passenger seat from the driver’s side and got in the car himself. He sped off the way he came, clipping the mailbox on his way out.

Though no words were exchanged, Frankie did not stop crying. The persistent wails of the young boy were taking their toll on the boy’s easily aggravated father. It seemed all the pills in the world, rather in the car, could not numb his ears to the shrill sound of a child’s tears. Dennis pulled the car over.

“Take this, you’ll feel better.” Dennis bit off half of a pill and swallowed it. He gave the other half to his son, who refused.

“Come on, please, do it for me, do it for Daddy,” he said calmly, trying to avoid bringing his son to hysterics again.

“Fine.” Dennis grabbed his son, popping the pill into his mouth and forcing him to swallow. After, Dennis took three more pills himself, washing them down with the Jim Beam under his seat. He suffered fifteen more minutes of screaming and sobbing before Frankie fell soundly asleep.
Frankie woke to a knocking on the window. On the other side of the glass stood a police officer, smiling. Standing behind him, was Frankie’s mother, a fresh bandage on her head and fresh tears in her eyes. The officer opened the door and Frankie climbed out the car. He didn’t notice that his father was nowhere to be seen. Kristin rushed over to her son and picked him up in her arms. “You’re ok,” she said, “you’re ok.”

Kristin, with Frankie still in her arms, climbed into the police cruiser that brought her there, the one that would take her back to her mother’s, where Jo was resting her injuries from the previous night. Not a word was said for the duration of the ride except the intermittent police jargon coming from the radio. His mother was softly crying, but Frankie didn’t say anything. It was not until they were almost at the house that Frankie said something. “Where’s Dad?” “He’s gone.” “Like Sammy?” “He wishes.”
Hamlet

amy
—tarangelo