

Girls

Prologue: Erin's Journal
Thursday

I am standing in the lobby of a restaurant. No one has noticed me. Waitresses pass by without even flinching in my direction. The woman behind the counter packaging baked goods is curling ribbon with a pair of scissors and is not looking up to greet me. This could go on for a long time, I shift my weight to my left foot.

This is my world today:

I am invisible.
First person.
I do not exist.
Particular.
I am nothing.
Universal.
I am [not].
Negation.

I am being ignored

I am not rich.

Everyone is white.

I do not belong here.

As-- [she pauses with a second thought]; "M'am?" Quiet. Assert. Louder. ASSERT! "M'am?" she calls her to attention; assert your existence, lest you be forgotten; is all I am saying, "Should I just seat myself?" The m'am politely responds. "No, honey; follow me. Smoking or non?" "Smoking."

She leads me to a booth in the corner, sets the menu down, asks if want coffee, I nod, and mention I would also like a water and she stops at another table and takes a plate, sets it in a bus tub and then grabs two glasses, fills one with water, the other with coffee, smiling profusely, she heads back to my table, setting my cups down and I nod again with gratitude.

Observation: Everyone here works very, very hard.
Conclusion: These are a bunch of hard working individuals.
Furthermore: I like to watch people work.
After all: Work, when people do it, looks so purposeful.

I am high strung. It is funny to think there are all these people working hard and probably doing the best their little hearts and bodies and minds can, yet they are still incredibly bad at what they are doing. I can afford to laugh because I define status quo, by how much I am not the status quo [... wishful thinking].

The woman at the nearby table is complaining. Her crème puff is too hard. She has only eaten a bite out of it. She is making the server take it back. She does not want a new one. She just wants to forget the whole crisis ever happened. She regrets even ordering the dessert. She does not even accept the server's apologies. Her hand is up, she has closed down communication. The server is going to throw the food away, uneaten. It is going to go to waste; a wasted resource just because the woman did not quite like it the way it was. I would offer to take it, but I am too lazy and lock jawed to say anything or get up or make a motion.

A whole bunch of dishes just crashed to the floor. It was really loud and startled a woman in the booth across the way from me. She dropped her fork and looked frightful. Her husband has turned around and is staring in the general direction of the clamor.

An ambulance just passed by the window.

An old woman outside just fell down trying to pick up one of her grocery bags.

This world is full of accidents and impending disasters.

You can get shot, bombed by religious zealots, or run over by buses, even fall down and break many bones or crack a skull.

In some ways, this actually comforts me.

I am depressed.

Confession: I sometimes wish I never talked. I often wish I had no feelings. I further desire to not be human sometimes; I would rather be a-human, a-sexual, a-everything. I often hate myself for being who I am. I want myself to stop. I hate that I have needs and desires; they make me pathetic and vulnerable and they make me feel childish and silly; I mean, it makes me feel childish that the very core of me is something that is my needs and has to have certain things or will do certain things just because that certain thing makes me feel better. I do not like being controlled by what I am and have to be. I have an erratic mind and am prone to have rapid mood shifts. I am overly sensitive and get my feelings hurt very easily. I am too innocent for this world. I am too sweet and nice for the hardened conditions of this world. I am too nice. I am very indecisive and rarely make much sense to myself. I do not understand why I do some things or why I act certain ways; all I can ever say is I acted true to how I felt and I did what I thought was best for me or best given the situation; but, ultimately, I end up feeling like a puny, self-righteous asshole.

Confession: Everything I say must be absolutely beside the point; I cannot help but laugh myself, because I miss my very own middle, my very own core, my very center, because I even speak of it; but this kind of skepticism about language is not much of a path, it is a dead end. I have to have the faith that I am making the best approximation. This makes me feel dirty. Like I am wearing a layer of filth because I use language. The things we do with language make it worse, analogies, metaphors, no matter how beautifully stated, are stained; beautiful from the inside, but from the outside, revolting; my mind is split, an outside to the inside, an inside to the outside, what a headache.

“What would you like to eat?”

“I would like a grilled cheese sandwich with fries.” She says nothing more. She gives me no extra attention. She does not start any pesky conversation. Coming here alone probably means I want to be left alone. She is doing a great job.

Confession: Nobody cares about me. No one has ever loved me except my parents. No one cares about me at all. I feel slighted by the world full of people that never notice me, full of people that overlook me.

I am searching.

“Food.” She throws down the plate and walks off. I look at the food before me with a vehement abhorrence. I am not hungry. My stomach is wobbly because I am nervous about my impending travel. I do not know why I came here. I am going to leave. I am just going to stare at my food for a while.

“Is there something wrong?”

“No. Nothing is wrong. I would just like a box and the bill please.”

“Certainly. I will bring the check right to you.”

Bill sounds low class. Check sounds more proper and high class; next time, say check.

The box. The check. Money out of my wallet. I stand up, take one last sip of my coffee, set the cup on the table, I am a dot on a large canvas. I am a fleshy dot of paint. I am a dried up clump of oil. I am synthetic. I am art. I am slender sheen layered right above the mirror of reality, the brush dips into the glossy eyes of self, painting the picture in slight tint lighter than the actual; and I head out the door, back into the city.

It is evening, a dimming world, the hour of dissemination and transition; I watch as a leaf slowly sweeps along the concrete as it flips and turns in the wind; from love to hate is just that, from war to peace, all one way or another, the same leaf. I listen to it scrape against the sidewalk. There is a saxophone being played down the street and the note is brown and the breath is copper, the tone and

shade of neutral, which is the scrape I try to stay in; I once sought mesmerizing absolutes, which I thought would coat the yellow and tan and brown deviations and graduations, but now I live in the confusion of the neutral, in the agitation of the scrape, being both love, being both love and hate.

I have traveled many miles. I have sat on many couches in many homes in many states, talking, listening, laying, being; I have been many places. I am world-wise.

Cities are old news to me. Cities are like most of my friendships: an amazing prospect, an inspiration, and then, sure enough, a huge disappointment. Once when I left my mid-sized Nebraska city for bigger cities, I was convinced something astounding would happen to me as soon as I reached the city, because big cities are big and marvelous and wonderful, therefore my life would become big and marvelous and wonderful. I walked around so always amazed and open eyed, fascinated, gaping mouth and all at the new sights and the opportunity held within, but I was mostly excited because of my own anticipation that something big was on the verge of happening. I waited diligently with each frequent trip to the heart and core of downtowns for that astounding thing to happen; yet, I was always, only left with my lonely, miserable self leading the same pathetic life, with nothing at all happening and not able to make anything at all happen, and by then I would be feeling all grungy and scummy in my nails and in my pores, further, I would be feeling all guilty because I had spent way too much money on things I did not need or want, but had to purchase for one reason or another. I do not belong in cities.

I have sidled along the jazz of Chicago, the green line el from the south side to downtown, filling myself with stories, feeling whole in the abstract; Chicago is the only city I care to know about, the only city I obsess over; but, I spent an hour too long there and ended up in the dark, cool canyon La Salle, the ceaseless transactions stretched me thin, the starched collar buildings itched my neck, and day to day of business wore me out, weaned of my addiction, I hopped back on that el, got back to my apartment, slept, and left the next morning. The road brought me to Savanna, of all places, and I sat on park benches wandering aimless for days, feasting on the thick, damp air of history, and while nice to know it is there, history bores me incredibly; soon, too, the busts, statues, gravestones of all the strivings, battles, goals, and persistence marked and remembered, began to bore me; and a sick trick, I started thinking, playing, pretending at immortality; so I went another way, heading west; then Texas, Houston and Dallas, a friend was calling me from there, but everything was dry, gaudy, and flashy, the land was too big in sentiment for how little it all is, I just passed you by; could not pick up on any substance, sturdiness Las Vegas, Los Angeles, could not stick there; San Fran, how I ate and ate and ate and walked and walked in the shadow of your innocence, your standing ovation of a white, virginal buildings, but I was not moved, only more and more convinced there

was some sort of sham, a bruise, a blemish, one I could barely enunciate, something like absurd oppressions, and I walked down streets lined for blocks, packed full of your disparities and poverties; and so I headed north, trying to find some fresh air and thought go were it rains, the air will be clean, and found Seattle, a bunch of stylish fakes indeed, the air was crisp, but I felt so frilly, so pretty, so petty; feeling disconcerted and distant, I head off to find my true self, carting myself back across the country, my eyes closed while going through the Midwest, I ended up in D.C.; but I was left in the cold, for I could not acquaint myself there, my spirit too free for the laws and my mind too ironic for your games, for I could not take you seriously as your stoic marbled facades would like me too and I could not say I was a part of the state, ever more alienated, I instead laughed at you; and then I landed here, like an immigrant from another country, New York, and I love how now, that it is night, you can look out over water to the warm yellow squares which emanates like a quaint and cozy, full bosomed cabaret. New York is all the other cities, yet is much more than every city, and it is the only city I could ever call home, the only city in which the buildings are made of flesh, and you can see their sighing and breathing, their gentleness; I like best the gentle clods and beats of heels of dress shoes gently ticking down concrete gritty stairs. I look around at my Brooklyn one last time; I am leaving you, Brooklyn, once and for all, leaving probably for good, this is your last chance to say good bye, I look to hear it, but there is no voice rising above the busy streets, mentioning a farewell; alas, I head down the stairs to the subway.

Mass transportation is the main artery of the city; a clogged, diseased arteries, which contains all the contaminations of this sick American blood; sick, obese blood that flows in and out and on top of the surprisingly fertile, abundant American soil; plump, living off the fat of the land.

Why do I continue to be a part of this strip mall gas guzzling industrial sized reproachable destroyer America? And if “they” burned and pillaged my country, even if I enjoyed it, enjoyed seeing those stores destroyed and the absolute nonsense that is an integral part of my everyday life wiped out and the pillars of our institutions and the apparatus of the military nation state dismantled, subverted, undermined, collapsing, a result of the reckless abandonment of some well planned revolution or upheaval, and even if I thought we had it coming, I do not now (by my own actions and by the conveniences I assume) dissent.

Besides, there is a lot of work involved in dissent, in doing so, I would probably have to stand up for what I believe, which is impossible because I cannot seem to believe much at all, from any given angle, one could justify or excuse or renounce or ignore about everything in one way or another.

I am around all these people. They look so nice and cheerful, so happy and so peaceful and nice, so busy and everyone looks like the character they are and my

imagination goes wild with narrations of the lives of all the myriads of characters; I am a misanthrope that loves people; it does not take long for it to get loud. Cough, cough, mucous; hacking; spitting. It is idle chatter in generalities that I hear. 'I don't want to be just a number; but he is a numbers man,' 'I am running out of minutes on my cell phone,' stuff like that, and I find myself hearing and thinking I am amongst the sum total of none because I am in the cold underworld of a city, then it is not before long that I am feeling the sickness of the strange around me and start smelling the warm, bodily air, and think of us as mere carriers of disease and I begin seeing in the air those mutant strains of tuberculosis I keep hearing about and then I hear the announcement "blah, next stop, blah, inarticulate blah" and then there is only hatred; and my hatred is my violence, my anger is my knife, I sneer instead of stab, critical and criticizing word, I am slice the throats of these people; killing the worst of it, killing the worst in me; showing just how far my rage, my indignant self, kicking and screaming, and fighting, will to keep beating my fist against the heavy wall of the grueling, crashing down world.

I close my eyes.
humming.

Get me out of this body.
Get me out of this pornography.
Get me out of this dirt.

Take me some place I can bathe.
Take me some place I can be fresh.
Take me some place where I can think clean.

Get me out of this body.
Get me out of this dirt.
Get me out of this ugliness and grime.

This is a city. I am on a train going through the guts of the culmination and continuation of this great enterprise, of humanity's great labors. Often the faces I see are impoverished and littered and blank. They are coated in the dingy ash of smut and smog and wear a base foundation of gray. These trains are grimy, perpetual boats on the river of Styx and we are crossing over in the transmigration of nothingness, all around me is death, vanishing, empty, endlessly needy souls, which reek of decay. I am in a parade of bankrupt souls, in a wearisome pageant of shopping bags, a swarming blizzard of white, bleaching out further the parched globe, these people that live in flashing half sentences and blurbs and fragments of advertising schemes, scraps that provide no nourishment, no sustenance, making us segmented, disconnected, dissected, marketed world without a core and the air is filled with the buzz of static pixels, dazed; and there is this bi polar, mind body split, two tiered saintly self-

possessed nation of a self-righteous consciousness, with empty words, freedom, liberty, democracy, where death and gore are wrapped in plastic and smell like cucumber rose glitter and strawberry melon, where reality seems to be lost in the flipping through of tri thousands of channels of commercial excess of death made unreal and untouchable, of a plunder virtually unfelt; I am caught unaware; I am a land of bountiful cars and bountiful exhaust ripping away the layers, the depth one sees, the roads covering up the soil ripe for epics, warehouse and industrial sized parking lots have cleared away the tress, the shade ripe for imaginations and interstates have abolished the shady groves, the resting places for the passions of the genuine, the real.

I made it to the bus station. It is filthy here. There is trash littered everywhere. The trash cans are over full with trash, the trash cans pour out trash, they do not contain it.

Meditation: I am perpetual adolescence. I am madness; unbounded and limitless. I am the exception. I travel many places, fast. I cross all boundaries of class, race, nationality; quick; I am a blur, pieced together. I am hyper alive. I never have to take a breath. I am hyper alive. I am all powerful.

A Weary and World Worn Traveler [title] [perhaps a poem]

After the agony of 'I have seen;' after the realization of sorrow and the fulfillment of pain; after the hope, the fading dream, and the dying flower of love; I continue. After the optimism, the ideal, the perfected and the perfecting; after the madness and into the clear, is when, I suppose, is when, I am willing to bet, is when enlightenment is ushered in? shows up? Arriving anytime now and here, this bus station, during the sleep deprived late hours of night, here, where the clocks are stopped, yet the tick still echoes upon the tock; perhaps in the bathroom, in this row of metal, shiny, reflective doors, in the blackened stall smelling of crimes and infringements, the floor decorated in dark tiles of grime, while pissing, my elbows poking my thighs, my head leaning forward and I am in my most meditative stance; my forehead and eyes cupped into my hands, peering into myself, and I suppose this, is this where enlightenment is attained?

I am returning home. The bus I am boarding is a time machine, I am returning to my past. All returns home are bittersweet, this one is no different. It will be wonderful to see my family, to see my old friends; but, I am a loser, disenchanted, but ambitious; ambitious, but unable to make good on my ambitions; what, I wonder, do people like me end up like? Where do we go?; roam, I guess, try to find a better, try to find our opportunity in our place when our time comes; now rising is the feeling of pain, all contentment or joy in my life is washed out, quickly and drowned completely in this, the vale of tears, and

I am thick with a headache from the bottomless cup of grief I have drunk.

This city [but what else is a city but the people, says a friend of mine], so these people, I mean, will not miss me. They are indifferent to me. I am nothing to them. I am nothing. I watch the rows of cars and all the flash blinking of lights and the cartoon of red lights switching to green and feel the speed of the cars, the airplanes zooming overhead, in the pace of those walking, and my eyes move quickly, taking it, my mind trying to catch all the quickness. I pass through the bottom of the buildings, pass by the scaffolding of buildings being re-built, restored, and re-worked, passing by the old layered with the new, my mind crossing the roads, meandering between eras past, centuries fallen, old news, ancient stories retold, seconds ago, and I cross into the future, five years from now, the unknown; and as the city falls away, I have misgivings while riding upon the ribbon of a fading past, and in his present, I have converged, and the substance of what I have been, will be, and am are before me as the open road, which I am re-riding for the first time, looping yet another spin, the gas pedal is pressed down harder, I am pushed, faster, forward into the timelessness and solitude of the present. I look out my window and see that fall is apparent, as radiant shades of red, glowing orange, and bright yellow leaves are, in the wind, swaying with thousands of different shades, thousands of different possibilities.

The return home [a breathe, a prayer]

Here me,
my almighty and highest self,
Remind me to be young again!
Remind me of the all the earthly splendor!
Remind me again how bountiful!
Grant me your grace! Give me your peace!
Amen.

Round One: Lee Ann

Friday

In the beginning there was man and man only. In the beginning there were men and men only. In the beginning there was a man and there were men, and there was only man and there were only men.

In the beginning there was a woman and a woman only. In the beginning there were women and women only. In the beginning there was a woman and there were women, and there was only woman and there were only women.

In the beginning there were not men and women and there was not man and woman. In the beginning men and women were not. In the beginning man and woman were not. Even when men and women are together, man and woman are not together. Even when women and men are together they are not together.

In the beginning there were no women. In the beginning there was not a woman. In the beginning there was not men. In the beginning there was not a man. There is no man or woman. There is no men or women. In the beginning there was a human. In the beginning was a human. There are many kinds of humans. Then there were women. Then there was woman. Then there were men. Then there was man. There are many kinds of men and many kinds of women and many kinds of men and women and women and men; but there are men there is man only and there are women and there is woman only and relations between the women and woman only and the relations between men and man only are strained. There is relations between women and men and men and women that are strained and so it goes for woman and man and man and woman when there is men and man only and women and woman only. There is no women and there is no men; there is only women when there is man and men only and there is only men where there is woman and women only. There are no women and there are no men and there is no woman and there is no man; yet there is men and

men only and women and women only.

It is men and man only who have the most visible, affective power. Men have the most space in the world and that means they have the most visible, affective power. That must have happened in the blink of an eye in the beginning. That is what is must of felt like in the beginning. Suddenly, in the blink of an eye, some men went from right beside some women and became elevated and soon they had books to support the elevation. It probably seems harmless enough to begin with. It even probably seemed like the best thing at the time for some one to be elevated. It probably helped sort things out a bit and probably worked to the advantage of people in the quickness of existence, but it must have happened in the blink of an eye. The elevation probably seemed harmless enough not to worry about. The laws and the books probably seemed harmless enough not to bother about for women. It has not turned out to be so harmless. It turned out to be a very desperate battle. It turned out to be a very desperate battle for power and it became a matter of faith. Men have faith in the elevation of men and the elevation of man, but the faith is not reciprocal, it goes all in one direction. Women have faith in men. It is men who have made the gods in the images of men and for the purpose of men and so every one has faith in men and in man. Every one has faith in men, so men have the most faith and the most power. So men and man are elevated and have the most faith. For the rest of us, there is doubt. I doubt women and I doubt woman. I have no faith in myself. My whole being is doubt to the very core, and the very core of my being is that doubt because I have no faith in myself as woman. Woman do not have faith in woman and women does not have faith in woman, some woman have that faith in women but that is hard to find. Men have the faith and the power and the elevation of faith and power.

There is power that is had and once that power is had more of that power is able to be had. There is power that is had and then there is power that is not had. I do not know what to think of power. For some people the power is not to be had, for some people the power cannot be had, for others the power seems foolish to be had, for some people power is all that is to be had, for others the power is had and that is way it is for them, the power is had and they do not even know they have the power they have, they just have it. There is power that is had and some humans have that power. Men have a lot of power, they have the visible, affective power. The visible, affective power of men is able to run women over and even though women are strong, the visible, affective power of men is able to run her over. The power of men is able to run the power of women over and the power of man is able to run woman over. I see that the power is not mine and that the power of men is able to run women over and the power of

man is able to run woman over and it is hard to know that even when a woman is strong the power of men can run her over. This is not a women's world. This is not a world for a woman.

Women are left facing the worst of it because the visible, affective power of men helps men keep the power that is had and will continue to be had. Women are left facing the worst of it because the visible, affective power of men for all of the remembered past is the mightiest sword in the big desperate battle for power between men and women and so it goes for man and woman and so it goes for woman and man. So it goes for man and woman in the everyday doings that involve power. So it goes for woman and man in the every day doings that involve power. There is the every day lives of man and the every day lives of woman that go on in the every day doings that involve power and the every day doings that do not involve power. There is the every day lives of woman and the every day lives of man that go on in the every day doings that involve power and the every day doings that do not involve power. There are the every day battles that are won by man and then lost the next day. There are the every day battles that are won by woman and then lost the next day. There is the big desperate battle and then there are the small every day battles that feed into the big desperate battle. Every where in the every day battles there are the wills of humans clashing hard against each other. Every day there are wills of man clashing against the every day wills of woman. Every day there are the wills of woman clashing against the every day wills of man. There are a lot of every day triumphs and losses for man. There are a lot of every day triumphs and losses for woman. At the end of the every day, men have done most of the winning all because of the mightiest sword in the big desperate battle, which is the mightiness of the past. In the quickness of existence there is a heavy hovering history and past and in the present it is hard to see how the future of women could be different from the past of woman and it is hard to see why the future of women should be different from the past of women and if that is possible.

At the end of the day, men have done most of the winning because of the mighty past and the power of the past is too heavy for a woman to beat. The past is often too heavy for a woman to beat. A woman is a part of the hardest, longest, widest suppression of women's will and that is hard to beat. The powerless past is very heavy and weighs against woman. The past that has been an oblivion for women is too heavy for a woman to beat and is too much for a woman to bear. A woman must learn that when she tries to enter into the world of ideas and laws and streets and tries to say something that can easily get lost in the shuffle. A woman learns that when she tires to make a difference and it gets lost in the shuffle of the quickness of existence where the visible, affective power of men is present. A woman

learns that all her hard, hard work can go by unnoticed and vanishes within the world of visible, affective power of men. It seems in the world for every ten steps women make, men only have to make one and can make the woman take back every one of those ten steps and she is back behind where she started from and her work vanishes. To be a woman in the world is to be in a world that is a big house full of big chores and no matter how much every day work goes into cleaning up and keeping up and making the messes stop, the messes keep coming back the next day and the stains and the spills and all the hard work of one day of cleaning is lost the next day and that is what it feels like to not have the visible, affective power. It must feel like all the hard work of one day vanishes the next day and then a woman has to start all over and the messes always keep coming back and no amount of cleaning or preparing makes the big chores cease and every day is starting over no matter how hard a woman worked yesterday. Even the work of woman that does not vanish never fully enters into the locus and concept of men. Men have their own troubles. Women have their own troubles. Man has his own trouble. Woman has her own trouble. The trouble of men is the trouble of man. The trouble of women is the trouble of woman and even when there are men and women and man and woman they never overlap and their troubles are never the same.

And, at the end of the day women have done most of the obeying. Women have obeying, so woman obeys. This makes it a very hard life. This makes it a very hard life where women's will is suppressed and stifled. This is a very hard life. I am a woman and the world weighs heavy on me and I have a burden that sometimes I cannot bear. Sometimes I cannot do the bearing. I have been very hard on myself to deal with the burden, but when I am hard on myself, the bearing and the burden only get harder.

As a woman there are many burdens and there is a hard plight. There is a plight that ties women down, rubbing and scarring her flesh, burning and scratching her flesh with all the fighting she is doing to struggle out of the restraints of the ropes and shackles. To be in a civilized society is to have restraints. To be in a civilized society is to struggle with the social restraints. Civilization is another word for restraints and a civilized society is ritual and rules and it is not freedom and that is what a civilized society is. A civilized society is full of restraints, as heavy as laws, as light as taboos, as simple as money and that is the civilized, social world. That is a hard life to have. It is a hard life for women because the restraints are made to hold her down in ropes and shackles that cut into a woman's well-being. Women must work very hard to take care of women and woman must work hard to take care of woman because the well-being of women and woman needs to be looked out for by some body. It is hard to be healthy in this world as a woman and as a women. It is hard life to live in a society that tears and

burns and cuts into the flesh of women struggling with their burden.

It is a terribly hard life to have and a plight that is not easy. Sometimes I cannot do the bearing and I am weak in the bearing. Sometimes I am very hard in the way I handle the burden and I cannot do the bearing I have to do in this terribly hard life and so I am very weak in the bearing. Women face a hard plight ahead. I am a woman with a hard plight.

Dated the first of this century or the end of the next

Dear Sir,

My dear sir, my doctor and confidant, who is executing the diagnosis, who is the magistrate of freedom, who is the judge and the jury, who seeks the explanation for all behaviors and actions concerning this body and mind circumstantially attached; I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, so help me whoever can help me, so that you can finally judge for yourself to the best of your abilities whether this homebody can finally go home and can finally be discharged from the ranks of the unacceptable mentally unfit and dispelled back into the world of the normally mentally unfit. My, how we have grown close after all these intimate sessions of confessions and documentations and declarations had amidst the long silences and virtually real uncomfortable zone between the chair and the bed, between the desk and the chair, between the bench and the rolling chair you delightfully found for me so we could soak up some sun and laugh in the gay fresh air and twitter about like passing butterflies. I want to start by saying that I have had a wonderful time meeting with you and this has been a truly wonderful experience and that I am glad we had the time to talk to one another.

It was just yesterday, was it not that we were outside watching the fluttering and twittering of butterflies? That day was so kind, it is hard to believe it was only yesterday. How cheerfully short my memory can be sometimes. How I wish I could forget more and more readily. When I let myself forget, I get the feeling that I can start over. If I could only forget, then I could move on and see differently. With the scars, though, it is hard to forget much of anything and surely I cannot forget much that readily with the scars. We both want me to change, to see things differently. I have tried to change. I have spent a long time trying to always change. The problem that needs to be addressed and readdressed it seems is that even when I forget, I never change and then I start thinking I may never change and that I may never be able to change. To change would mean to start over and this time really start over and then see things differently. I cannot get to seeing things differently no matter how many times I try to start over. I always get the sadness and the hurt back. Sometimes the sadness starts when I start doubting and sometimes it starts with the memory of my rips, but sometimes it just comes. What I remember has the most power over me and the terror and my doubts and the fears I hold onto and remember have the power over me because I remember the reasons for all the terror and fear and doubts. This is why I would like to forget. I would like to forget and start anew. It is

hard to have all the change that I have had and then for all the hurt to come back. I have faced a lot of change, but I am powerless to change things. I cannot seem to change and stop the sorrow and the pain and the memories from coming to me. My history is really an unbreakable pattern of wanting to have change but never being able to get that change. Every time I try to start fresh, old things come back. I cannot seem to change enough. I cannot seem to change enough to stop the old things from coming back. I cannot seem to make the right changes to stop the pattern from coming back. I cannot seem to turn around enough to make the change I need to make. Even when I think things have changed, the old things come back because there is not enough change in me to stop the old things from coming back. Change can never happen fast enough for me. It never gains a steady and fast momentum. The change never happens fast enough and the change never happens with enough momentum to push all the old ways of thinking of things out for good. I am always trying to start anew so that the old stops coming back. I put a lot of hope in change. I have friends who think I will never change. I think it may be hopeless too and then I start getting sad and that is always the beginning of the sadness and then it is only a matter of seconds before the pain and the hurt come back and all the old ways of thinking come to me and I remember all the fear and terror and rips and all the other bad things. I try to hold it back and not let the pain come back, but once it starts, once it enters into me, I have a hard time getting it out. My chest gets very tight and it is very hard for me to breathe. The pain starts by pouring concrete into my lungs and they get very tight. Things weigh heavy in me even when I do not want them to weigh heavy in me and they cause a lot of pain, and the pain pours concrete into my lungs and suppresses me and sit heavy in my chest. Most of the time I do not make it to the places I need to be because of the pain. Many times I am not able to make it to work because I get so heavy with the concrete being poured into my lungs making them very tight and then it starts to go into the rest of my body and I become as heavy as stone. I get so heavy with the concrete the pain pours into me and the concrete hardens and I get stuck where I am at because I crash down and sit for a long time and I do not make it to the places I need to get to. I get stuck where I am at because I get heavy and crash down onto the floor and sit for a long time. It is in all the heaviness that I cannot get things squared away right. I have lost a lot of jobs. I have to start over a lot. I start to feel better when I start over. When I start anew, at a new place, I start to feel much better. When I start fresh at a new place, I have a lot of hope that this time I can get away from the heaviness and the pain. I cannot seem to get things squared away right though because I always end up right back where I started because the heaviness and the pain always comes back and I cannot stop them and I cannot change that. I start having only the hurt then, the hurt that comes to me and makes me get stuck in the sadness. It always starts small and I think it will stay small and I try to keep it staying small, but then it tips over and starts to pour the concrete and my lungs get very tight because of the concrete pain pouring into them. Once my lungs get tight with the sadness, it is all over because then it just starts spreading into me. The concrete pain pours into me, spreads from my lungs into my blood and soon I am heavy with it all and have to sit down and then I can only concentrate on the hurt because

that is all I am and the hurt is in all of me. So I sit and have it out with the hurt an the pain. I let the concrete tears pour out of me. The concrete tears are hard on my skin. The concrete tears rip my flesh as they fall down my cheek. The concrete tears are not sweet like dew or refreshing rain, but they lacerate my sensitive cheek with the harshness of the world and when the concrete comes, it covers all of the inside of me and my lungs get so tight that I can barely breathe and I choke on the concrete and the pain and the harshness of the world. Eventually the pain drains out of me. Eventually something happens and I am able to chisel away the concrete inside of me and I chisel it away with hope or a heavy laugh and slowly I can chisel away the concrete poured into me that was so heavy and thick in my body. By the time I get done chiseling all the concrete out and by the time the pain drains out of me, I have gone all wrong. Then there is a lot of trouble I have to deal with and a lot of explanations I have to give and apologies I have to feign and then I have to pick up and start anew again. Every time I think no, no, no this is the last time, I will start fresh and get things right and squared away and the pain will not come back. Every day I try to get things right and squared away. Every day I try hard to get things right, but the pain never stays away for long. It is never the last time for the pain and the concrete. I try always to start over. I try always to let the new in, but it is never the last time for the pain. Then I start getting sad in my thinking about things. The way I get to thinking about all the times I have started over and never has the pain gone away but only ever comes back, is sad. I get to wondering ifi am not going to get it right ever and that I am never going to get squared away, never and not at all. That is when I start getting sad in my thinking and in my thinking I get stuck. I can never seem to start anew and that is what I need to do. I try so hard, but it never lasts very long. I never know what is going to cause the pain. It is different every time. I cannot seem to get myself out of having some kind of pain. It always comes back. The pain of my past pierces me too terribly deep. The pain of my present and my inability to change pierces me deep. I start wondering if I can ever do anything. I start thinking I will never be able to get things right or that when I do start getting things right, it will be too late. I do not think I can do anything. I start wondering if I can ever do anything and wonder if I can ever do anything right because I am trying to get things right and never can get to doing it right. Then I start getting sad in my thinking again and then there is the pain and then it starts all over again and then I have the pain and it is all over and then I know I can not do anything right at all and I lose the hope I have that I can change things. I cannot seem to make the positive change, as you call it, I need to make because of all the sadness, the thick walls of sadness that are distorting and blocking and suppressing me from getting things right and making a change.

I have a tight, blocked, fragile world of sense that is slowed down by all the sadness and the thick wall of depressions and I have a hard time getting things squared away. My mind is a very fragile glass world of sense that is always pushed off the counter it is sitting on and it is always teetering and as soon as the concrete pours into me, it pushes the fragile glass world of sense I have off the ledge and my mind of fragile porcelain ends up shattering into sharp, broken pieces. The glass world teeters and falls and crashes into

the floor and shatters. The noise of the shattering is so beautiful. The crystal tumbles through the air and sh sh sha shatt ttt ttt tat tat ttt eer sss into pieces and the sharp shards rip up the inside of my mind. The noise it makes is more than beautiful, it is so much worse the cr cr cr cra aa sh shsh sh sh it crashes on the floor in twinkling pieces and I go all wrong and into pieces. Every time this happens, I have to pick up the shards but the shards are sharp and they never fit together when I try to piece them together and the sharp edges rip me as I try to pick them up. My world of sense has become a piece of glass with a lot of gaps. There are a lot of overlaps and gaps and misapprehensions and distortions. My world of sense does not piece together very smoothly and there are sharp pieces that stick out and still cut me and leave a confused scar where I should see clearly. There are so many sharp edges and gaps, folds and misapprehensions where the sense is supposed to be smooth and straight, perfect and precise, but instead I have a rough, glued together, impure and clunky sense. I try to pick up all the pieces that have crashed. I try to pick up all the pieces with my dumpy hands and fit them together smoothly, but I can never get the pieces together very well. I cannot place things right and together like they should be. I try to put them together as perfect as I can, but the rips inside my mind never heal completely or properly and so my mind is always ripped and contorted and misapprehending, blocked and full of scars and sometimes I am just blank because I am in one of the gaps. I have a hard time putting everything together and so I have a hard time making a positive change because nothing in me is put together right and so I cannot get around to making the changes I need to make, even though I try very, very hard to.

But I have forgotten myself. I was talking about yesterday. I was talking about yesterday and wanting to speak of yesterday when we sat together in the garden discussing possibilities, and the possibility of my returning home. I remember you on that bench and me sitting wrapped up in a warm, cozy blanket like an invalid in a chair that rolled about that you had found for me so we could go out into the garden. Even then you wanted more. You want so much from me, so much talk and discussion so that we can make real progress and get to the base of my problem and problems. You were concerned I might have to stay here a long time and you want to hear everything on my mind. I looked at you, yesterday, in that garden and I looked at the white flowers surrounding you, I looked at the white flowers in the bush behind you and I thought I would have to submit to you and that is the only way to do things. I would have to submit to what you wanted and I looked at those white flowers behind you and I thought I would submit to you. I am willing to submit to the beauty of those flowers, because I can submit to the powerful beauty of those flowers, because those flowers were so beautiful and the way they surrounded you, I felt my heart flutter with joy because of the powerful beauty of those flowers, and so, then, I decided I could submit to you because you are master so I am writing this letter and I am not going to take my promise back to you that I would tell you, and I am taking part in the act of submitting this submission and you had those beautiful white flowers behind you, the power of the beauty of those flowers overcame me and swayed me to act obedient to you and so I could submit to you who sat in front of those flowers looking kind of like my father would, looking kind of like a father. I love

my father incredibly. I love my father and his gentle tone that is like your gentle tone and I love my father because he is always trying to protect me and is concerned deeply about me, just like you when you sat across from me on that bench, surrounded by those white flowers and looking so warm and open and comforting and I thought you would protect me, like my loving father, you would protect me and comfort me and so I should stop fighting you. I am always fighting something. I have to learn to stop fighting so much and listen and submit more and maybe then I will be better off. I always submit. I have learned to submit but then I started to see that maybe there was even some power to be found in submitting. You would think that by making some one submit, you would have succeeded in making them more docile and calm, but that is not really what happens; in fact, it goes quite the other way, it just makes a person more mean. each time I submit, I cut deeper into myself. I cut deep into myself. I cut so deep that sometimes I think I must be indestructible and invincible because I cut so deep but I always come back. I have always thought that was a kind of power. I have always thought the way submit and cut deep into myself and still come back was a kind of power. I always thought I was gaining in power, but I have not gained power at all. When I sat there before you with you looking like a father might and looking like you would protect and comfort me, I realized I have not gained any power at all because I still have not found a way to be in control of what happens to me because I still had to sit there before you and wait for you to decide what I should do and how I should be. I always thought that when I cut deep into myself that I was gaining power by being able to come back, I always took the dare. Submitting is like daring yourself to see how far you can cut into yourself and still come back. I always want to go further and further into my own destruction and I always destroy as much as I can, but I could never be destroyed completely, but I always thought I had destroyed enough to make every one lose their power over that self that submitted and I would come back and I always came back and I always dare some one to make me submit more just to show them I can come back even after all the destruction that I could come back out of the pits of my own destruction and dare some one to try to make me submit again. I see differently now, so maybe I have changed. Now I see there is no power in that because then I would not be here and not be forced more and more into your way of doing things and no matter how I cut into myself, no matter how I turn my violence inwards, I never gain. No matter how I cut into myself and turn inwards, there is never a point where I stop and explode; I am left to implode, like the poem says, with a whimper, a whimper and then I am left for dead with little of myself left. I never gain, I only lose with a whimper when I am always cutting into myself.

I can submit to you, story of man, as I always submit, my role in the story of man, and will do so thinking of you as a father in front of beautiful white flowers, looking so very gentle and comforting and like you are going to protect me and I know that I cannot cut into myself any longer.

I have to go to work sometimes. I have to go to work whether I want to or not. I have to work because my father tells me that I need to have a job, and working requires me to leave the house. I try to leave my house as rarely as possible. I only leave to work. I only

leave my house if I have to and I try to do that as rarely as possible. I find it hard to leave my house. Every time I leave the house, it is an ordeal for me. I do not like to have to leave the house because I always have to wear layers and layers of clothes because that is how I protect myself. Even with all the layers and layers of clothes, I feel naked when I go outside. No matter how hard I try to cast my eyes down and no matter that I wear all the layers of clothes I wear I feel naked because I try hard not to look up but then I do and I see a billboard and see that I am naked and weak or I catch a television screen in the window of the appliance store and see that I am naked and fearful and my body is poured over in a sexuality that is not mine, but one I have decided to wear. No matter how many layers and layers of clothes I wear, when I go into the world and leave my house, I am naked and weakened and I try to cover my naked body with my arms as best I can, but some how I always get thrown down and I am open and naked. No matter how many layers of clothes I wear to cover myself, it is never enough to cover all the skin. So going to work is an ordeal for me because I have to leave my house and when I leave my house I always end up stripped and naked no matter how many layers of clothes I wear. I would rather not leave my house at all. I do not like to have to leave my house to begin with because I am stripped when I leave the house no matter how many layers of clothes I wear and I am always open and sexed with a layer of sexuality that is thick with violation. I do not like to leave the house, but I have to when I go to work. So that day, I went to work and so I had to leave the house and I was covered up and bundled tightly but I still heard and saw too much and it was too much for me to bear that day, but I went to work and I worked very hard and by the end of the day I was very tired. When I pulled up and parked my car, I instantly wished I would have driven right into the big wall in front of me and instead of slowing down, speeding up. I would have liked to have felt the sound of crashing into a big wall and cracking my skull against the windshield, but I just parked the car. I work very hard when I have to work. The work just gets into me and when I work hard I feel cleaned out because working is very cathartic for me, I worked that day harder and harder because the work gripped me and I wanted to work hard. I worked so hard to try to get the violence out of me. I work so that my muscles feel it and I work until they ache. I drank a lot of coffee that day so I would feel like I had a lot of energy and so I would not get tired. I walked hard into the floor. I grabbed plates fiercely. I worked my muscles into knots. I smiled ferociously through clenched teeth and I clenched them so hard I started to get a headache, I had such an aching headache. I listened to the sound of plates hitting the counter and I listened to the ceramic, hard plates crashing against the metal counter. When I had to go into the back room, I slammed the plates down. I would stand there and listen to the sound of them scraping the food off the plate because that is such a hard, painful sound. I would help slam the plates into the dishwasher, and I did it with the hope that I had the force to break many plates. I wanted them to chip and shatter. I kept hoping that a piece of chipped plate would go into my eye and cut it or that a piece of glass plate would go into my mouth and I would swallow it. I wanted my eye to bleed and thought that if a chip of plate went into it, I could possibly go blind. On that day I kept bumping into things. I

would mistake the placement of things and my hips would run into the sharp edges of the counter and into the sharp edges of tables and my knees would bump into walls and I had all sorts of bruises. By the time the manager told me that I had to go take my break, I had bruises forming on my knees and elbows and I had a magnificent headache and my muscles were very sore. So I had to take a break because the manager told me to because otherwise I would have kept working because I did not really want to stop working, but I did and I took a break and I sat down and put my head back into the wall and I hit it so hard, I felt like I put a dent in it. I clenched my teeth tighter and I hit my head against the wall again thinking I could smash either the wall or my head and hoped I would crack one of my teeth and I sat there on my break, listening to all the background noises of customers and their voices and cooks cooking and steaming and frying and the churn of the dishwasher and all the noises rang in my ears very loudly and it made my headache so much worse and I took a deep breath and listened to all the loudness and I took all the hurt and the soreness and I meditated on it. I held myself very still in all the pain and soreness. I collected all the pain and felt all the way the pain was taking, all the pressure and weighing on top of my head and I felt the way the pain emanated from all directions and how my head felt like it was cracked, bleeding, and exploding with pain and I felt my heart thumping wildly and I felt my wrists sore from all the carrying of dishes and I felt my feet pounding, feeling like they were going to fall off and I let the bones inside me crack and bend and ache and in the pain I felt the darkness I needed to let go and in the pain I become whole and I transcended the world and transcended my body through all this pain and I became whole. The world went on around me, but I was stilled and quieted with the pain and I hit my head hard against the wall again and made it bleed to get more of that pain and I went into a bit of the blackness and rested in the calm, soothing arms of pain and then I transcended the world, but not for very long because that was the day I went to work and while on my break and no sooner had I sat down to rest and meditate on the pain and had all the caffeine trickling inside my veins, scratching me with razor sharp kitten claws into alertness that I looked up and I read or heard something and then it was all over.

I never wanted to injure myself that badly. I had no intention of trying to injure myself as badly as I did. I only did what made sense at the time. I realize I have worried a lot of people. It is nice that in people there is somewhere in them love that makes them worry. Erin was the only person who asked me anything in the way you ask me anything. I told her I was trying to drain all the veins that had covered me like ivy covers buildings. I told her I was not trying to kill myself and that she should not be worried about me. I was just trying to get off the layers of skin and blood that have covered me and consumed me. She did not see what I meant. You may not see what I mean. she did not see the violence that I had in me and that had been in me and was deep in me, the violence that covered my own skin and was heavy on my own skin. And that day I read something or heard it and it did not take me long to become disturbed by the flesh and the blood I had read or heard about. Out of the darkness came out all kind of dreadful images that I never even knew sat back there. I never realized how full of blood I was. I never realized how deep

the violence was in me until I felt the wiry body that stunk of cigarette smoke and until the wheezing was in me. Until I started wheezing with all the cigarettes and felt my long hair around my face and saw that is was stringy. My hair was stringy with all the sweat and the inside of me was depleted and the air inside me gross and my stomach was empty and rotted. Not until I looked in the mirror and my teeth were rotted by the acids of my empty stomach and coated with the stain of tar. It was like instead of living off of oxygen, I was living on monoxides and I had no air and I was gagging and I had only the wheezing of my lungs. I never noticed how deep the violence was in me until I thought that all my blood was as black as tar and monoxides nor until I noticed that my teeth were rotted from the inside out from the wear of the acids of my stomach and the remains of the teeth were yellowed. Not until I realized I was effacing myself through the thinness and the wheezing that makes me so tiny and weak and then I realized I was barely supporting myself and I became so dizzy and weak living off the thin, monoxide air; and I was so empty, and I was empty and yet felt so full because I was so empty and rotten. I was in the bathroom and there it was slinking surreptitiously into the stall next to me, tap, tap, tap, la la lor, tapping eerily, slowly on the metal divider making me afraid, making me hunted and I went running out and running more, to a home, some place I thought I knew and then I felt the blow of wind knocking me down the stairs. I must have tripped because my wiry, wheezing, dizzy body of bones went tripping or falling down the concrete stairs, pushed by the wind or the door as I left, but I probably tripped because I could barely keep upright and walk, but I know my body went tumbling down a flight of concrete stairs and I ended up with large knobs of cross-stitch cuts across my bleeding knees and the fall knocked the wind out of me because I remember I laid in the cold, wet street for a while and I remember there was gravel in my cuts and in my hair. Thinking of what I had read, what I had heard, what I had saw. I laid there for quite a time trying to remember my name and what had happened. I remember I did not have any particular name at all. I tried to remember my particular name and piece together what had happened. Thinking of only what I had read, heard, saw. I could not remember much just that I had stringy hair and there was a lot of sweat pouring out of me from all the running I had been doing because I had gotten up and I was running because I could hear the tiptoeing right behind me, near me, following me, dodging around the other people, sneaking behind trees, watching me and I could hear the tiptoeing right behind me, and I ran and hid under covers but I heard a sinister snicker outside my window and the sound of shoes pacing back and forth, like I was hunted and I could hear the harsh, raspy sound of a dark, dirty snicker and I was so afraid and hid under the covers my hands in fists beating against my head to stop the fear and trying to breath because my chest was tight with panic and I there was a snicker, the sound of snicker waiting for me, waiting for me, coming in, the sound of low snicker, caught, a prisoner in a mind and an imagination that is a part of that low snicker, always the sound of the snicker and the low voice traps me, and some how I break my stronghold and am caught vulnerable and the snicker found me and conquered me and I was ravaged and I had to wait it out and let it all be finished biting my lips until they bleed, puncturing flesh with my nails,

scratching anything I can touch, scratching my own legs, I asked him to continue, I spent the rest of the night there and woke up to myself wheezing, thin, and wiry sweating and woke up putting sharp holes into my body, drugged and suddenly what I heard, read, saw, I remembered what I had heard, what I had read and I beat myself down into a corner with my sweaty, stringy hair and wheezing through it all and it was so slight what I had read, a breast, nothing more than a breast being lopped off while being held in captivity, something slight as a breast, la la lopped off, la and I thought of what it would look like to see the veins and the fat and the blood and nice space where a breast once was and I imagine the knife was sharp, so it was a clean cut and I began to think what it would look like, a breast falling off a body to the earth, tumbling to the ground and suddenly I fell into a breast and became a falling breast and the flesh and the veins and the fat covered me and it was a big mess and I could barely breath because I was covered in all the veins and they were knotted around my throat strangling me and I remember looking at my skin that was thick and covered with blood and with veins and with ripped skin of bodies slashed, ripped, cut, stabbed, torn, and beat. It was so slight what I had read but I was suddenly covered in veins and flesh and I was falling through all the tearing and the rips and the stabs and the cuts and my own skin felt very heavy and I was covered inside out with the blood and veins of torn flesh and la le le lean le le la la and I wanted to get out of all the veins and all the falling to the ground of fat and flesh and blood and veins and my cramps started, I had such tight cramps in me, tightening up and tightening me and I has such thick heavy cramps and I thought of my blood pouring out, because cramps always meant blood was going to pour and I had those tight cramps in me and I took nails or a needle or a knife and I stabbed myself right where my ovaries are, where the cramps were the most vivid and the cramps were sighing and hurting me the most and I stabbed right where the pain was the most vivid and I added my own blood to all the blood that was in me and I watched as it poured out of me and I watched as all the flesh, blood, and veins poured out from under my skin taking all of my blood with it and all the veins and blood and skin that covered me that were inside me, poured out of me with my own blood and everything came out of me and the veins and flesh and blood and fat that covered me when inside me and poured out of me in my own blood and I felt and saw how the tears were so deep and wide. The blood was so warm as it poured out of me, it was the warmest I had ever felt to have the warm blood pouring out of me. I looked and saw my skin broken open and torn and I saw how I had made a deep oblivion for myself and I watched the blood pouring out and I was waiting for it to finish pouring out so that I could fall deep into the oblivion I had made for myself, but the blood kept coming and I watched as it drained out of me and rinsed out all of the other flesh and the blood that was mine and not mine and all the blood and flesh and skin that was in me and on top of me and I just thought la la lily la la lore la lil la tore la la lean len le la la lean lena la looking for a particular name that was mine and trying to find la lee la le aa le la lee ann lee ann lee ann and I am a particular name and I am in all the mess of veins and flesh over all the other women in me that I see that were inside me that I am and am them and I have found my name la la lean lena lee anne ann Lee Ann and that

was when I began to try to get up and I got up and saw that is raining out side and I saw the mist and I thought how nice and refreshing rain would be and I remember wandering outside and wanting to get the rain to rinse me out and rinse me so that my wounds were clean and the oblivion was clear so that I could fall into it and no sooner had I walked out did I hear the sound of a bell ringing, a bell in a tower that was chiming discordantly, in a chaotic, biting melody, like I was reliving the sound of ripped veins, knotted and tied together, the knotted notes, thrown out of harmony into a nightmare of loud, clanging tones, ringing, pounding, a painful mess in my hollow ears and then it started chiming one by one by one and it was counting moments, I thought I was counting the moments until I would die, and I fell down again, but I never died, I just bleed and the one by one by one counted out the moments one by one of my life that kept living and I lived through the dead and the flesh and the oblivion. I wear the oblivion I gave myself. I am wearing the blood that pours out of me. I lived through the oblivion and the blood and the one by one moments following each other one by one and that was and is my life, my life was moments going one by one by and I was ripped and I was pouring still and I had my oblivion and my blood, the blood that was no particular blood but every blood of my every body beat, ripped, torn, slashed, and soiled and every vein that was in me until I got it out of me and off of me by pouring my own blood and veins and I lived through all of it and I live through all of it and now I have scars and now I have to think about it more than I ever want to think about all my destruction and all my coming back and all my one by one by one moments. I have never cared too much about living and surviving. I have always just kept on surviving and I always end up living and I live one by one through all my destruction. I try to forget about it all but I look at my scars and bumps and bruises and I cannot forget. The scars and bumps and bruises do no let me forget anything readily and so I will try so hard for you sir to make the changes I need to make and I will make a positive, healthy change just like you say sir, I will pick up a hobby, as you suggested I should so that I will be able to keep myself occupied and I am devoted to making positive change for myself, I will do everything sir, that is my promise, sir, and now that I am written and spread out for you, stated and submitted for your approval, now that I have been here under the care of your task force for much longer than I would prefer, please grant me my leave, and let this homebody get home, respectfully yours,

Lee Ann

Sometimes I cannot do the bearing. I have been very hard on myself in the battling. I have done a lot of hard suffering in the battling. This hard life is a lot of hard battling and a lot of hard suffering that takes a lot of strength and in all the struggle and the suffering that I have had so hard, I am learning to do it with strength and I am always trying to get more and more strength. I seek out strength and I know I have real strength. I face the suffering and the struggle I have with strength. I face the deep suffering

and struggle I have faced with as much strength as I can muster, but sometimes I have to admit that I am weak. I never like to admit I am weak because I try so hard to face the struggle and the suffering with as much strength as I can. I am always trying to seek strength and get more of it to hand the hard struggle and the hard suffering. It is a very hard life with a lot of hard struggle and hard suffering; but I do not like to talk about suffering. Some people feel sorry for themselves and I have seen so many of those people and I am not one of them. I do not like to talk about suffering as if it was just my suffering. To talk and think about suffering and struggle is wrong of me. There are many people suffering and struggling and handling it with much more strength than I am and it is better to bear the hurt to yourself and although it is hard to carry it and carry it deeply, it is better to just not say anything when it gets down to it. I try to be indifferent to my own suffering and struggle and face the struggle with strength and stoicism like my father does. I try to be as indifferent to my struggle as possible and face it with strength and not talk about it because I do not feel sorry for myself because I do not want to belittle the suffering and the struggle. There is so much make up suffering people have and there is the suffering people try to get sympathy and pity for and while there is a lot of true, hard suffering, pity and sympathy make the suffering look like one is too weak to bear the struggle and suffering. True suffering and struggle is hard to communicate to others and you cannot look for pity or sympathy from others. Suffering is hard to make meaningful to other people without the same kind of suffering and true suffering is understood between people who struggle the same way, but it is hard to make that meaningful to anybody else. When I try to talk about my suffering, I just get ashamed and wish I would not have said anything at all because people never respond the right way and I do not like pity or sympathy. I do not know how I want them to respond, but I do not like to be made weak through other people's eyes. So I can not make any of my suffering and struggling heard because I can not say it they way I want it heard. I do not want to be treated like I am frail. It is better to not say anything about the struggle and whenever I try to say something I just get ashamed that I even said anything because I am ashamed it even bothered me in the first place and I wonder why I have such a hard time with the suffering and the struggle that I cannot be strong enough to bear it especially when I know there is a lot of struggle out there and it is not just mine and I start feeling bad that my struggle is really nothing at all and I try feeling so bad when there is a lot of struggle out there and I should not get to feeling so sorry for myself.

It is a hard battle and a hard life and there is no respite in a hard life and there is no breath or break given or had in a hard life and I know it is best to bear it all with strength even though sometimes I feel so weak like I

cannot bear the struggle or the suffering and then I feel ashamed at my weakness. I try always to be strong. This is a hard life with a lot of hard struggle and I have to have the strength to bear it and I know that. When the suffering is deep, it takes a lot of strength to do the bearing. I have always said that I am a woman. To be a woman is to deal with the deep suffering with strength. Sometimes I have deep suffering and I treat it with weakness and make myself weak. That is not a very womanly thing to do; that is a very foolish, childish thing to do. A real woman takes deep suffering and bears it with strength. There are many kinds of women and many kinds of men and men are strong and women are strong and men are weak and women are weak and humans are strong and humans are weak and everything in between but I have always through to be a real woman is to be strong and that women are the stronger human beings. I am learning to become a woman and bearing it all with strength.

Every one has struggle and suffering and some people just have it lighter than others, but every one suffers and struggles. Every one suffers and struggles but no one seems to have my kind of suffering because no one suffers the same. I suffer alone and find it is hard to bear sometimes and my suffering makes me all the more alone but at the same time more like everybody else. It makes me all the more like everybody else, but it makes me all the more alone. I do not like talking about suffering and struggle. I like to keep it mine and have it alone. It is better to keep to yourself and have your suffering and although that is a lonely place to be, I do not want to make my deep suffering look light of and I do not want to show that I am sometimes weak in the facing of deep suffering and struggle when I should always be strong. I am trying to keep the suffering to myself until I can learn how to face the hard struggle and suffering with the strength I need to have and until I can understand my suffering and keeping it quiet so I am not ashamed or getting sympathy or pity. I wish I was not always so all with my suffering and sadness. I am so all with my suffering all the time. I wish I was not having to have to be so all, but the suffering comes to me and I cannot stop it and then I always have to have it out with the hurt. Then I am the suffering and my suffering is all of me and always the suffering that is all of me is had alone and the suffering is in all of me and my suffering is all suffering and all suffering is my suffering.

Round Two: Shannon

Now momma always did keep a close watch over me once I budded, never letting me stray too far away from her in the stores, pulling me out of softball when she felt there were too many men in the stands looking at me and the other girls, stuff like that. As soon as those breasts appeared, she knew it was her job to keep the hounds at bay, because *men are animals and you had best be watchful and always suspicious* she told me, inflecting her advice in the tremble of the deep down fear of god I was supposed to be having; sure, I heeded the warning, but I never gave it much thought.

She was not there that day, at that particular time, so we lucked out. I remember that is was cool, cold, scary; where angels dare not tread. I remember the two boys, neighborhood friends were over for the afternoon. I remember I saw them whisper to one another, I remember the pause as they separately mulled it over, and then I remember one, very abruptly, asked. I did not hesitate. I lifted off my shirt and took off my bra. I remember liking it. I liked standing before them; and standing in front of them made such a difference; I mean, I had caught myself in the mirror in the bathroom and all, but I could dart from the image; in front of them, I was able to stand with a confidence of who I was; in front of them, I was less ashamed, and more intrigued.

It was cold downstairs in the basement, so cold it made my nipples incredibly tight and poking out and I remember my body shook, partly because a draft came through the poorly sealed window was so chilling, but I shook mostly with nerves and dread. I did not know what I had become, and that was what shocked me the most. I started touching one of my hard nipples, right in front of them, rubbed a circle around the areola and then pinched the tip pretty hard and got really turned on. I looked at them and told them to take off their shirts, too; I told them to take off their pants. They refused, I suppose they were scared, but I was not; and by then I became so curious about the whole set up in a way I never had been before. I let them watch me as I took off the rest of my clothes, spread my legs,

and played with myself. That was so hot; I mean, having the boys watching me, but afraid, not taking one step closer, but still struck by me, watching, and I could feel them getting slimy inside and feeling that in them, made things even hotter for me. I kept on going, and just when I thought I was close to the big deal, was precisely when my mother opened the door and yelled down to us that dinner was ready; I remember the boys sprinted and then dashed up the stairs, while I was left alone to scramble for my clothes, get dressed, hurry up, not lagging too far behind, and doing it collected, so nothing would look suspicious to my mother. I went up the stairs as calm as anything and as we all sat silently around the table, near each other, squirmy, not making eye contact, mumbling requests for the butter, more juice, I remember being so happy, so interested in what I had begun; it was while I was sitting there eating that I slowly came into the possibility of myself; in the brief time I had rubbing myself, I woke up out of the dark ages and into my light, into my territory.

Later that night, while the bath water ran, I looked at myself in the mirror as I slowly undressed and thought how good my body looked, how beautiful my breasts and stomach turned to hip, and I soon threw off my red underwear, continuing the days venture, exploring more and more, hoping the sound of rushing water covered up all the deep breathing and the sound of my hand running against my own flesh, my muff and puff of hair, and I worked hard to swallow my noises so that momma would not hear me. I remember I was so nervous; but the wet, but the depth, and the wet held me through until I got the glory, hallelujah.

I sat that night in the tub, lights turned off, the moon streaming in, the water still, feeling raw, my mind fresh, but fried with excitement, and I was thinking in purples and moist greens. From that night on, I always let the water run and run and run as I sat on the tile floor moaning; and afterwards, I would take long, long baths, examining the body laid out before me, so I could see it, it's curves, it's freckles, and then really seeing it, closely inspecting it, really seeing it after understanding it.

That all happened during the height of a cold, cold winter. I matured over the course of the spring and summer, I spent that time building a relationship with myself, I learned my first lesson; that all love, respect, and appreciation has to come from the inside in order to have any love, respect, or appreciation coming in from the outside; I thought I was set to go out into the world; and the next fall, I started high school.

In a degrading environment, it is easy to lose sight of beauty. That is the second thing I learned. I found a boy to teach me that, soon enough. My first kiss was in his truck. He dropped me off two blocks away from my house, so mother would think I walked home from school. We went swinging together in parks at night. He was nice. I remember the lightness

of flirting, the flightiness of winks and blinks and laughs, mixed with that nervous drop in my stomach when he touched me, making me speechless with wonder. In his hands, I always got such a horrible case of goose bumps and I shook violently. He would laugh. It took some time, but soon enough, I grew comfortable and my skin started staying warm with him and not getting so bumpy. I was ready to push boundaries, to start questioning things.

I cannot speak highly of the first time with him, or the next few times, and soon he stopped calling. Well, the deed is done, I thought. I thought he would always be there for me and we would always talk. I was trying back then to get his affection and thought sex would get it for me; and somehow with him, I forgot about that inner love I told myself to have, I was always looking for his approval and I remember when he denied me that and stopped talking to me, I felt I had lost everything. I should have never trusted him. I should have known there was only one thing keeping us together. I should have known he was not going to call me anymore. I admit it, I admit it, I did cry over him for a couple of dark days, wailing into the plush of my pillows to silence the ache; but I stopped soon enough with the promise that I would never shed any more of my tears for another person.

I cannot speak highly of the second guy either. I never did have the sense to listen to other people; I always have had a hard head. I would argue *nah, nah, he is not too old for me* besides, I would think, this is my shit, my life, I can take care of myself. He told me he would take care of me; and he did, for a few weeks anyway. At least, at least, you know, he took me to dinner and I think he brought me a daisy once. Sometimes I cannot believe the decisions I make; but then I look back and try to make myself regret, I cannot. It takes a lot of wrong decisions to start making the right ones. Looking back, I am glad that I did it *my* way, that I was so hard headed; I mean, that is how I started to learn myself; what I could handle, what I could not handle and I learned it all independently, all my lessons were my own; so I figured, I gained even though I also lost.

I cannot speak highly of the third man; mother found out about that one. She yelled and hollered like all get out; and I laughed in her face, because by then, I was too emotionally scarred and too ashamed of letting myself be taken advantage of by another, treated as means to ends that were different than my own desired ends and his ends had so clandestinely, so behind my back, yet right in front of my face; and I thought sure one other "her" was not so bad, but to find out it was a whole bunch of hers, well that just made my stomach hurt so bad, and I was so sick inside to even care that my mother was upset; she seemed a triviality. Her criticizing me and calling me words that no woman should call another woman, only

made the act seem subversive and somehow her taunts, to my sinister heart, helped redeemed my actions to myself; of course she was upset, angry because she was thinking I would make her exact same mistakes, so I forgave her, but what she said is unforgivable; and it did not even help the worst thing of all, because by this point in time, I could not even touch myself anymore without feeling hurt and it was not even pleasurable because I was so far away from myself and had thrown away so much of myself that it would take some time to gather and to restore. I got so tough in me, I remember at night thinking, reciting, chanting, the only one who ever is going to take care of me is myself and I had better just accept I was going to have to do this thing alone and on my own and not bother with men or man or any one.

My mom was right, though. There is not much difference between man and beast, woman and beast, either; and just because people talk, have language, well, that does not really make them a human being, a human is a person that can say what they mean; when the words that come out do not sound like a bunch of movie lines and pick up lines and telling me what I want to hear lines and just plain lies, but instead an honest assessment, the word and the deed, the word and the intention actually line up, and that is when you can judge the merit of a human and see them as courageous person, otherwise, you have an animal that happens to speak, a beast with the capability of being human, but not becoming one. I learned back then to honor the integrity of the word I speak, the things I say, and I always keep it real.

I was sixteen when I met Joe. He is probably the first person I ever listened to, because he spoke, offered: advice, thoughts, questions, I longed to hear. He showed me everything I was missing and did not even know I wanted, conversations, lying in some one's arms for hours, telling stories and reading books together, and sharing; just sharing time and having that time together, making our time together collective and making things between us reciprocal. He was so sweet and jovial, everything made him happy. I remember how we always danced together. He would always have gifts to give me. Most of the gifts he gave always reflected him, an extension of him, but sometimes, when he was good, I saw the us in his gifts, the two of us and our one; and I learned to give too, to be generous; I learned the importance of sharing myself, but also knowing how to conserve, when to give away and what part to give away; and I saw that all the taking is selfish, and all the giving is the most selfish selflessness. I have so many artifacts from us that I still hold on to, music tapes he made for me of our favorite songs, books he bought me, newspaper clippings, and all sorts of fancy junk we picked up along the way. We had a good time, Joe and I.

And it was through Joe, that's right, through Joe I met his sister Lee Ann and, de facto, Shannon, since the two were always together and always stuck in Lee Ann's house because of her strict father. Luckily, I was able to change that; I figured out if Joe was with us, her father did not mind her leaving. Soon enough he stopped noticing, or stopped caring, that Joe was not with us. So I found some girls, the first girls I ever had; we had other firsts together, first speeding tickets; Lee Ann bawled uncontrollably for probably an hour; and first detentions or suspensions; on nice days, in the fall or spring, we would skip school because it seemed like a better idea to get doughnuts and hang around downtown, talking, dreaming, laughing in the fresh air, but we did one too many times, authorities were called, and we had ourselves some trouble, but the trouble went away soon enough and we laughed about it fondly soon enough, once Lee Ann's dad let her hang out with us again.

When I think back about the girls and I, I remember most fondly the traditions we had, like Sunday nights, we would get out of the city and watch the trains go by, kicking our feet in the stones, waiting for the next one to appear, sometimes, two would happen at once, going in opposite directions, which was real exciting; or going to our favorite diner Tuesday mornings before school, watching movies and cooking dinner together on Wednesday nights. I remember how it was good to have each other's company, especially while eating lunch, the ostracized three at our same table in the back of the cafeteria. I remember, too, the adventures we took. Shannon was dead set on always finding some place for us to go, new cities to see, festivals to attend, rock formations to visit, cemeteries to glance upon, dilapidated buildings to crawl around, some history museum with their proudly displayed pilgrim pictures *look, look at their homesteads and porches and big guns and men with big moustaches guarding their big families looking so full of fortitude, looking so white* and Lee Ann would only have to sneak out a giggle before I would burst out laughing-- with absolutely reverent mocking, I might add; we would always stick out no matter where we went, loud and boisterous as we tended to be or just plain unfamiliar to local, small town crowds *Lee Ann! Go ask that guy for some sparklers for us; if all three of us approach him, he might run; she smiled*, she was unassuming enough, so people liked her, Shannon and I would just stand back laughing at our marginality.

Shannon always wanted to do anything that took us far on down some road; we would often go without plans, just to drive, but we would always end up witnessing something magnificent, people flying kites or flying their model airplanes or the full moon from the bluffs or walks on the banks of rivers; she was searching for something interesting, something previously unknown to her, always searching while speeding past all the buildings, landmarks, mile markers, transposing pandemonium over the quiet sleepy

streets and homes, while passing through the country and bucolic slumber, she would honk to remind people they were still alive; our minds flying as fast and as forceful as the car could go, street lights hastening past, which were really the Christmas lights we hung from pole to pole leaving behind us a trail of festivity; she was always documenting her surroundings, through pictures, through writing, through video, trying to document what happened, what it looked like; all while trying to push further, pushing rules and testing the limits of people, places, her self, and in the speed, the helm under the weight of her heavy foot, it never seemed like there were any; but, reflecting back, it is a different story; I see now that we really did have few options; I mean none of our families had money, not really, and none of them went to college; I don't even think they had ever left home, not really; I think now our lives were defined all too much by the place, by the situation we found ourselves in; but back then, for us, there were no precedents, no known precedents anyway, no tangible ones that showed us a different life, we had so much freedom because we were left to define ourselves in the vast space of the undefined, and Shannon always operated under the assumption we had our own travails and travels to invent, and so we had better get to inventing, she taught me one can move, maneuver, maybe not make a decision, but a move to make openings and opportunities, and she taught me freedom is seeing as many moves and options as one can, strategies, and then getting to a place to act on making those options a possibility, a reality, but I think now, there were so many obstacles to overcome, obstacles that are larger and older and higher than I ever realized and my life formed itself before I could even catch it, change it, and even though I take full responsibility for my choices even though they look fated, I wish I had the drive to try to look at my life, to have foresight, I wish had the sense then to take a step back, a step outside myself and looked at what could change, what I could have changed; and Shannon tried, but I missed her message then.

I remember seeing all the teenagers around me as a bunch of fading stars, bright for a moment, a spark, a different want, but then the decision, soon their parent's lives become solidified as one's own and each generation of conformity builds an invisible wall around the boundaries of the neighborhood, then the city, then the state, one that is so impenetrable that even when you try to leave, tired to leave, one never could, everyone always ends up coming back, like there is big magnet in the ground, pulling one back; because we were given paths by the society around us, one of them, the pomp and circumstance of homecoming kings and queens, cheerleaders and football players, but any one could see where that was going, most girls ending up pregnant by the time they were eighteen, the father broke, but loaded with intentions, the boys and some girls filtering

into local jobs as store attendants or at local farms or in factories; some boys would attend the state university and come back to average business jobs, a doctor, maybe; perhaps one of the more industrious girls would open a bridal shop, start a dance studio or art classes, but everyone would spend their adult life with their pride and joy on raising girls and boys and their glories waged on the winning season of the high school football team; and the other, most prominent one, of the streets, the no good path of causing and getting into all sorts of trouble, which I followed; and I am still here, stuck in this town, stuck being poor, and just plain stuck; and I see now, it was Shannon, who, in every drive we took, every new place we saw, taught me the only place I will ever go is the place I take myself and the worst thing of all was to get settled, stay comfortable. She had such fervor, she worked hard, at school, at home, with us, trying to look beyond the apparent options she was given, trying to create a space for herself that was different, and she did it with a bit of imagination and determination, and I think of her now, and how she took it on faith, took a chance, a gamble, she could make herself something in the world, that she could become whatever she wanted to be; it is for that reason Shannon leaving and going on to school has always been so amazing to me; like she left to do more, to make her life big, something few of us, none it seems, can do, could do now, now that we have stayed; and here she is, coming back; the magnet is too strong for even her; when she called and told me she was returning, I was shocked.

I remember the day Shannon left, Lee Ann and I showed up at the airport, her miserable pep squad, and sitting there waiting for her departure, while Shannon held the wilted flowers that we picked for her; I remember sitting there and I felt left out; I had barely graduated high school, Lee Ann did average and there was that shining star, the head of the class taking off in a big shiny airplane; I remember seeing her plane fly away, while I stood, trapped; so Lee Ann and I turned back around and heading to her house. Damn, I was jealous, upset. Lee Ann and I sat around and felt sorry for ourselves for the rest of the afternoon, we ate a lot of chocolate that day, and barely laughed; I finally realized I had a life I could call my own, too; a life that was going to be much different from Shannon's, and I accepted that.

Shannon, Lee Ann and I knew that real friends never leave one another and distance would never damage or erase the bond we had, so we knew we always had each other, always, but still, Lee Ann and I, looked so forward to seeing her again soon. That afternoon Lee Ann and I thought about how she would be back for her holiday break or at least next summer; but she never came for the holidays, and we knew then to not expect her for summer; she had left us behind, we were dumped and practically forgotten,

Lee Ann and I would receive rare letters with few details, as if she wrote them grudgingly, not out of her desire to speak to us; after awhile she stopped bothering with communication all together; and since there was not much for Lee Ann and I to do without Shannon and without her there was a dynamic missing, her and I began to fade, too; we continued to talk, but rarely; we were not interested in the same things anymore; because it was not long after Shannon left that something had changed in me; inside me something tumultuous happened, there was black flash, an origin, and then an upheaval, all sorts of rocks shifting and colliding, making in me a whole new and different terrain. Suddenly, whenever I would go out, run errands for my mother, everywhere I went, I attracted some kind of attention; it just took one glance, one glance at the waiter, one glance at whoever, and I would have a phone number, a date, plans; or I would get invited to parties and meet even more boys; soon I had boys calling me left and right. I was it; I was hot shit in my white t-shirt, blue jeans, pink underwear, walking, rather gliding along feeling something all sorts of eternal feminine glowing out of me, something trickling around me with magic, coming from my hips, in the round of my ass, in the tight flesh of my tits; and I found myself in a different position than I had ever known, of trying to make time for all the men that I kept finding and kept finding me. I had learned earlier in my life I could be penetrated, and could be hurt deeper than I knew I could hurt, deeper than I knew I could feel; but, I had a shift and began to realize I could choose what penetrated me; that I could make my own terms and conditions; and I began to see people just needed some direction, and I learned to give it to them.

I lived in a perpetual summer, my insides melting, my skin melting in the air that felt like syrup, rich, sweet, and thick with sex, thick with the turning over and opening and caressing of thighs, and I dripped with sweat in the rich, vicious humidity that surrounded me, my skin always moist and dank, drenched in pleasure. The sun was always warm and glowing, and the earth rained sugar and the sappiness filled me with such a sticky desire and boys talked as sweet as honey with their plump lips and eyes hanging half open, lazy with desire; hands touching you just right, running their fingers through my hair, playfully scratching my head, tickling my neck; the inside of me melting and I could never get enough, could never cool the heat deep down inside me that sat in the back of everything. I was always panting, begging, hot; those days, I went on a rhythm, one that pounded deep down in me and I followed it, and everything went smoothly, slide right into place and I always made the right move, said the right thing, showed up at the right time, or he showed up at the right time *he came! He came to my porch and you came to me and he is going to be with me and not any other girl; take me, ooh , take me as I am, this wretched creature, weak in the knees, wanting you, have me, tell me, yes I*

know I am wonderful, beautiful, so take me now and we have each other and you, man enough, man enough to keep me a woman, and men, sitting across from them as they talked, and I always winking, winking, as they spoke as the authority figures on everything and something and I smiled and winked and then they would finally stopped the talking and we could get on with more important matters; and maybe I just went for rough guys with a sensitive lining, but most of the guys always were trying hard to stay a man, not be a girly man, even though they never fully felt, never saw in them, the man they were supposed to be and half the boys I saw had far more style and sense about accessories than I could ever muster and I am underneath you now and that will keep things real tight and close and ooh ooo oh o don't stop don't stop, stay here, stay a little longer, rest, come back, get up oo ooh oo.

Back in those days, my hands were clammy and I was deep in these primordial desires, as if all the heavy, hot desire came down through all the pleasurable centuries and exploded in me, because I was larger than myself in desire, I always wanted more, more, more and no one person could satisfy me; I had it good then and I just have to laugh at all the late nights and the giggling and the back seats, back stairs *girl, you are scandalous, you having one going out the back, while the other comes in the front; something else; and there is more? Yeah, honey, I always keep a couple on the back burner and sneaking out, the wearing in and out of new couches, all the slip-ups and darting in and out of lies oh no, shit, shit, she is not supposed to be here, quick hide, hide, real quick, for only a minute, hide under there*, but I always looked out for the other ladies, I would walk out not thirty seconds later because I would never let another girl be mislead on my account, plus, I was always looking for trouble, wanted to see the fighting, and sometimes I felt bad, it is always hard to see a person some one cares about deceiving them, hurting them, but then, no one can really stop being the way they are, desiring, lustful; seeking many, not one; and it always hard to realize what you think you own, what you think is your property turns out to have a mind of his or her own and could never be solely yours and people are selfish, I certainly was back then, I could never see myself tied or connected to anybody, I was out there on my own, getting what I wanted and all I wanted, the best I knew how and I never thought there was anything wrong with that; plus, I never saw the good in trying to make a relationship, trying to control or hold some one down, keeping them tied to me, especially when there is so much out there to explore, so many things to learn, no two people can give each other everything they need, it is impossible to try to live like that, I always thought; and, maybe just because I was lucky, smart, I found people would come back to me on their own will, make themselves exclusive to me if I wanted. I never did have to scramble to get some one to come to me or fight with a person and I never tried to make a person do what they didn't

want to do; I was convinced back then that men served me and damn if not one of them challenged me because I just had to ask, to say, to tell, and I would have.

I learned to hold on to a good feeling for as long as a good feeling could last, because that is what I found I could expect from another person, a good feeling, which may last a night, a few weeks, sometimes longer, just depending. We are given brief stills, quick snapshots of each other's beauty and we are given only brief moments to expose yourself to another's thoughts, their life; and each person showed me something different and new, for each some body has something no one else does, says something differently, moves differently, laughs heartily, a different way to phrase it, and any little, minute personality traits, minute deviations are the beginnings of a new world, something previously enclosed, overlooked; but, sht, I am sugar coating it, most people have one good story, one quirk, one really original joke and after that they are a lost cause, so you are forced to narrow in and enjoy that one thing; and I often find myself wondering exactly how desperate I am; sometimes you have to take what you are given, other times, you can afford to be choosy, so I learned to take what I was given sometimes and do the best I could with what I had, just like my mother always had to do.

Ahh; but it's true, in this world, there are only brief times for two people to line up and match before the change, brief seconds to find each other and have the chance to reflect each other while the clouds part and the sun shines on the divide, but soon enough, a storm comes, wind, time, change, blowing us fast, so quickly and lives never blow in quite the same way, and it is rare to find someone who changes like you, with you; and interest fades so rapidly; so you have that brief time you had better enjoy; and I could never slow myself down for others, sometimes people like to hold on some of those moments and let them drag on past their due; and sometimes I could not get fast enough to catch up with myself, because in me some moments still lingered, never seemed to last long enough and those were the painful times, missing a person, I would start dreaming them along with me to fill the space they left in the place of their body, and I would be sad until I could get back into the real, forget them, find another; and sometimes things end just right, the ecstatic frenzy of a new beginning winds down and we, he and I, I and he, shared a common end and there was a simple hug goodbye.

I met Tracy entirely by coincidence while waiting for the bus one day. We became fast friends and from that first second we had an understanding that we never lost. I was so fascinated by her, of course because she was stunning, gorgeous, but also because she was more wild than I was, a dash more crazed, and a whole lot more spirited, and I think that is really what

attracted me most to her. I started hanging out with her and her friends, whom all gathered at the club she danced at; what was that place called? Right, right The Bittersweet; and doesn't it all boil down to that, this faint life, a continual fluctuation between the thin gradations of the bitter and the sweet; and sure there is some deriving pleasure from the pain, but this is different, like I am starting to think happiness, the one I seek even, is at best a pained bliss; that place was such a dive, but it was always lively and full of all sorts of characters, some interesting, some just sleazy, but all low down and grimy. I had a good time and all, going there, but I only went at first because of my obsession with Tracy; but she was hard to pin down, hard to get her attention, because she was always busy with some one or working or kissing it up with some boy; for the longest time our conversations were limited in time and scope, because I was sidelined, relegated to her back burner, and I accepted that, and started making friends with her friends, but, to my chagrin, I was never getting closer to her. The crew sat at the back table, played cards and chatted, we stayed away from the hullabaloo and sequins, I kept my back to the stage, I could not stand seeing Tracy doing her job, to her it was just a body, to her it was seen as an asset, the quickest and easiest way to make money, and this work was something she had been doing for some time now, *I got kicked out of my house and had to figure out some way to survive on my own and this is what popped up she would shrug, sometimes it does not even feel like mine, there is that damn landlord always coming around, begging for his rent money for my use of my own body*, well, she made the most of it and she looked good, there was no doubting that she always looked best, she had class, I mean, relatively and what else was she going to do, anyway; in many ways I was in the same place as she was and I certainly was not going to go to school or get a real, decent job, either.

I slowly became one of the guys, instead of with one of the guys; I met Luke, an old friend of Joshua's and we got to talking one night and he liked me, said *I like the way you think*; he had a something for me to help him with, he was established, so he took me on. I liked being around Luke, he was older than me, more sure, yeah, established. Just being around him taught me a lot, mostly about staying cool, not letting things get to me; he was deep down cool, he looked tough, so tough, but really he was this laid back, nice guy who never rushed, never hurried, never got agitated about much of anything; I always strove, but could never get as deep down cool as him; that was his. I can never remember what he really looked like, I have only the image of him, sort of Socratic, distant, not quite of his body, but not motivated against it, just beyond it or at one with it, he never belonged to any place or time; yeah, yeah, he was a dash of Socrates mixed with a whole bunch of old southern man sitting in overalls on some green hump, hunched over his crawfish, enjoying the air around him, enjoying his catch,

taking the fish apart slowly, cleanly thinking it over, all on his own time; that was Luke. He was like a brother, almost like a father to me. He always had my back and I was lucky for that, he gave me validity, people trusted me more because they knew we were close, and no one messed with me because they would not dare mess with him.

I lived fast, thought fast, and learned fast, and I quickly saw ev-e-ry-on-e is out for themselves, as swindlers or thieves, all out playing the game *don't hate the player, hate the game* and the only rule is to take and take and take what you are given, anything and all you can get, as much as you can, and do whatever you can get away with; it was up to the individual to know their game, the way they played it, their strategy and the only judge of right and wrong was if you won or lost. I kept the books in order, kept the money counted, Luke did other things, the people things that kept them coming to me, he found the ways to collect, he made the deals. I learned quick that all rules and laws in this world are arbitrary; established rules are meant to be broken, undermined, ignored; as an old hand James taught me while playing cards one night, you have to understand why the rules are there before you can break them; and I learned the rules really do only apply to some. I learned that interactions with people require a certain sensitivity to them, there is a delicate balance that must be struck, and you better hope you don't find them in the wrong mood and rub them the wrong way, that it is the most efficient way to lose an advantage one might have, it is easy, too easy to lose their trust, and I learned to be equally disinterested as others and to never, ever joke where they take seriously. I learned how to tell stories, which gave me the ability to be in two, three places at once, depending on who you talked to; I was forced to be a quick thinker, and I had an agile mind, a real fast talker, which was my talent, every one is given one skill, one thing, you have to learn that and fly with it; I was a regular trickster, too, I knew how to play them, as long as I could outsmart the other person, if I just thought a little more, I could get anybody and had my way. I remember one time we owed Johnny some money we didn't really have but that Roy owed us almost as much; I explained to Johnny, that *I have no debt to you, see*, because I was owed the money by some one else; I was in the clear; I had zero, the two canceled out, so it wasn't my debt to him at all and so he couldn't ask me for it; and he wasn't sure, and of course thinking alone won't do it, I had to know where the sympathies lie; also, I then said, the guy with your money is Dino's younger brother and then he was convinced him; I always listened to what people had to say, even though it was mostly uninteresting, but I knew there was a score to be settled between the two, thanks to Roy running his damn mouth so much; and I knew that young blood could make up for an old scar; and so I got him, and he went after Roy and I stayed clear of the whole business and got

a lot of weight off of my back that I could not afford to have. I always did know how to spot a sucker; but I also knew when the coast was clear and knew what I could get away with; and I anticipated well, still do, and I see quick, quick enough ahead of me, to the side of me, quick enough to judge the time, the speed, the space so I never have to stop for stop signs or red lights or nothing, just coast right through, untouched; and that is the way I always operated back then and I always made out fine, unscathed, on top, never getting caught, never grazed, never out done and taking the biggest cut, right along with Luke.

Soon enough, Tracy and I came around to each other, *you and I speak each others language, similar* she said, *you see things for what they are, you are not tricked, don't fool yourself like the others*; but we were not really that much the same at all, she lacked a self somehow, that is the only way I can say her, I mean she was somebody, she had a good mind on her shoulders, but it would never amount to anything, she was empty somewhere in her where she needed to be full and never put herself together, she was too stifled in her to listen, stuck being little more than attraction, even on the inside, but I didn't learn that until later; at first, to me she was lightning, she could throw any one for a loop, she was clever; she transformed reality, manipulated it so cleanly, so precisely, so perfectly, to say she was a lie, a deception is too simple, lies are had at a distance and by simple minds, she would be right in front of you transforming herself, becoming what a person wanted to see, because she knew people and their ability to look at only the appearance and not the reality underneath, she was always playing the role, whatever role coy, seductress, the aggressor, a fool, whatever role demanded, and I never could figure out what she gained from it other than it was her art, what she had mastered in her interaction with others; and when I watched her I learned different than she probably meant to teach, I saw the best way to explore is to dig, unearth assumptions people had and brought with them, because the assumption always bends the reality that follows; and then I saw the most interesting was the deviations, the quirks in one that made them see just a little differently, it made all the difference. So I always did try because of her in my own mind to suspend judgments and rather than try to strangle out a certainty, I would instead watch, just watch to take nothing as given and patiently wait as a reality emerged and see how that challenged all that I had held the world to contain before I saw again.

I remember other things; all of her wigs, costumes, disguises, personas; in her arms, I was never with the same woman, never with the same man, we always switched roles, exchanged clothing, taking each other on, always intertwined and mixed in each other's crowd; between the two of us, we had so many names, aliases Eleanor, Petunia, Grace, Chad, on so many state I.d.'s and licenses, we lost track of who we were, we were just being

and were nothing more. We had both lived so much by then, *we have lived hard* she would say and *look, look how tender we are deep down as she was stretched out before me as I slid one of my hands around her hips, as she whimpered, I nearly cried; no one ever kisses me like you do, I can never explain it other than it is sincere* and I still cannot figure out if I ever saw her, if really saw her, or how much of myself I only saw.

For it's intensity, the affair was short lived. I think both of our excitement was in the getting and once we had and had as much as we did of each other, we lost our interest *man, Shannon, you are annoying me* she said one day and I could only say, *ditto*; but we still made plans together, set aside some time for just us every once in a while; and it was going to be her, Joan, and I that were going to leave this city for once and for all; hit the road, we said, we did not care where, we flung names about, Austin, New York, San Fran, somewhere Oregon, we all had friends we could see, in some city, somewhere, maybe some small town on the coast and we were going to go, we just need to get our monies together; I had it all figured out, written down, added up, all the costs for travel, deposits, a few months rent just in case, money for groceries, bills until we could find jobs; we decided we were all it in on our own, split the costs three ways and it us up to each of us to make and save up our portion of the money, to gather what we individually needed and wanted; and for a day or two, it was really in the works, the plans were taking flight, the goal was set and we were going; by the end of the third day, the enthusiasm was lost, none of us had the real desire to leave or else we lost it as quickly as it came; and it wasn't more than a week later that Tracy started "losing" the tip money she made because she was buying something precious, jewels and powders (sht. Now, don't ask me how I know what glittered for her in mirrors); and then Joan, spoiled brat, Grandpa always going to take care of her lazy ass Joan, could not keep a job for nothing and kept getting fired *I told them, told them up front that I would not be coming in at eight that they could expect me around ten if I felt up to it, maybe ten thirty and still they got mad when I was not there "on time" which meant their time, because if they would have listened, they would have expected me at ten, ten thirty*; and I had my trade and made my money, all I needed, but I was not going to go it alone, and I was having fun here; so I stayed, we stayed, and the group stayed together and things stayed the same, we did the same old things as always; the same old Joan and I getting ready together in the early evening; Tracy and I laughing endlessly at George's new girl, who was always some nails done, fake fur wearing woman, our word for his girls were sorry, just plain sorry; and one of them named Ashley, right, Ashley and she stuck with us after her George affair and she wasn't so bad after all, but she was the only new addition we ever had, the mainstays and the core of the group from day one was Joan, Tracy, and I, Luke, George, Mark,

Joshua, but then again, the table was always switching with people's cousins or old friends from back in the old neighborhood, and some of the other regulars at the club; and Joshua and I played pool and I spent many an hour having to listen to Mark with his glowing face talking on and on about his bright ideas and how he would soon be cashing in *I am going to make it big soon, I am making the connections, things are in the works, I have big dreams you'll see, with a little bit of discipline and work, the promised land will be at hand, the tracks are laid down and I am the conductor going to ride my tracks, yeah, I got a feeling in me, those tracks will lead us all to paradise and I will take you all with me*, man, people sure can talk a whole bunch.

We lived rough, called it strength, even street-smart, but knowing all along it was foolish business we took on, but it was exciting, and it got our adrenaline pumping, our instincts charged, and we were always acting, going on the feeling, and never thinking; we were nothing but a regular bunch of scam artists, small-time drug dealers, gamblers, cheaters, and dead beats, but not criminals, because the only crime is getting caught; and we had a good time and we were a family, but better than family because friends are the family you can choose, the ones more aligned to your values and humors; and like family, we withstood a lot of crap from each other, but we stuck through it and the only thing that really changed was who was sleeping with who and who was talking again and who stopped talking to who and the whys of the argument; at night, the club was our haunt, but on Tracy's nights off, we went to other bars, to parties; and late nights we would end up at Joshua's house or Luke's, we all preferred Luke's because Joshua's stunk and the place was filled with his bad attitude about the things, there is nothing to do about those types who always feel wronged by some one and him and Mark would sit in that house and stew up the worst kind of anger and fill it up with a bad feeling, besides Luke had better music and we often spent the wee hours of the morning over there; during the days we were left to ourselves, to take care of our business and personal matters. It was a life, it was fun and everything worked out real well for us because life was a party, we were always in high spirits, but we were always hitting new lows, especially on those particularly inebriated nights, which were most nights, I would spend all the money I had on the next round, more rounds; we would all be trying to out drink each other; the drive home was always bad, in Luke's caddy, Joan in backseat, in the center, emptying out all the belongings in her purse and vomiting in it, while my head was out the window, George with a girl on his lap, kissing each other, while Tracy would be singing the harmony to Luke's low guttural tune and he would be weaving across the road, driving slowly, however, so that I wouldn't get puke on his car and Joan in his car; we would finally get to Luke's house and Joan I running in to the bathroom; another place we always ended up

together; but she was a bit of a nut and worse when drunk; she would start yelling at me about something old school, but something she was still bitter about somewhere in her; *why didn't you let me borrow your black dress; that was four months ago? I told you that one was special, it was expensive and my mother gave it to me special; you never trust me, just say it, because that is really why you would not let me; that's right, I don't trust you, I don't, because you don't think things through* and then she would get angry even though she knew I was egging her on, but she felt had and would shut up; but it would not take long until she was back with something else *how come you never introduced me to Michael. You know I liked him; why didn't you say something, I didn't know nothing about you liking him, besides that guy was an idiot; see there you go, how are you going to decide that for me. You always think you can decide things for me; no I don't; well, I did like him; well, then why didn't you tell him that* beginning to puke again in the toilet as Joan passed out on the floor.

It was one groggy morning when I woke up and felt something inside me was off, but I went out anyway, and when I was out, I found I could not speak as quick as I normally could, I kept tripping over my mind instead of having the usual flow; next think I knew I had a bunch of money stolen from me, which is unthinkable; and strange that I was not on my guard and had that happen, but then I figured in my head it all balanced out, this time just not in my favor; but even more strange was that I didn't have the usual protection, the clout, because no one would touch somebody in with Luke; but then I realized a new generation had come and Luke, our crowd, our connections were old news and no longer had our privileges. Obsolete, I went home, sat on my bed, and with the most recent era of my life now coming to an end, I began to think about how I had reverted to primitive living, had been lost in a jungle and I was then starting to not feeling so good about that and I looked at myself and didn't like who I had become; and then I started thinking about how nuts all my friends were, how each and every one of us, underneath it all, were hell bent on destruction and just plain harebrained; and I finally realized how tired I was, and how I needed to get my life together, do something with myself; which was precisely when Luke called me and I tried telling him how ugly I felt and how I was all wrong and we acted as if life was one big game, but we only ever played one trick at a time, but never looked at the bigger picture, and never thought if there was something more and he said *you are smarter than that, come on now, there is nothing but the game, no matter what walk of life you come from, that is all there is different ins and outs, different deals, different skills and sophistication, but there is nothing more, so you got to be good at the game* and I told him I did not think like that and I could not anymore *it seems to me you are just playing because you are looking for gains, sht, even to the point where you are scraping to just survive, but what, now really, what does that have to do with understanding, getting a real*

understanding he laughed at me like I was a nut *you are in for a rude awakening; besides you cannot afford to think like that* and I said, I said, *you only think like that because you are nothing but a god damn cheat and who are you to tell me what I can afford, I have my life and a mind and that is all the rich I need* and he had nothing in response, not because I was right, necessarily, but because he and I felt the schism and saw the chasm of the earth cracking in front of us, now that we had lost our common view, we only had the empty air of space between us, so we hung up; after that conversation, I ignored all other incoming phone calls and just laid there for five days, partly to figure out what I was going to do next with myself and to think about how I was going to make new friends; and partly because I foretold the future somewhere in me, I mean I just knew I would not be getting any rest for a while.

That spring hit us all hard. I don't know what happened, something was in the air, but everybody finally lost it and ran right out of their luck; on the fifth day of my rest, I made the mistake of picking up the phone. Within hours, maybe days, it felt like seconds, of each other Joan was calling me to tell me her younger sister got pregnant *again*, and then it was Lee Ann's father, telling me about her accident and I went to visit her in the hospital *don't be bothered by me, no, no, no, just forget me, forget anything happened, nothing has happened, just forget it, stop coming here;* and then Luke got hurt, Mark was on the run, Tracy got put in jail and it was not like she did not have her reasons, I mean, "her man" and Mark got into a dispute about money and with the average pace of life, violence ensued (even Luke slipped, how Mark got him, is hard to imagine) *that bastard, I thought, that bastard is not going to get away with it, she look at me I knew the second I heard that he did it and so I went after him* she spent the rest of the afternoon and evening and night toting some piece she took from some one, searching, going from house to house, to bar after bar, ended up at Joshua's *Joshua, has Mark been by? Tell me you better tell me, tell me has he been here, have you seen him, do you know where he is? 'No I have not seen him.' I told him he better not be lying to me and I slammed him against the wall, held him there 'no, no' he cried, 'no I have not seen him'* and she believed him, of course, she did and as soon as she left the house *I could hear through the walls, him yelling 'that crazy bitch, that crazy bitch' and I yelled too, yeah that is right I am a crazy bitch and I will show you I yelled as I* and then it was all over, she just started shooting at the house his car, *shot, yeah, but I was not going to hurt Joshua, I had no intentions of that, if just felt good to release, to have that release* and really I don't know why she went to such lengths, because she knew as well as anybody else that Luke was invincible and did not need anybody to find his revenge for him, because his revenge was that he lived, that man walked three miles from the place of being stabbed however many times, dripping blood and everything, walked right into some one's house, dialed for the ambulance on his own; and he only did that, I think, to

pretend he was human, because he did not a doctor or medical attention to keep him alive and ticking, the wounds were probably already healed when the ambulance got there and I doubt they really had to give him stitches, anyway, he dialed the ambulance and then sat down and asked the shocked people for a drink of water and waited; Tracy thought she had something prove, I guess, she thought no one could do that to him and the person who did would not get away with it.

Soon after Tracy was incarcerated, the club was busted and shut down because one of the policeman recognized Tracy as one of the dancers and having found out her real age (I didn't even know she was that young) and the police guy obviously had a moral crisis of some kind, felt it was his duty to right his own wrong or some wrong and so there went our second home and I mean what was the point now of shutting down the club, now that she was only a month away from being legal anyway and she had been doing it for so long, so really, kind of pointless; and it left the group, well what was left of us, with no common meeting ground, with no place to congregate, so, man, the loss of Bittersweet was really a loss to the community, specifically, ours.

It was real hell those days, all the fun gone, and I was left to strenuous visits to the hospital and jail listening to the stories of two girls with crazy minds thinking crazy ways and it hurt to see those two forceful girls confined in the way they were, behind bars, in a bed, but then I thought maybe they would start figuring something out for themselves; One day after returning home, the mess kept piling up, as errant, disposed souls started gravitating towards me, because there, sure enough, was Joan knocking on my door, dragging her sister behind her as if she was on a leash, a poor, helpless, puppy dog *please, can my sister stay with you, just for a while until my mother's temper gets cooled down; mom who never spoke boo to either of us about sex and said next to nothing after the first time it happened, just let it slide, ignored it, so how can she get mad anyway if she is not even going to educate her properly and mom still is trying to tell her should be a virgin, how she should be practicing abstinence, even though it is obviously too late for that, so to me it is just as much mom's fault; but could you let her stay here; yes, okay, fine* and I talked with her sister, tried being supportive, a counselor even, helpful, abortion, adoption, something, *don't take this one, you are not ready for the responsibility*, but her sister had this whole self-prophecy thing, to her the pregnancy had an inevitability about it, in her dictated and narrated view of her role in the world *I am a baby making machine, I am going to end up with five kids, living in a trailer home, probably on welfare* and she embraced this view, her own self-fulfilling fate that she did not want to change and saw no reason why she should, had no other aspirations in life or wasn't shown any; I could only shake my head and say *okay, fine, stay with me, keep the kid, you are going to do what you are going to*

do anyway and she stayed as long as I could stand her, until she drank all the alcohol in the house, yelled at my mother, ran up telephone bills calling who knows what or who, and I had to kick her out and Joan never spoke to me again.

Next it was George, he came by *just wanting to see how things were going with you, girl*, wanted to talk to me about the stress he thought I must have, but then he stayed for quite a while and it was suspicious that he was here because he knew I never really liked him or how he did things and we had a few good times together, but we kept our distance and I really did not understand why he wanted to talk to me and when I was about to ask, he went into the bathroom, real hushed like taking the phone with him and finally I knocked and soon found out *I don't have any other place to go* and ugh, I almost slugged him, he was really a no good man, I swear he always did have three girls and one of them was always willing to pay for him, support his ass, shelter him, cook for him, but suddenly, this is how he got his, every one of them turned him out and he could find no other and I knew things were desperate for him, but come on, I thought, yelling at him *you cannot stay here, George, now, why don't you take some responsibility for yourself, grow up, get a job, take care of your own self; the whole bunch of us need to grow up, you included* and he looked at me with strange eyes *you gone crazy?* and he sure was mad at me for sounding like his mother *alright, alright, I am leaving, I am going to go one and get out of your responsible way*, but not before first taking a shower and calling his mother.

Then it was Ashley, telling me about some guy, Jonah, Joe, Ben, who knows with her *he is going to be sorry he ever dumped me, I am the best thing that ever happened to him; yeah, sure, right, too bad about that, sorry; that's right, he is going to be sorry he ever did this and I can not wait until I see him coming back to me, groveling, begging for me, once he realizes I am the best thing he ever had; never mind*, I thought, *his new girlfriend*. The worst thing was that my mother locked herself in her room one evening way back and refused to come out, so I started having to cook dinner for her, bring it to her and force it down her throat while she yelled at me all sorts of things I did not want to have to listen to you *I was always there for you and look what you have done to me; I tried to give you something better and you still turned out nasty, like one of them* and she was right, I should have been more considerate to her after all and I did turn out horribly *I am sorry, I am sorry* mom is all I could ever say.

I remember at some point between Joan and Ashley, I realized there was not one thing I could do to stop what was happening and I tried with all of me to remain laid back and deep down cool and ignore the confusion and wait for this storm to pass, and I picked up a guitar mom had packed away in our basement and started playing lullabies to myself, songs and tunes to coat the absurdity and soothe my mind. I remember the day I yelled at

George, the last thing I heard from him was *alright, then Bob Dylan, see you later, see YOU later* as he walked out and I ran after him *uh-huh, no, SHAN-IIIINNNNNN, my name is SHANN-INN and don' you forget that, I am not a man and I am not an already been done before you fucking jerk*, as he continued to walk away, he shook his head and I was satisfied with that because it proved he at least heard me, but then he turned around and said *you don't ever quit, do you*, and I hollered, *hell no* and then triumphantly slammed the door behind me.

Last I heard from people, Luke just plain disappeared, poof and all, people talked like he was a legend, disappearing on a misty night riding away in some cloud or some shit like that; but I just kept quiet, because I know what he really did, he went as quick as he could back to the suburbs, went straight, got a job with his dad's company and they went on and sent him somewhere nice and tropical, somewhere far away; and about Tracy, they decided to hold her on charges of attempted murder, because that whiny ass Joshua told the officers and lawyers and who ever listened to him, he wanted all possible charges leveled against her; what a way to treat a friend, after all; and they listened and he got what he wanted, so she is locked away, for now, hopefully with good behavior she'll be out in a couple. After Tracy's arraignment, news finally stopped coming my way and I just sat down on the couch and stared off into space, realizing there really was not anything to do and that I had never really been doing anything and there was no place to get or go and I started enjoying just being able to plop down and sit and I started doing everything I could to avoid entering into the chaos that just is everywhere. I used to think it was best to embrace chaos instead of fighting it, but now I think better to keep things orderly where you can; and I used to think it was best to enjoy the wild in people, but now I have lost the energy it requires to deal with any more madness than my own and I am always wishing everyone would just settle down a bit and think, really think.

Things have sure calmed down for me; I guess all I ever do is play my guitar or play cards with my mother and drink mint tea and I listen almost constantly to national radio for the public because it sure is nice to listen to all those well thought out investigations and rational reporting and clear discussions and all those answers from people who have made a lot of sense about the things that are in question; I am always hoping that some day I, too can get a trim and proper point of view, no matter how hard I try, my mind still gets to acting crazy, despite myself; but then, what else can I expect, look where I live, planet earth, one giant mental institution full of hooligans, lunatics, and half wits; and sht., I really do get to thinking those people on the radio are just as delusional and crazy as I am, so maybe they don't have nothing on me after all.

Ah, shit. There she is. Looking like something I never really seen before.

Round Three: Return to Together

Locate, is a word spray painted on the telephone pole; locate the locale, I have crossed the bridge, I have entered Nebraska and this is the destination; home. I recognize all too well the hum and mummer of slight hearts, the flat land, the brown boring grass, the subdued, pastoral feather clouds, with a muted almost magnificence, a grandeur that is muffled, as if wrapped up in a quilt, made very cozy, one that is tamed. All around me is the unfortunate, sullen barrenness of trees (the vibrant leaves now dried up and fallen); I am in a rush of cars, cars heading home after work, after school, a rush to the comforts of home, to tradition, to the same, to culture, for here the present always looks like the past, the past always looks like the present, and nothing has changed, and all of these buildings, the downtown, mix matched, mirror the static drone of the brown grass and the dry air, the buildings are all a mix of taupe, light brown, medium brown, and dark brown buildings, washed down, mild, feeble, the wind hitting the taupe sides of the city, both like the hide of cow, tanned and leathered; I step off the bus into musty air, immediately stinging my nostrils making my throat already sore and parched.

“Hey Girl!” Shannon still has her same bright smile.

“Good to see you.” The two girls hug.

“Where is Lee Ann?”

“Ugh, girl; her and I had planned to pick you up together and she asked ahead of time and her father promised her the car, so she told me anyway, and I got dropped off at her house, last minute with no time to call somebody else and try to figure something else out, because her dad suddenly decided that she could not go or have the car, because he never really did like me, and I do not think she told him that I was going to come along; so I had to have it out with him, seriously, now, a grown woman fighting a grown man like I was some rowdy, raging teenager; but, finally he

had had enough of the fighting and told me to just take the car. Now I don't know why she couldn't come if he let me take the car anyway, but whatever, you know, at least I got here; and I imagine Lee Ann is probably up in her room pouting because she knows she may have well just come along if I got the car; how old is she really, you know."

"Sorry about the bother."

"No bother at all; I like confrontation, so it was less than a bother and more just plain silly; it was like being back in high school, took me back, and set the mood for my evening, I just spent the whole time waiting for you reminiscing my life away."

"Hey, do me a favor; let's stop at a bar before going back to Lee Ann's."

"Yeah, yeah; of course; if you do me a favor."

"What's that?"

"Drive. I prefer to be in the passenger's seat."

"Alright."

Shannon, wasting no time, bursts in, "Why are you back?"

"I have no plan, girl. I graduated from school and there was nothing, no prospects, nothing. I feel like I do not belong, there is no place welcoming me, made for me. Shit, I do not if I am the failure or if the world fails me; if I drag the world down, or if it drags me; I didn't know what else to do, so I thought I should see what here is like; but I am not my usual self, I am dead, weak, frustrated."

"All I can say is, you make your world, honey, it sounds like you are just looking for the ugly; anyway, people like you make me laugh, feeling all ostracized, alienated, really" she rolls her eyes, "you people should make a club for yourselves and not join; your complaints coming from anybody else I might excuse, but you, I don't know."

The car was very silent, stayed silent. Erin was a little startled by Shannon's straight forward tone, "Maybe. Maybe," Erin whispered, she was shocked because she forgot she could be criticized; Shannon felt that maybe it was inappropriate to be harsh at first; but then, she thought, what else is a friend for? Precisely, she responds to her own inquiry, it gives you the right to be the harshest critic of that person; Erin wanted to say something more, to fix her sentiments, make them less reproachable, but could not get it out differently, and stayed quiet.

"Remember my cousin Jocelyn?" Shannon breaks in with a neutral triviality.

"Of course."

"She got married to Joe about a year ago and they moved off to California together."

"Oh yeah, I heard about the marriage, Lee Ann had them send me an invitation. Was it a nice ceremony?"

“Small, but yeah, nice. I think it might really last. Joe is a good guy. Jocelyn is a nice girl. They are perfect for each other.”

“Good; I am happy for them.”

“Yes. Happy for them...”

Silence again.

“Take a right here, I have never been to this place.”

“Okay.” Erin parks the car in the parking lot for their chosen bar, Rock Bottom.

How desperate, desperately awful to walk into the rock bottom, the lowest common denominator of people, as they say; the space is burdened, heavy with disappointment, which is actually comforting me, the bar full of aimless, numb Joes and Jacks and Sues and there is an ugliness in the crass, stale air; the bartender is wearing a thick line of black eyeliner, she is skinny and smoking, she has thin hair, her clothes are definitely from a thrift store, stone washed jeans from the eighties, matched with a striped blue and gray wool sweater...

“What can I get you ladies,” Her voice cracks through huskiness.

“A glass of water.”

“Lots of vodka in a large glass,” Erin looks to Shannon, “want a cigarette?”

“Nah, thanks though.”

“So what have you been up to?”

“Not much, hanging out with my mom. I have a boyfriend. I spend most of my time with him, most of my mind thinking about him.”

“How did you meet him?”

“Around.”

“How are things?”

“I never like to complain, I am going to sound as bad as you; but I will be honest, you know, he makes things rough. The run down is like this, everything was perfect for the first bit, then we started arguing a lot about six months ago, and he said he felt stuck, he said, imprisoned, I told him go, and he did for a month or so, but he came back, and that was big for us, because when he came back, he meant it, and we realized we had somehow become addicted to each other, not in love, just addicted, and so we took some time learned each other again, went over our history, thought about what we started, found it glorious, and decided we should keep going, and we were fine for a while, but now we are back to the disputes.

“He says so many things to me, I mean everything to him, he could not ever find another girl, I am a virtue incarnate; but those are on good days; sometimes he tells me he think I am a no good whore, and he feels used, dirty, and pushes me away and out, like I am some sort of dingy alley cat; he barely trusts me, thinks I am a liar, calls me manipulative if I say too much,

if I ask just the wrong way, even though all I want is to be close to him; I have so many images of him, tender, but a scoundrel, cruel and harsh, then a floating, tranquil like a picture of a stone Buddha statue, then shallow, simple; then more understanding than even myself;

“Damn, I just feel like some contortionist, always pushed and pushing to see how far I can bend without breaking, testing how flexible I am; and I am always straining, it is so hard at the end of the day lately to see any good when he hurts me like he does, and when I think things are going to change and get better, like they were at first, nothing changes; and something in me makes all this propaganda, promotes him through my system, and no matter what I do, I cannot get the posters ripped down and no amount of tears can make the ink run, and the local theater plays the same reel of fond memories over and over and over and I get sucked in every time; and sometimes when I want to escape, I cannot, only to find I have erected the gates and the fences and walls; things are funny like that; funny like that, the conflict is how to be a good person in a relationship, you know, making him happy and all, while still staying true to myself,” she takes a sip of her water, takes a breath, grins, “I am going to see if they have Patsy Cline in their juke box; this kind of place would.” She gets up and walks away, leaving Shannon to soak up the environment.

The ragged woman next to me yawns, yelling something out across the bar to other customers, and they are speaking to each other, but the sounds are missing the port of entry, thoughts on a sea of confusion, floating away, flowing in and then away, sentences are formed, but not quite outlined and finished, a man is reading the newspaper to his pal, mumbles about the state of daily and local politics and the “new ordinance” “damn politicians; who decided?” “well, it says here, the governor *ordered* it,” silence, there is never a retort to such a statement for these obnoxious splotches of the population that like to be governed, who shudder with fear into obedience, who want to be told; these are people who have spent an entire life conforming to every one else and now are nothing but bored and dull, having never dared their own; the man reading has moved on to deaths and misfortunes listed and reported, I guess in attempt to arouse pity, why else would some one want to read that “that poor guy” “how horrible,” are exclaimed with a twinkle of enjoyment at hearing about other people’s misery *if you plan on leaving soon; tell me, get it over with* one man begins to speak of a recent health mishap of a relative, an accident of a friend, speaking of these things without emotions, just telling; and I shudder and begin to itch with the burning rash of stupidity, of mediocrity, we should not have come here, my head is starting to get thick, blocked, my vision obfuscated; I try to cast my eyes down, but instead I glimpse a bunch of bearded men with glazed over sorrowful eyes *for I don’t want to live in a world of dreams; don’t want to live with*

what might have been because they have had to let go of the vision, their drooping eyes are from the disillusioned coming down from the drug of a dream, having thought so many years back so much about the future, the impending brightness of the future, now having lost, having failed, but worse than the pain is the doubt, and the ensuing belittlement of the self and others, friends, sons, daughters, wives, or lovers, because of that failure, and the only mistake any one made was believing in the first place, believing a lie, entertaining the ambition in the first place, sore because the dream seemed so real, so destined; and here, the flag hanging from televisions, as a banner behind the bar, one hanging from the post outside the house; resolutely agree they are in the land of the free, supporting the religious brain strain, and the great thing is just being a part of this great nation and prospects, just being here means freedom to them; but I feel them, like myself, all the spirits sitting around the bar jammed in gears, emaciated by the monotonous sound of machines, our timing belts worn down, stretched thin, and our bearings, slowing down, almost frozen.

“Hey, let’s get going. Lee Ann is probably getting anxious.”

Erin nods, and as they are exiting, she hears a hearty laugh coming from a man at the table by the door, the laugh had in it the feeling of hope, a feeling not near, but zooming in another dimension, distant, but felt. Maybe all is not lost, Erin thinks.

Erin getting in the driver’s seat, starts her usual gripping, “Look at these streets, disgusting; this anti-aesthetic, this crap, cheap restaurants and that obnoxious plastic, who designs this crap? And to think, a similar nightmare is blaring out now, on television screens, in nearby movie theaters...” she is interrupted, “you are really are something tonight,” Shannon says tautly, trying to ignore her; silence again; Erin finds herself asking, “is that place, umm, Bill’s, still in business?”

“Yeah.”

“We should go there and get breakfast in the morning.”

“Sounds good,” as they pull into Lee Ann’s driveway.

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“Yes, father?”

“You’re friends are here and they are going to come up, but get dinner started soon, okay?”

“Of course,” he has already headed back down the stairs before he can even hear me say “I will,” but now Shannon is here and that is nice. Shannon and Erin are here.

The two girls shuffle in together, heads still looking down at the floor, as that is how they both walked in the house in an attempt to avoid eye contact with Father; no matter how old we get, Erin laughs to herself, he is still in charge.

“Hi,” it is nice to see them both, “I have to make dinner soon, so you cannot stay long.”

“Shannon and I thought it would be fun to go to the diner tomorrow morning, kind of like old times; can you come?”

“What time?”

“I was thinking ten.”

“Yes, I can.”

“Fine.”

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“You can sit down.”

“Okay.” They do; Shannon on the bed (she just looks so small, frayed); Erin on the floor.

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“Do you guys hang out much with each other since I left?”

Erin and Lee Ann make light eye contact; say at the same time, “no, not really” “Yes, it has been a while.”

“I see.”

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“What are you up to?”

“You mean tonight?”

“I meant in general.”

“I work part time as a receptionist at the bank and the rest of the time I spend helping dad around the house. I might go and live with my brother; maybe, if I feel okay about leaving dad here.” I wish I had more to say, but I do not do much more than that.

“Good. Shannon told me he moved to California.” She does not look like I remember.

“It would be really good for you to go,” Shannon adds, abrasively.

“Yeah, he has a room for me, so I might just go and see sometime. I am going to see sometime what it is like.”

“Great.”

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I should not neglect dinner. I need to get that started. It was nice to see them, but I should get going. "I have to get started on dinner; so I will just see you two tomorrow, okay?"

"Yes. Fine. Great. Bye."

Having left that awkward house, Erin instantly looks at Shannon with very concerned, questioning eyes; Shannon recognizing the source of that concern speaks, "I have always thought, by acting courageous to the weak or to those that appear weak, you force that person to be stronger; which is to say, I have been doing what I can to get her out of that house, to get her more in charge of her life, but she is intricate, hard to talk to; and I have come to the conclusion there is no changing her and no challenging her dutiful daughter act. She needs to do whatever it is she needs to do on her own terms."

"I guess so; I have to turn here; if you want, you can come over for dinner, I am sure there is room for you at the table."

"I would, but I want to get home and rest."

"Right-o. See you later," how weird, Erin thinks, a little disappointed by her decision; too tipsy to completely care.

"Later."

The old neighborhood...the appearances of these houses, at my right a stucco exterior, the next is an uptight Victorian, to my left, a wreath on the door of a country home, next, a small castle, Bavarian, up further, a sunflower with the word welcome stitched below the stem is hanging in between the four neat, Doric columns, then a ranch style home, low to the ground, Wright inspired, a vintage car in the driveway, then suddenly a stucco, and then mine, the first of a group of similar homes, the typical, cookie cutter, plain homes, neat and neutral colors, painted a delicate yellow with unstylish, drab, dark mahogany wood, which I never liked, outlining the windows and that stupid brick chimney right in the middle. I swear this house would have crumbled and fallen down long ago if it was not for my mother's indomitable will, for she believes the house is standing, therefore it stays up...

Round Four

It is always nice to Shannon and Erin. I should have asked if they would stay and have dinner with me, but Erin probably wants to get home to her family; but I should have at least asked if they would stay, though I know neither of them would. It is nice to think they would have stayed and we could have talked longer. When I am here and Shannon comes by, she never sticks around too long. She always abandons me here and thinks that if I am here and if I want to stay here, then she cannot be here. She only ever likes to come and take me away. If I do not go away with her, she leaves and abandons me. It would have been nice to have their company, even if only one or both of them stayed.

I have to go get dinner started and stop thinking like this. I have to get that started. I do have a way of feeling bad. I have been feeling bad for too long now. I have not been doing much but feeling bad. I have to get it started and even though I do have a way of getting so that I feel bad, but it was nice to see the girls. It is going to be a late dinner because I am getting started so behind the time I should have started it. I do have a way of feeling bad that always gets in the way of doing what needs to be and has to be done, but then I think somehow it all gets done. Everything has a way of getting done.

It was nice to see Shannon. I have not seen her in a while but now that I have seen her again, I am remembering how much I really do like and love Shannon. I do not know where all this love comes from, but all this time I have loved and I have been loving Shannon. The love grows strong in me whenever I see her. The love rises high in me when I see her. I do not know where that love comes from. The love I have for her is all of me. I have been loving her all this time we have known each other, at first it was not really noticeable, but then it started becoming all. I am always rise with the feeling when I get near her with the feeling. All this love and the love that is all of me and my love for her and all the love grows when I see her again and all this grows so strong in me and when I see her again I am reminded of it. Every time I see her, I am reminded and I do not know where the love even comes from since I have not seen her in such a long time, but it came again to me and I love her and we are friends and that she has a life outside of me, but I have all this love and I wonder why I have all that love to begin with, but I know I cannot stop it because it has been there for such a long time and it has grown so strong in me. She does not know about the love I have been having for all this long time. I could never even tell her about all this I have been having for her. If I tell her, I do not know what will happen, but I know it is wrong to tell her, because it is the wrong kind of love to have for a friend. I have held on to all this love and

Round Five

My mother scooping up a wailing child, lifts her body back up, ripping with her teeth a piece of the rag she carries with her, covering up the bleeding knee.

"I thought you would be here earlier. Come on back and set the table." I follow her through the random bunch of straggly children busy scratching the wood floor, drawing on walls, and picking their noses,

"Mom?"

"Yes?"

"You are still taking care--are people paying you?"

"I got all sorts of headaches, and when it seems like one of them has finally left, it just comes right back." I smirk, my mother does have such a tongue on her, we pass by the den full of cajoling people, their good cheer covering the buzz of the muted television with a game on, they are telling jokes, while my father is in his chair, with his toothy grin, silent, resting after his days at work sweeping and polishing floors, construction, operating machines, and I now enter the core of the house, the kitchen, where all the friendly warmth collects and here is all the joy, our back door is swinging open, then shut, recipes are being swapped, returned pans are instantly borrowed again, food is being brought over, advice being asked, a few girls, my sister's friends, sit chatting at the table; my mother opens a drawer, takes out duct tape, wraps it around the rag, a make-shift band-aid, swats the boy's wound, telling him he is alright, "so stop crying" setting him down, throws the tape back in the drawer, shutting it with her leg as the rest of her body is heading to the stove, to flip the tortilla frying in the pan and stirs whatever is in the other pot, she tells me, "we got some new silverware, the set is above the dish rack--"

"Mom, it is have."

"What?"

"You should say we have new silverware; or the new silverware we have is above the dish rack, you know, instead of got." As soon as I talk, precisely on the edge of the sound of the t, and with the force of my mother's annoyance, an egg rolled off the counter, smashing all over the floor concomitantly a glass falls with a glaring thud on the nearby table, knocked over by some mangy cat, and the whole house stops breathing, and with a fierce look, "Some things are more important than grammar, like respect; now clean that up and get the table set," biting my tongue, as a couple of girls snicker, which receives a look of disapproval from my mother; I now am wiping up the yolk and the jagged, crisp shell. Finished, I look up as mom swats a young girl's hand away from the salad, the girl was picking out carrots, and I get the new silverware and go about my

kept it quiet and Shannon does not know that I love her and that I have a rising feeling of love when I see her, and I have love for her in all of me and I am reminded of the love whenever I see her. I have always known I have loved her for this long time and the love always stays and stays low but then comes back to me big when I am near her and when I see her I secretly have to hide the excitement in me. When she is near me, no matter how long it has been, I still get nervous and I get nervous about her finding out about the excitement I feel when I see her that I always have in me. I always get excited when I am near her and I get excited when I think she was on my floor and the feeling rises in me high and grows so strong in me and I have to keep it so quiet. I love her really a lot and I have always loved her, but I do not know what I should ever say or if I should say or how or if it is right for me to say how I feel in all of me when I see her. I love her quiet and I have a huge rising in me and a large rise in me of feelings whenever I see her and I get so excited and nervous and I wish I knew that it was okay to tell her and that it would be okay to tell her and that she would maybe try and love me, and if she knew she might try harder to be around me more.

When we are around each other and even thought I have this huge rising of a feeling and all the nervousness, she can still make me very angry. When she makes me angry, I have a hard time having my the feelings I have for her. My love grows strong for her and I get excited when I see her. I have always loved her no matter what she does to me and no matter that she abandons me and no matter what she does to anger me. I know she means to do well. I know she means to do good. I know she wants to give me a helping hand and she is trying to do good. It is always Shannon who makes me very angry though when we do see each other. It is Shannon who tells me I need to change and challenge the way of things. Shannon wants me to challenge the certain way of things that I do not want to challenge, not any more. People get to thinking they can challenge the way of things and they build dams and they reverse the flow of water and they think they have done something and they think they have challenged the natural way of things. I always tell Shannon she can say what she likes, but I will not challenge the way of things. I can obey my father. That is why sometimes I do not even want to see Shannon. She always tries to get to challenge the way of things that I have accepted. I told her one time when she was trying to get me to change things that if she wants to challenge the way of things, she would have to go back, back before my father and me, back before the colonizers arrived, back before Judas, way back to when Lilith was facing her scrutiny. I told her she would have to go back a lot farther than me and even if she went back farther than me, I do not know if she would change much of anything. I am not going to challenge the way of things, it would not make a difference at this point to try and challenge things because it is

appointed duty, leaving the room to the sound of the over slamming and the smell of chicken bake filling up the air and my heart is already on the verge of a heart attack from the buttery, fatty sauce she is pouring on top.

My grandmother is in the dining room, dusting off all the stuff collected and placed on the shelves my father built for her to place all her stuff on; it is mostly memorabilia from travels to the Ozarks in Arkansas, the Black Hills of South Dakota, but some of the junk is from more exotic places, like those replicas, dolls of Indians from Alaska, complete with real fur of seals or elk or some creatures native to the land, and there is decorations from the old country, Danish plates, Swedish wood horses, painted steins. This house is filled with more than the smell of meat; far more pungent is the tediousness of the futile everyday demands of cleaning, cooking, and setting and re-setting of tables, all of which uproot sense and stifle wills, my will in particular, as I would much prefer joining my colleagues on the couch, but I being the dutiful daughter myself, place each knife neatly in it's place, place setting by place setting. At the centerpiece of the table is a barrel of a candle, on the walls are paintings of carriages and horses, another of a girl in a bonnet and a boy in a straw hat, another of an old man fishing, the wall paper is geometric lines of yellow, orange, and brown, interlaced with flowers. My mother rushes past me and has set all the food on the table before I could finish, strikes a match on against her hip, lights the candle, and with the dryer buzzing, the laundry! She heads down the stairs, yelling for everybody to come and eat. Nothing has changed here; everyone just looks younger, seems even more energetic than before.

"Hey, sit next to me," my sister demands through the clanging of her silver hoop earrings and amidst the flashiness of her brand new clothes, she never has quite fit in with this family, "right between father and I. I have been so anxious for you to get here" I can hardly register her words through all the perfume "Sometimes we even leave a seat empty for you, just because we miss you" I smile at her; well, at least I belong here, I think; at least people care about me here, maybe even have missed me. "I also made the corn bread for you," I appreciatively muster a thank you, and watch as she delicately unfolds her napkin and spreads it across her lap.

My father comes in, looks at my sister, then at me, "A man looking for approval parades his goods in front of a woman in tattered cloth, blaring the trumpet of his boisterous ego, she ignores him, he grows upset her eyes do not grow large with greed; he goes over to her, asks her if she wants a gold necklace, she refuses and taken aback he asks how come? She responds, you have all these riches for now, but what will you do when those you have robbed come back to rob you? How far will you go to defend your greedy hand? I will not take your spoils. The man goes back home, estimates himself narrowly with small actions, assess the goods he

too late for me anyway. Even when I get to thinking I should maybe try to be like Shannon wants me to be, I think it is better not to and that I would have to go back a lot further than me. I am not going to challenge the way of things like I used to try to do, because I could never really do it and even when I try I can never seem to really challenge things. Shannon makes me angry when she tries to get me to build a dam that obstructs the way of things. Shannon always tries to give me materials to build a dam. I do not want to build a dam. I will follow the way of things, the way father has them planned out, and that is better way to do things. I think it is better to obey the way father has things laid out and that is the better way to do it. It is right that I obey my father and help my father out as best I can. I do not tell Shannon that, but I listen to her give me materials to build a dam that obstructs my father's way of doing things and the natural course of things, but I do not tell her that I think it is better to obey my father and she makes me very angry when she keeps talking like she always does. I get angry because sometimes I think she is right and that I should listen to her. I get so angry that part of me thinks she is right and that I should not obey my father like I do. I get angry with her for making me think she is right. That is why it is hard to see Shannon and sometimes I do not even want to see her, even though only part of me is angry and the other part likes her very much and I get sad to think she always abandons me.

It is right that I obey my father. That is the way I see things. I feel indebted to my father. My father has always raised me the best he could and has always provided for me. My father has always provided for me and I feel indebted to my father because he has always raised me the best he could and has always provided for me. My father has always provided for me and I feel indebted to my father because he has done all that for me. My father always provides for me the best he can and so I feel indebted to him for what he has done for me. It is not only that I feel indebted to my father for always providing for me, but that I also feel a responsibility to him. I feel a responsibility to help my father and to listen to my father and honor him. I feel a responsibility to him because he has always provided for me and has raised me the best he can and has done so much for me and once I started realizing all that he has done for me, I felt indebted to him and thankful and so I feel I have a responsibility to help him out too. I feel a responsibility to him and I have a deep care and concern for him. I care for my father deeply on top of feeling a responsibility to him for always providing for me and raising me the best he could. My father has gone through a lot. It was hard that he lost mom a long time ago. It was hard for him to have to say good bye to Joe. It is a hard day of work for my father. My father goes through a lot. I care about my father deeply. My father has always provided and cared for me and I have a deep bond with him and I

can touch, yet the best in him is squandered.”

Father and I have always agreed on things; he sits down next to me, “It is nice to have you back.”

“It is nice to be back,” I smile, and that is partly true, for I am happy to be here, back to the generosity of my mother and father, back to what is familiar to me, and how could I complain with the feast before me, this feast of meat and more meat, chicken baked and fried, chicken wrapped in beef in a creamy sauce, beef wrapped in enchilada form, a big fatty prime rib and bloody steak, fried bacon in the salad; rolls and more rolls, wheat and white bread, corn bread and mounds of butter; an assortment of casseroles, the most peculiar is the green bean, peas, chicken topped with bread crumbs, there is fruit salads, mixed vegetables: carrots, peas, and corn; and there is thick, creamy gravy for the mashed potatoes; the food is colorful is, it is a lackluster pastiche, bland and tasteless, the spices run together, I take bits and pieces of each, and as I eat I taste nothing, everyone else seems to be enjoying the food, eating heartily, piling the food up on their plates; we always have enough: room, food, resources for everyone who comes by, just enough, the right amount for each; and we continue to eat, as my mother runs about...

“Billy, your mom is here, you better get on over here, now; no, no take the bigger crock pot,” the door slams again, when she does finally come to the table, she eats while folding clothes in her lap.

“Mom,” my sister groans, “is this the chicken casserole from two nights ago?”

“I was not going to let it go to waste.”

“Grosss,” she hisses.

“Don’t be so picky; you better eat it now that you have taken it.”

“Don’t treat me like a child,” my sis complies, however, with a scowl, takes the lump of old food in little bits.

Everyone else ignoring my sister, continue to place more and more butter on their bread, devouring the gratifying meat, as greasy words slip out between bites, Lucinda, a big woman, her hair cut very, who works in a factory with Dan, who is sitting next to her, uses her sleeve to wipe the butter off the top of her lip, says to me, “looking at you, I see now a days you can’t tell the difference between the elites and the degenerates; we are dressed alike (and true, we are both in old pants, a button up shirt, generally unappealing to look at), but there is a different air to you, now that you have been gone, off to school”

“And you have not been talking much, you used to always blabber constantly,” Bob throws.

“Got too good for us?” Dan furthers these obnoxious claims.

“Ah guys, that is not it, I don’t have good stories to tell you; besides I

care for him so deeply and I feel very indebted to him and also that I have a responsibility to him.

My father is a gentle man. I care deeply for the gentle man that is my father. I care very deeply for my father and he always tries to be good to me. My father is good to me and has always been good to me over the years and I care deeply for the gentle man that is my father.

Of course he can be mean sometimes, but he is also very gentle and tender and always tries to be good to me. My father can be very cruel sometimes and my father is cruel and often times mean and he has a dark strictness, but my father is not always mean and sometimes he has a gentleness that he only sometimes covers over with this cruelty.

My father is strict. My father has always been strict with me and my father mostly always has the control he wants. He says sometimes that this house is his territory. To him, this house is his domain and he thinks he should have the control over his domain. He says to me sometimes that this is his domain and he says it smirking and I smile back at him when he says it like that with a playful authority, but I know when he says it is his domain, he says it to himself with sincerity, even though to me he says it with a smirk. My father shows me the smirk, but I see that he says the words to himself with sincerity; but then I know that the smirk and the sincerity are then slipped underneath his stoicism because as soon as I see the smirk and catch the sincerity, they are gone and slipped underneath his stoicism. My father controls his domain with stoicism. He is a stoic man that says to me sometimes this is his domain and he says that with a smirk like it is a joke and with sincerity all at once.

My father controls his domain with a dark strictness and sometimes a tenderness and sometimes with cruelty. This is my father's domain. I am in his territory and he controls the territory and I can obey that. My father is very giving and he has always provided for me and he has always shared all that he can with me and in the territory he controls he can be gentle and sometimes cruel and often times mean and carries with him a dark strictness. That is the way my father is and that is how I see my father and I can obey him because that is right for me to do.

I can keep my head above his cruelty. Even though my father can be mean, he can also be gentle. I used to cower and tremble to his cruelty and dark strictness. Now I never cower before his meanness or his cruelty. I wait his cruelty and his meanness out and sometimes I do not let him have it as much as he wants to have it. Then other times I duck under the cruelty and hold tight to myself and I wait the cruelty and the meanness out, but I have learned not to cower to it. Sometimes I do things they way I want to do it because I am no longer afraid of him and I have learned how to wait the cruelty out. I am not afraid of him anymore and he has been better to

would never make that distinction between us anyway, Lucinda; and if I did, I would consider myself a degenerate right with you; to be elite, you have to be born and raised elite, and you all did a great job of making me rough around the edges, and no amount of books can take that away from me, so lay off," and they laugh; look at me, after all, I think, I like my clothes to feel worn in and patched up, I never put new buttons on my shirts when I lose them and I like the little rips from wear or thread hanging from my shirt, I like how my pants are grimy, rarely washed, and I let drops of coffee soak in, discolor, and sully them because I like my clothes to feel lived in, like this house, not afraid of some discoloration, the spots are little bits of history, like the knicks and dents in the walls; and I do not give much weight to manners, I would wipe butter off my face with my sleeve before using a napkin, so I am a degenerate after all, I reassure myself.

"I went to Don's the other day, and that son of a bitch," Bob starts in, with his heavy Bulgarian accent that he took from his father and never let it go.

"Now what," a barely interested chorus responds, Bob always has something to complain about, sometimes it is valid, however, sometimes he just likes to complain and sometimes he has an audience for those complaints, but other times, he does not; even my grandma is skeptical,

"Oh, you are always sucking the hind tit, I tell you," she states brazenly.

"He sells the big construction company wood for cheaper because they have bigger jobs, buy a lot more, but has raised the price for me. I am going to have to start asking people to pay more for my services and half of them think what I charge now is outlandish," he pauses and continues, "the thing that really gets to me is when I talked to Don about it, he lied to me, he flat out lied to me, one of his most loyal customers over the years, my friend. He told me he was charging those guys the same hiked up price, but I saw one of their receipts, I saw how much less he was charging."

"Give him a break. Consider yourself helping him out, his budget is tight too, he is counting the days until the big guys put him out of business, too; he is fortunate to have lasted this long," Mike says.

"That is why I did not say anything to him and still go to him; but is the principle of the thing, that he lied to me. He should have just told me himself, that's all." With these guys, there is always a premium set on honest, it is the single most important value they hold, and the sacredness with which they hold the value is what makes the value meaningful; my father and his friends are always kind, honest, and treat others fairly in their deals and business with others; they act consistently with their beliefs, and I have always given them credit for that, if one has a belief, the least they should be able to do is live it, act on it, be at one with it. For my father, honesty it not just a value, but a worldview, he always told us growing up

me once he saw that I no longer fear him. He is not as cruel as he once was, now that he sees it is more of my choice to stay here and help him out. My father stopped being as cruel and as mean once he saw that I wanted to stay here and help him and that I would not leave him. He is not as strict as he once was. He is only strict when he thinks that I will leave him like Joe has and like my mother did.

It is my choice to stay here and I think it is best to help my father and it is best to obey him. Since he started seeing it as my choice to stay here, my father has grown more thankful and is not as cruel and strict as he once was. My father controls his territory and shares his domain with me and so I honor him because I have decided to stay here and obey him. I have chosen to honor my father and to help my father out. I think that is a good choice to make. I care for my father deeply and wanted to make that choice. Now that my father sees it as my choice, and now that I have lost my fear, things are much better. I take on certain responsibilities and I take better care for myself and have grown up a lot and now I am a more responsible person because of my decisions.

There are parts of me that do not want to honor my father. I can obey my father and I can let him control his domain and I try to give my father the power over his domain, but I cannot obey him with all of me. That is where the tension always is. There are parts of me in his domain that do not want to honor his wills and wishes, but I try to obey my father regardless. Even when I try to stand up to him, he somehow out of nowhere gets his way. It is an endless happening between my father and I that I try to fight with him and go against his will, but then I always end up doing what my father wills and wishes. I have just learned to obey and try not to have the tension between my not wanting to obey and the inevitability that I will obey. What little control I have always wants more and more control and so there is a tug and tension between the more of me that obeys his will and the parts of me that do not want to obey his wills. I am a different person than him so I cannot always as he wills. I cannot help that but sometimes I want to do things differently than he wants and I try not to challenge the way he wants things done and the expectations he has for me. My father helps me through rough times and he helps keep things in order and it is better to obey his will. I have gotten strong with his help because he gives me responsibilities. My father always provides for me and shares with me and wants what is best for me. My father gives me responsibilities which make me more mature and grown up. My father has always done the best he could for me and I care deeply for my father even though part of me cannot stand to always obey his will.

I love my father and he does what is best for me. I can sacrifice a bit of myself because my father has sacrificed for me. I care about my father

we should strive to see the world for what it is, to see people, places, things for what they are, as best we can, no matter how much it might hurt; my father told us that it is hard to be honest and a challenge to be a good person, all the more reason to attempt it, he would say.

“Nothing,” my father adds, “is more important than the individual’s battle self-perceived; give a man a jail cell, he will still make his own hells, his own fight.”

The group chuckles.

Leone saunters in, with his well-trimmed mustache, high cheek bones, and his brown, distant eyes imply his Peruvian ancestry.

“You are late! You have been late all week,” Lucinda exclaims.

“I had to work extra hours. They have really been laying it on us recently and for what they are paying, I don’t know why I bother,”

“The unions--,” Bob questions.

“They never do enough, not really, they are trying, but the wages are still low, and practically getting lower. I get to thinking how grandpa told me back home, there were people who valued decency. It was not unknown for the owner of farms, for example, finding out about abuses of overseers to fire them, for the owner did not want people on their lands to be treated cruelly, inhumanely, for the treatment of their workers became a reflection or denial of their own humanity.

“What we have to do is inhuman work, but no one minds working, we even take it on with pride and work hard, most of us feel loyalty to the company, and we do quality work. There is no reason to not get paid with wages that reflect the prosperity and profits had at the top,” he is interrupted, no reason to not have adequate concern for our health and well being.”

“Hear, hear” Lucinda agrees, Dan nods his head, and my mother sets out tea before him “I put only a little bit of milk in it, just how you like it.”

“Thank you,” he sticks out his pinky and takes a small sip, “and to get paid fairly for the merciless hours they demand.” Leone takes pride in knowing he is stronger than most, that where others would break, often those in charge, he would be able to withstand.

“Persecuted and beaten, a man is asked by he who holds the whip why he is crying. The man responds, an ant is crawling on the ground, the flowers are blooming, rain is falling, and rivers flow, what splendor before me; I weep with graciousness; I have grown stronger, I have not struggled in vain.”

My sister gets up and leaves, “I am going out for the evening,” hurrying off; a very frazzled looking Sally comes running in with an apple pie, she sets on the table. “Thanks for watching Susie,” she says as she grabs her child by the hand; the door slamming again.

deeply and he gives me his love back and he has sacrificed for me and provided for me and I care deeply about my father. He always tries to make sure I am okay and he gives me responsibilities and I grow up because I have the responsibilities he gives me and even though there is a tug and a tension between what I obey and what does not want to obey, it is best I obey his will and take on the responsibilities he gives me and that is how I can help out my father, as he has always helped me out.

My father is a surprisingly old man. My father walks into the kitchen and he is a surprisingly old man. When I looked up as he walked into the kitchen, I saw a surprisingly old man who squats as he stands. My father squats as he stands that is how he looks because he has short legs. It might just be the light, but I see a lot of wrinkles and heavy folds that I never saw before or never noticed before. There are a lot of wrinkles I never noticed before and so my father appears as a surprisingly old man that squats as he stands because his legs are so short and gruff. My father has changed only a little bit over the years, and other than having all the folds and a lot of wrinkles I never really noticed before, he is still the same cold man he has always been. My father walked into the room and even though he came near me and stands near me, he is cold. There is a great distance between my father and I.

When I look at my father, it is like he is across the room from as if he just walked into the kitchen, even though he is next to me. The man next to me is a surprisingly old man who is hard and thick with wrinkles and a father who is very distant and cold like he has always been. When I look at my father I see a concrete retaining wall with brick mortared around it to hold it up and make him even sturdier. Even when he is near me, he is still distance from me and his presence is like a cold, hard, thick wall of concrete, brick, and mortar.

My father stares directly at me with his down turned eyes and stares at me through his folds and folds of thick wrinkles that make him look like a surprisingly old man in the light of this kitchen.

My father lifts up his hand and puts it on my shoulder and looks over my other shoulder at what I am cooking. Where my father touches my shoulder there is almost a bit of warmth. There is a bit of warmth where my father places his hand on my shoulder, but he is still distant and cold.

With one hand I stir, but I place my other arm around his waist and look at the surprisingly old man with thick folds of wrinkles and I look at his down turned eyes and I look at his concrete mortared distance, and I smile because on my shoulder where his hand is, there is a little bit of warmth. There is only a little bit of warmth on my shoulder where he touches me and the little bit of warmth comes from his touch and the little bit of warmth coming through his thick, sturdy hands.

“I will get the coffee and knife,” my mother off and running again. People have finished eating, are sitting back, relaxed, enjoying their slice of warm pie.

“Wisdom came; he was suffocated and dampened, a whisper upon deaf ears; his lips moved in front of blind eyes; ignored. So be it.”

My father pauses. “Erin, help me clean up the table and get the dishes washed?”

“Of course.”

As we begin to pick up the plates, Mike and Dan get up, get their coats, saying, repeating their appreciation for my parent’s hospitality, Leone heads to the den to watch the last of the basketball game, Lucinda follows, Bob is snoring loud with food in his gut, his head resting on the table. My father and I carry all the dishes to the kitchen, which is no longer a busy street, but an alley, my sister’s friends gone, the oven off, the dishes are stacked and the water is running, my mother comes in, sits and starts to knit a scarf, as my grandmother comes in with a picture album. My mother pulls out a chair for her, willing to sit down next to her and hear the same stories, once again, because she knows my grandmother likes to tell them.

“Erin, you will never believe what your mother has done! She lost all my photographs or gave them away or threw them away. I used to have trunks full, now this one book is all I have left.”

“Now, mother, that is not true, they are somewhere, they are.”

“Where? I have looked everywhere. You threw them away!”

My mother sighs, my grandmother continues on, “Look at Miguel. What a handsome man. My father was never keen on our marriage. He told me that he was never going to let me get married to some spic. I told him that spic I want to marry has one quarter white in him, so he wasn’t all spic anyway; so you are saying is that he isn’t all worthless, just three quarters worthless? Yes. Well then he is perfect for a mostly worthless daughter. He soon consented. You know, I would have married him anyway without daddy’s permission and I was sure lucky to have him; he supported me my whole life, always could pay rent, for food, and he never beat me.”

“Grandma?” I ask, “What did his parent’s think?”

“Hmm. I don’t remember. We never did talk much about his parents. Now here is Grandmother Larsen, standing outside the home I was raised in, I remember she used to cook up dandelions and fry up lutefisk, as kids we hated that stuff, but it was we were served and she forced us to eat it.” “Look Mary, this is you two before you first dance together in high school. Remember that? You were so happy because I let you borrow my brooch.” “Yes, yes I do.” “I always did think back then you were making a mistake,” she looks at my mother, “but you fought me like I fought my father; and just like my father, I was wrong,” my mother glances up at her, smiles, goes

I hold on to the little bit of warmth he gives in my mind. My father can be very gentle and even though my father can be cruel and strict, he can be endearing, I have learned how to hold on to the little bit of the warmth and the endearing bits of my father and that is why I no longer cower to his cruelty, but I just wait it out. I wait out his dark strictness by holding to the little bit of warmth he gives to me sometimes.

I hold on to the little bit of heat he gives to me and focus on the little bit of warmth and the slight smile he gave me when I put my arm around his waist and I hold on to the gentleness he shows me and shares with me for as long as I my mind can hold on to it. I am holding on to that slight smile and the little bit of warmth as tightly as I can as long as I can.

I latch onto his slight smile and let the little bit of feeling in him come into me. There is a little bit of feeling coming from the little bit of heat he gives off through his thick hand that is on my shoulder and even though he remains distant from me as though he is still standing across the room from me like when he first entered the kitchen. The warmth barely brings him one step closer than when he first walked into the room, but he is still at a distance from me and across the room from me but there is a little bit of feeling coming from the warmth of his and the warm feeling comes into me and I hold on to him tight.

I can feel where my hand is on his waist getting warmer and there is also a little bit of steam coming up from the boiling liquid and a warm smell rising up to me. I can kind of feel the little bit of warmth coming from his hand on my shoulder and the warm feeling that has started to rise in him and rise in me and the steam surrounds my face with a warm smell and we have started to share a warm feeling that is rising up in me and I can feel a little bit of warmth where his hand is resting on my shoulder and in an instant with all the steam and the warm feeling and having my father next to me, the cold, cold distance evaporates between us. My father is next to me and the warmth of the steam rising up and a warm feeling rises in me and in him and his cold distance between us has evaporated a little and my father is finally next to me and we have a warm feeling between us now that his cold distance has evaporated.

In all this warm around me and inside I am growing relaxed and as I stir the boiling liquid the warm air comes up to my nose and my father is standing next to me with his arm on my shoulder and my arm around his waist and we are sharing such a warm feeling. My father stands next to me and we are sharing a warm feeling that has risen up in us and that evaporated the cold distance between us and I am trying to hold on to all the warmth all I can and capture it and take it in all of me and let the inside of me relax with all the warmth and the warm feeling. I am holding on to the warm feeling because the warm feeling is so nice to have and it relaxes

back to work.

Lying here in a golden stream of light passing through all of my body coming through the very tip of my head, bouncing off my feet and returning back, up to my neck and leaving my mouth with a soft, but gutted moan, the breath resounds in my ears, the noise echoes, tickling my body as a cool rush comes over me. My body resting long before me, the feeling spreading through out me, I close my eyes, my mind actively at rest, passively active, alert but relaxed; moaning, solacing myself with the yearning; dreaming... remembering that day...

I stifle a laugh, looking over at my father, as he hands me a plate to rinse and dry. I remember he once said, there is asceticism and there is prudence, and I choose prudence, and he is a prudent man; he is not at the whims of passing fancies, his happy is rooted, so he is not disposed to pointless pleasure seeking, he is no slave to his desires, and aware of his emotions, if something is bothering him, he gets to the bottom of it.

I look at his dark skin, the brown of his palms, and look at my own hands, so much lighter, I used to tell myself to feel better that I had his black in my blood and I had his skin, even if I did not match him exactly in depth of shade. He looks at me, "You are having some troubles; focus; and avow yourself, pitfalls and limitations included." I nod, with my head down.

Our daunting task finished, as he hands me the last of the knives, he hugs me and I tell him good night. Everyone has left the kitchen except me. I look down at my hands and then my feet and stare at the floor for a while; I see a young girl sleeping under the table. I pick her up, take her to my old room, my old posters still up and my own paintings, put her on the bed, and lay on my floor and mope, for I have done nothing to make my parent's proud; I have failed in that department most of all; I mope to the sound of my father's violin, he finishes, and Leone begins to play the piano, out of tune, Chopin never sounded so good.

me and I can let go of some of the heaviness and I have the warm feeling from my father who can be cruel and strict, but can also be endearing.

My father stood next to me because the cold and the distance between us evaporated in the warmth of the feeling that came from the inside of my father and was felt where his thick hand with thick wrinkles now lightly rests on my shoulder. My father is standing next to me and my father and I are filled with a warm feeling and he tells me with a slight smile and through down turned eyes that what I am cooking looks good. My father told me that it looks good with a slight smile and with his down turned eyes he looks into my eyes with the slight smile and while staring directly into my eyes, I catch a little more of the warm feeling that we are sharing. I am holding on to the slight smile my father gave me and the warm feeling for as long as I can catch it and hold it and capture it because I can already feel it is drifting away and that my father can be very endearing and he stands next to me but he is about to go back to his distance across the room.

My father a surprisingly old man covered in thick wrinkles embraced me at first with a concrete distance and chillingly stared at what I was doing when I was stirring the liquid and there was a small amount of heat where he touches me on my shoulder and there was a warmth rising up in him and in me and he gave me a slight smile and looking directly into my eyes he told me that it looked good that what I was cooking looked good.

I smile back at him to the him know I heard him and I squeezed the side of his waist where my hand is resting so that he knows I heard him and I am happy that he is being so endearing as my father with thick wrinkles and a dark strictness can be endearing sometimes. I smiled back at him when he told me it looks good. I put the lid back on the pot and tell him 'father, I have to get the food over there' motioning to the other counter and he nods and I move my arm that was around his waist back to my side and he drops his arm from its old resting place on my shoulder and he leaves the room to let me finish. My father left the room.

My father in his gentleness and in the little bit of warmth he gives can be endearing and I care deeply for my father and I hold on to the little bit of warmth and the gentleness he has and the slight smiles he gives and that is what I try to remember and hold on to when he gets mean and strict. I never have to cower to his meanness and cruelty anymore because I know deep down that it is only part of him and there is a gentleness and he can be endearing and when I look at all of him, I can hold on through the parts of him that are harder. I listen to the sound of the bubbling, boiling liquid popping and very lightly I think how the stew is only good because each of its parts adds something to it and even though I do not much care for the green peppers my father likes, then I think even the green peppers add something to it.

Round Six

...remembering the day I met him, remembering the romance I felt in the fresh air and surrounding me was an aura of something old fashioned and goody toe shoed; it was a real dandy of an afternoon; if not a conventional one. I wanted to go to a soda fountain, where there would have been a dapper man behind the counter, wearing a gracious smile, and he would make me a large chocolate shake or a picture perfect banana sundae, and I would gleefully wink at him whence he handed me my order. That dream, however, crushed by the cruel fist of reality, for such store was to be found. That afternoon, I decided, instead, to stroll around downtown, where the streets are brick and the buildings carry in their facades a bit of old times, their windows still reflecting ladies with nice parasols swung over their shoulders, parasols that matched their fluffy, white dresses, their chests held in tight by their fancy, flowery corset.

On that afternoon, local farmers, with tufts of white hair poking out from underneath their hats or berets, were selling vegetables, fruits, and wild flower arrangements on the sidewalks; ragged women with missing teeth or holes in their shirts were selling crafts, such as wind chimes, knitted pot holders, delicately painted coasters; children were hopping about, bars were tumbling with joviality, and the used book store I passed coughed with dust as the door opened to let out an appreciated customer. There were many people congregated and walking about, there was a humbleness to the gathering, a fluid stillness presiding though the disconcerted, yet motionless movements; and I paddled down the stream of kindness that poured from the hearts of every man and woman around me, and I was surely glowing with a smile, because I was having a truly jolly time amongst the colorful, faceless crowd, even a fascinating one. I ambled slowly, trying to pick out and collect for safe keeping the memorable pieces, but alas, I would forget as quickly as I saw, no sooner registering the sights than erasing them with the next blink, so I gave up trying to remember; and began embracing the anonymity, my own included, as I was no more and no less than those around me, I was them or could have been any one of us, any one of us forgotten souls. I became hungry, bought and munched on stagnant, salty popcorn, which I hoped to fill up on in order to suppress any further cravings, for I was short of money, and with no desire to walk any further, I sat down on a curb as a steady smudge of people continued to file past me, while I rested, subjected completely to indifference; and I was left to a contented, if not pacified, serenity.

I awoke, through pure happenstance, out of a long, soporific daze, opened my eyes to a man walking directly towards me, radiantly parting the crowd as he was striding down the road; it was less the emergence of a

Shifting the weight to the left side of my body after pouring in the rest of the ingredients with my right side getting tired, I realize even now I would rather be with my brother. I would have liked to have gone with my brother when he left a year or so ago. I forgot about the plans I had to go live with him until I said that to Shannon earlier. I have been busy enough that I have forgotten about my plans to be with my brother. My brother says I could come and live with him. My brother says there is room for me at his place. My brother says there will always be room for me in his place.

We have planned so many times that I could come to stay with him and see if I could live with him. My father never likes the idea of that. My father tells me I should stay here for now and that I can go live there and stay with my brother when I am older and more stable. My father is right. My father tells me I should stay here for right now and my father is right that I need to be older and more stable. I will go live with my brother when I am older.

I would like to at least to go visit my brother, but that never works out. I have tried that before, but I end up having to cancel the plans because there is some excuse or something comes up or my father wants me to stay here. My brother understands. He knows I will go live with him when I am older. He tells me when I talk to him that he will have a room for me at his place no matter what and no matter where he is at. That is good of my brother. I can wait until I get older and more stable and I will be able to live with him. Until then, I can live with my father.

I know my father likes to have me around. If I left the house would be empty. I know my father would like me to stick around and so it is better to live here with my father for now. I like to stick with my father. I like to stick with my father through everything. I always stick by my father. I honor and care for my father. I like to stick by my father and help him out. I have grown accustomed to sticking around here and helping my father.

My father is lonely. He does not say it but he thinks he is all alone. My father likes to think he is isolated and alone. I like to stick by my father so that he has company. I do not want him to think he is all alone in his trials and tribulations. I do not ever want him to think that he is alone, but my father thinks that anyway. My father isolates himself and thinks he is all alone and that is my father. So I like to stick around and keep him company so at least there is some one he is around. I always think I am alone, too; but then I think of the few friends I have made in my life. Friends do not even have to be around you all the time for you to feel their company. I think of my few friends and then I never feel isolated.

My father does not really have some one to talk to. I would let him talk to me but he never wants to talk to me and I do not ever have the right thing to say to him to make him feel better. He is alone and that is my father and I sticky by my father so he has company and so he is not alone.

prophet, and more the sighting of a god, as good looks such as his could only be explained by divine lineage; in the blur of the unmemorable day, I discovered, it is beauty which is remembered; and I, roused, this goddess in her own right, scrambled to my feet, anxious, as he moved carefully forward, his eyes, I swear were staring straight at me, for he was as enamored as I; for he had an irrepressible attraction for me and was seeking me, and I stood there waiting for his arrival, my lips aching, a pounding pain at the base of me longing for his pressure, yearning, I brought my finger up to my mouth, and bit down hard to try to calm the desire.

Then something horrible happened; he slyly turned to the right, down a different street, deterred from me; I went completely unnoticed by him, completely! I, not one to follow, found myself in a hurried pace trying to catch up; and it was I that sough, it was I who went seeking, perhaps for a lack of anything better to do, perhaps because my imagination stirred up visions of him and I latching arms and playfully disappearing into each other, perhaps because I decided I was not going to be denied this god of a man; regardless, and suggesting to myself that this was not stalking, but opening up an opportunity for him to meet me, I soon was slinking around the corner of yet another street he turned down, to see him yards, meters, and seemingly blocks ahead of me; hesitating, doubting if I should continue, I did continue, hastened my pace, steadily making progress, until I was close, just close enough that it would only take a slight cough for him to hear me, to take note of me; and I began to oblige my more natural instincts, returning to a relaxed, disaffected promenade, breathing in deep breaths in order to subdue the thumping rush of my heart.

The sea of people now depleted, it was him and I and a few other stragglers on a quiet street block. He lifted one of his arms, his wrist flowing out a hand, his fingers lively snapping a one beat, then two before placing that hand into his pocket, he continued moseying on down the street in a swagger, leaning back, walking sweet and slow, with all the manners of a gentleman, and I took each step cautiously and tried to align my steps, tap, tapping, tapping with the beat he made when his dress shoes hit the concrete, and I placed one of my hands right below the red belt I wore that matched the flowers printed on my dress and I, sniffing my pits, found myself smelling just as rosy a flower (or I placed one of my hands on my hip right below the brown leather belt that I wore, which held up my trousers and I, sniffing, found myself smelling salty and musty and just plain stank); my other hand loosely dangled in the breeze and around my wrist and I twirled around the sequin pouch I was using as a purse (or my other hand loosely, but awkwardly dangled in the breeze trying to find some where to go); and I pursed my lips together to refresh my coat of lipstick (lipstick which I was not wearing); and I began to fear this situation was

My father does not think of people in his life. He is very sad. My father makes me sad. It is his alone that makes him sad. Even with me around he feels some how alone. He does not think of people in his life. He has a very heavy heart and does not think of people. That is my father and I try to keep him company so he does not feel alone even though he makes himself alone and isolated.

I know he feels sad. Sometimes he is sad, but at the same time angry. He is sad and sometimes even his snoring sounds like tears and bitter weeping. My father is sad and he does not know it but sometimes his loud snoring sounds like bitter weeping. My father has a heavy heart and my father is stoic and tries to hold out through all the sadness and anger and alone and be fine, but he is hurt and he is not fine.

My father is all alone in his hurt. I stick by my father because I do not want him to be alone and to think of my father alone makes me shudder with hurt. I worry he will be gasping his last breath of air and then look up to see nobody and think around and remember there is no one with him and then I get sad and I want to make sure he is never alone like that. I never want my father to have to face that alone and I do not want him to think he is alone.

Sometimes, though I do not know how to make him happy or I should do even when I cannot be happy myself. I am sad and hurt and alone most of the time too and he never seems to really be worrying about me and I cannot help that I get sad and want to be happy and want to move and not be around him and that I wish I would think less about him, just like he does not think about me. It is my choice to stay here and help my father and keep him company. I cannot put any responsibility on him to be more appreciative. This is my choice.

Sometimes I get to thinking about how I am hurt and alone just like my father. It is always my love that hurts me. I have all this love for him and he does the best he can, but he expects a lot out of me and that I am supposed to give and respect him and I feel like my love just should not be because it only hurts me and makes it worse. I care deeply for my father but it would be better if I did not care so deeply for my father, but I am concerned for him and so that makes my love the thing that hurts me most.

My love starts to wear thin. This love of mine wears thin. Sometimes when I try to have this love that is also my hurt, I try to stop caring all together because I get so sick of the caring and the loving that I have that is in all of me and I stop wanting to have it all together. I do not want the caring and the loving that is in me, especially all the loving that goes unreturned. My love wears thin. I get very mad and I start with all the loving and the hurt and then I get mad and think how none of it is returned and I get mad and congested.

hopeless, I had no game, no in; and I was hardly a woman.

I persisted, however, a bit longer, but with no sign of providence stepping in, and growing tired of walking out of my way so far, this pursuit was no longer striking my fancy and so I turned around, tapping out my own rhythm against the sidewalk away from his; and after turning around, I heard a gentle holler *hey, girl! wait, I was just about to stop and talk to you* and I clacked my tongue, perusing my options, and said, offhand, over my shoulder *boy, if you are starting this off by playing games, and one of hunt and seek no less, how am I ever going to trust you* and I continued walking away; there was a prolonged pause, a low whistle sounding of a setback, *you do have me there* but then *now get on over here*, laughing, I went ahead and did.

“How...did you plan that?”

“Yeah, I saw you sit down and I figured I had a few minutes to work something out, to make you notice me without having to make any definite move myself.”

“What if I didn’t see you...what if I didn’t follow?”

“I knew you would,” he said with a bit of foolishly arrogant innocence. I liked him I decided, right then and there. Christ and I--I mean Charod and I-- made plans for the next day; the ensuing three weeks, we would meet at the same restaurant, then go to the same bar, twice sometimes three times a week, because he wanted to take it slow, and we would go out, talk all night long, recounting for each other our lives, our dreams; he had a funny way about him, grandiose in manner, like he would not eat all his food, but then he would not take a box *no, no just take it, take it away*, he was always paying and looking out for me, whatever I needed, he demanded for me--now, I had to get him out of that habit, because I can speak for myself, but the first few times it was real nice to see someone going out of their way for me, making sure I had what I wanted, and that was because he was a gentlemen through and through. He talks of hardships *you know for a while there, it was so hip to be urban, poor, but it is so different to have to live it, everyone is trying to be it, while you are it, living as a consequence of history, being the poor, being the black man, while everyone else is romanticizing it. Those who have made it out are not helping much of anything, I mean look at me, I got out and I am not looking back*; he said to me *you would think it has all passed, but I have seen a lot of fighting, a lot of racism, a lot of anger* and with no idea what to say, really, *funny, where you see division, I see reconciliation* and he gave me the look that said maybe; and when he spoke of his life, told me his thoughts, he would say things exactly as I was thinking them, close to the same, anyway, deep down, we agreed, I have always thought of him and me as a deep down similar, a living paradox, where up is down and down is up, same, but different, different, but same; and over those first dinners we argued to test the bounds of each other’s reality and over those first drinks we were presented with the new

I have all this love for Irene and she hurts me but she does not realize she hurts me too. I love her with all of me and I do not know what to do with the love I have for her but I do love her no matter what just like I love my father no matter what. I start to get angry when I think I am never going to get my love returned. I get mad when I think I will never get my love, will never get my understanding. I get congested and angry when I think of how I will never get my understanding and how I will never get my love.

The problem with my love is that it is everything and even when I try to ignore it, it is everything in me and there is no way to fight it even for all the pain it causes and I still have it and I have to have it and it is everything. Love is the something that is everything and love is everything and everything in me and everything to me and it is the love all in me that gives me some hope. I hope all the time my love will be with her love and so I have the love in me that is everything and it is all my hurt but also my hope.

I have love that hurts me and that helps me hope that when we have our love, things will be better. I hope that some day she will see that I love her or I will tell her and I will get some of her love back and then a lot in my life will be better and I will have her love. I only need a little bit of her love back because I can hold on so well to the littlest things that people are able to give me. I do not need all of her love even if I love with all of me because I only need a little bit and to that I can hold on very tightly.

All my love is all my suffering and sadness and anger but it is also my hope. The hope of my love and her love makes me happy. All my hope is in all of my love for her. I have my love and I have my hope. I have all this love and all the love I think is everything and I have all this hope and then in it is all the hurt and a lot of suffering and sadness.

All my love is congested inside of me and I have all this love for Shannon and it is in only me and it is all my love. This is my deepest sadness in all my love, all my love that hurts me and is my hope and makes me angry. I should not always be with my love for her. I have this love for her and the love comes to me when I see her, but I should not have that love the way I am loving her and so my love is always how I go wrong. I do not think I should have the love I have for her, but I cannot stop the love I have. I have a love that has grown in me for her, a love that is unerring love and a love that never falters, a love that is in all of me and sticks in me and I think I will always have this love because I have always had this love.

My love starts to wear thin. I think of all this love and then for what. I have all this love for Shannon and all this love for my father and I have it with all of me and it never matters much and it does not really do anything except make me have a lot of hurt. I get my hope and so I have hope because of my love but that hope looks pathetic, especially when I think of

idea of each other, and we shared his cigarettes, laughing, because both of us had found a match, we put the cigarette in my mouth, and lit it with both fires. I remember going home after those nights and taking burning, scalding baths, for I was trying to torch my skin, to torch my outside as my inside burned; how many times I put my head under the water, baptizing myself in his name, arising purified.

I remember one night I told him *I do not believe in marriage, don't think two people should stick together that long, people need to grow, I could never be in a marriage* and he *what's this you are telling me, girl, huh, you don't think there is love, you don't believe in love* and I said, *I guess, maybe just that you can't count on love lasting too long* and he smiled, didn't know what to say to that, and winked *we'll see* and that was the exact Friday night he invited me to a picnic a group of his friends and family were having the next day; and I, of course, as an equal opportunity picnic attendee, agreed to go.

The sun that day was sure bright, he was shamelessly exposing his prodigious breadth, the round center emanated rays of light harder than gold and thicker than clay, while pouring out grandeur upon the world; and we walked side by side he told during that walk, *you empower me* and I smiled, clutched his hands tighter; that day I meet his family and friends and their friends, and we all sat around, eating, talking and enjoying our Saturday vacation, and all the women, his grandma, mother, cousins kept asking, kept saying in that prodding, husky, low voice of wanting to get right to the bottom of things, *Your new girl, huh? Your new girl?* and he looked down at the ground, bashful, but he was indicating something to me and would not say it, I laughed and responded, *yeah, yeah, I am his girl* and they would smile back to me, and he, sht., kept his head down, but I saw the grin, I saw him happy.

It was when I went to get some food, that I started to feel something wrong in me, and I was there, staring at the goopy egg salad with all that mayonnaise just sitting out in the sun, spoiling in all the heat, about to make some one sick, about to poison some one, and I could feel a sickness in my own stomach, and I got faint and it was the thought of that egg salad and the heat, turning my stomach and making me feel ill and then there was the heat of the sun hitting me and I began to sweat, and I started feeling all sick like; I realized right then I had the sickness, I had a fever, it was love, fucking love, that punk finally got me after all these years and I was working so diligently to avoid it, and I got dizzy and dropped my plate and fainted; heat stroke, the doctors said, but doesn't heat stroke go away? I have yet to fully recover, for that was a stroke which permanently weakened me, I have never been the same since that summer day and the fever has not left.

I remember waking up back at my house, him towering over me, gleaming just like the sun, as if he had digested it and it was in his blood; he

all this love I have and how it never matters much anyway except that I have it. I start getting very angry and want to never love. I want to never have this love and to stop any love I have. I start getting angry that I have it at all. I get encrusted with the anger and I never want to love. Then I have the anger and the anger comes even when I try not to have it.

“Father” I go into the family room, motioning, whispering, “the food is ready.”

I get angry that I am alone. I try to be patient for when I can move with my brother because he is better company for me, better than my father. I try to patient for Shannon to see that I love her and for her to try to give me a little bit of her love. I still get angry and I have no place to put all the anger I have just like I have no place to share any of my love. I have all of this in me and I have no where to make it go and it is a love that makes me angry and so all the anger and the love piles up on me and I get congested. I get so angry thinking about how I am alone and just like my father alone and hurt and sad. My love that is all of me and is everything is my sadness and my anger and it is where I have the most hurt and it makes me encrusted with anger.

Even my love for my father looks like something I would be better off not having all together. I look at my father as he comes in and sits down to his table, the table I set and sits to the food I made and I think I am like my father alone and isolated and encrusted with anger and hurt. So even though I should not have my love for him, I do have my father. We keep each other company in our hurt and anger. I have my love for him and I have the little bit of tenderness he shows and I know he is trying to help me and he has always provided for me and I know he cares about me and I do have my father even though I should not have my love for him.

I have made a choice to stay here with my father but I have made the choice why could I never leave? I do have my father but I do not want to have to always be around my father and I do not like that I am here and alone and angry and with a cold, distant, strict man that is only sometimes endearing. I do not have a choice at all. What am I supposed to do? I could never leave my father and I could no go against him because he has always provided for me and taken care of me. Why should I go if it hurts him when I have a responsibility to him. I should never think of leaving but I do not want to be around my father even though I do love him and care for him deeply. It is my choice to stay here but I do not want to say that it is my choice because then I should have the choice to leave. I do not want to have to decide to hurt my father that I care deeply about and feel a responsibility towards. I do not want to have the choice of making him alone like everyone else has done. That does not seem like a choice or a decision I should have to be able to make. My happiness is not choice when

seethed with its fierceness and I passed out again to him burning in my mind. I knew right then I should have stopped seeing him, I knew that when I woke up again, I had to make a big decisions, because I had one last opportunity to deny the love, back out, leave it as a could have been, and I had that chance to stay alone; and I think now, I should have fasted and let the frenzy drain out of me, but in that moment, I could not stop the love and so I took it, had to and I let him stay, or I stayed with him; and he took care of me, massaged my muscles, brought me water and ice and when I was better, he decided to never leave my side, no longer wait, no longer put things off; and we were always together, we finally had our beginning, we would often just stare, our arms and legs enfolding each other, the flesh called black and the flesh called white, peach crossing, creamy, I felt like vanilla or melted butter with brown sugar kissing him, our tongues swapping the taste of the pork chops he cooked us for dinner, while the rest of the world stopped existing to us, wars were probably being fought, suns and moons went cycling past, but none of it seemed to matter, everything else faded; and in those first months, we made our own traditions, wrote our own history, we had our progressions, our misunderstandings and understandings, we made our rules, which we followed close, set the boundaries and paid strict attention to, we were so careful to say the right thing, careful to feel the other in our decisions, staying open with each other, disclosed.

I remember at some point writing that quaint old crone of mother a note to make it official *I have your son now, you have been replaced, he is mine now, we have birthed each other new. I will take good care of him --S;* in the beginning, those perfect days in constant counsel, waking up to each other under warm sheets *damn that I only have two hands, that I have to take you in bits and pieces and I can never have the whole* I kissed him then, he said, *I want this to last forever; always* and we were married, our spirits bonded, but no ceremony, for we had an eternal present and our always was no promise for the future, and I knew that since we had it real and true right then, that present would last in us forever; *let me inside you*, intertwined, a part of your life, I asked him, *as I have let you inside me* and he traced my neck, him, the architect, the rugged statue of his own towering ideas, who was always sketching me as he was unveiling me; and under his direction, he built in me skyscrapers, I fell in love with his civilization, the rough rocks chiseled, jungles turned to city buildings and sidewalks, the sky filled with the tall, sleek, sophisticated towers of his city; mmm I remember back in those first days, the first months, staring at me, always staring, he traced my neck, engagingly, his hand slipping underneath my strap, kneading so slightly my muscles, carefully, his hands gracing my shoulders, supporting me, encouraging me, lifting me up; awakening, rousing my blood, inspired, my toes wiggling,

the choice I have is to hurt my father and leave him alone like everyone else and even though I cannot make him happy and even though he feels isolated, hurt and alone, it should not be my choice to make myself happy and do what I want to do because that is not a choice.

My father sits at the table in silence. "Pass me the butter," he says gruffly and he goes back to his distance and we go back to our silence. My father and I eat in silence like we eat all the time in silence. With all this silence all I can hear is the sound of our spoons every once in a while hitting the bottom of our bowls and the quiet trickles of soup falling off the spoon. Even the sound of my crumbling pieces of bread that drop as I pick up a piece from the center of the table can be heard it is so silent. My father and I eat silently and he sits across from me at a far distance and chews his bread and eats the food I cooked.

My father especially when he is angry and sad likes to keep to himself. I do not know why he is angry and sad tonight. My father is keeping himself at a distance and as we eat together, he is in an enraged silence just like I am. I look down into my bowl. I am not hungry. I am staring into my bowl while dipping a piece of bread that I hold up between the round tips of my forefinger and thumb and watch as the liquid soaks up into the bread. I am watching as the stew soaks into the bread and makes the bread soggy enough that it starts to dissolve and break away and melt into my warm liquid.

I am never hungry for what I cook. I am sick of the food that I cook half way through cooking it and that is why instead of eating the stew, I am dipping more bread in and watching as the soup soaks up the bread, making it soggy, and the piece is dissolving and almost vanishing.

My father looks up at me and I left him look up at me. I begin to eat not looking back up at him, but just knowing he looked up at me made me put the remaining bit of bread in my mouth. Dipping my bread in the stew like that is childish of me. I do not want my father looking up to see me acting childish. Watching the soup soak up my bread was childish of me and I should really be acting better. If I would stop acting so childish, I would be acting better. I do not know what has gotten into me.

I am letting the piece of soggy bread that I shoved into my mouth dissolve in my mouth. The bread is so soggy and I let it rest on my tongue and put a little bit of soup in my mouth so that it will dissolve even more. I am taking small bits and drops of soup in case my father looks up again so that I will prevent him from saying anything to me in his gruff voice in the form of an order about sitting up and eating me or to prevent him from saying anything to me in his gruff voice about me eating like a bird like a typical father would do. I continue to eat, but I look up to see that my father has gone back to himself and is not looking at me. My father has

active; my knees, my elbows angular, sharp, alert.

He would touch my belly, thighs, fingers, ears, curious, hearing, seeing, feeling; fingers rounding out my breasts, the cunning, witty curves, the rising mountains, height, invigorated, hard; following the strict lines of my legs, rubbing the subtly, while touching the stylish curve of my hips.

I think of him now dancing, the way he dances, sometimes odd, sometimes like a robot, sometimes tripping over his own two feet; and his smell, that smell, his smell that I taste in the back of my throat...

I start thinking of the sturdy, weighty, thick bone, I choke with desire, thinking of my tongue outlining the sensitive tip, that softest skin, his soothing mind, the curved head... mmm his body, him; the way his thin fingers touch me and then his tongue, the light force between my lips;

a breeze comes in through the window, rushing in and around me is the cool air, he has opened the door, arrived; the breeze tickles my feet and teasing me, I sit up as he closes the door behind him; I grab his hand, the rush of air he carries with him brings his scent, he sits down next to me as I touch his back, the cozy wool sweatshirt, he has come tonight, man;

He drags his finger along my leg, I have waited patiently, I smile as he brings his finger to my lips that spoke, who honors me with his touch.

I roll over into his chest and rest on his shoulder as he wraps his arms around me, consumes me, and I look up at him, each kiss he gives is confidence, arrogance, my grizzled Zeus; who commanded a world;

"How are you tonight," he asks, voice crooning, speckled with jazz, "I am fine, baby, but you are not looking so good" "Tired. Been a long day, all sorts of stuff to worry about, it never ends, always something." "Life is meant to be lived leisurely, working like you do gets your mind all caught up in knots; I can never understand where all that work you have comes from. You have changed. You used to be able to have fun, be as lazy as I am." "I have changed; but, I am telling you, not everyone sees things quite like you, some of us are ambitious, feel like there is much to do, much to prove." "well, that's you, then." "Maybe you are right. I am always thinking lately you are right about a lot of things, I have gotten so hard in my work these days," he smiles; who concedes (if only slightly);

He shyly looks into my eyes, tugging, grabbing my shirt, delicately hinting that he desires, I stare at him, so slick in his pants, jeans, trousers, his tie hanging loosely, collar starched, crisp, and unknotted, sliding off, slowly going down the fresh line of buttons of his bright shirt, donning the appearance of the god himself he is, he always is, reason; who deliberates in ironies;

His fingers dancing, running on me; his heart pounding, pulling, taking, off, sliding pants off, he sits me near him, tracing my ass, sliding, his fingers, sliding, oh, squelching, sliding, again; as he is pulsing with creativity who is

turned all his silent attention back to himself. I continue to put small spoonfuls of soup into my mouth.

I am putting spoonfuls of metal into my mouth. When I put the spoon in my mouth I bite down hard on it with the teeth at the entrance of my mouth. When I bite down on the spoon, my teeth become metal. When I bite down on the metal spoon, my teeth start to feel hard and metallic and soon from the front of my teeth to the back of my jaw, the bones are all metal and hard. My whole mouth is metal. I let the belly of the spoon rest along my tongue, so that my tongue turns metal too.

When I bite down on the spoon and let the belly of the spoon rest on my tongue and let the top of the spoon while resting on my tongue touch the back of my teeth, my whole mouth becomes metal. I pull the spoon partly out of my mouth and I bite down hard again on the spoon, turning my teeth and jaws metal. Where I bite down the metal strikes through my teeth. I grit my teeth tough across the metal and it drives right into me, making all my bones metal.

My whole mouth and my jaw and all of my bones are now metal, as metal as the spoon I am gritting my teeth on. I clench tighter on the spoon and I am staring to get a headache, but the taste of silver in my mouth is refreshing and the silver metal fills up my mouth. When I finally take the spoon out of my mouth, I do it slowly and I pull it up against the back of my teeth as I slide it out. I get more soup to put in my mouth. I bring the spoon back up to my mouth and I bite down hard on the handle as I put it in my mouth. I clench tight with my teeth and grit the spoon again and I let it strike through my teeth and I let the silver metal fill up my whole mouth again with the taste of metal. I clench even tighter this time and grind my teeth against the metal and let my teeth and jaw become the metal silver spoon. I am getting a headache. My head is tight and compounded and becoming metal. My jaw is sore from all the tight clenching of the metal spoon and I am clenching tighter trying to crack the metal spoon. My mind has such a bad headache, so bad it is becoming a wide open mouth screaming. In the dark, silver, metallic open mouth of my mind, there is a pained, metallic scream. At the front of my mind is the wide open mouth of a clawing, metallic screaming that is very pained. There is a pained screaming in my mind. I clench tighter to the spoon and the screaming is getting louder and scratches me with its sharp teeth. I clench tight to the spoon until it slips out of my teeth and out of my mouth comes the scream and out of my mouth I start screaming a metallic, pained, clawing scream that is in me. I am screaming with all the pained clawing of the scream and my father has thrown his silver ware down, got up and has slapped me and left the room, gruffly telling me to make sure and get the kitchen cleaned up. I bury my head into the table, my mind still screaming.

drawn, written, composed, built; who creates, who births, his hand reaches, sculpts my breast, a polished marble, idealized, then he graces lightly, the flesh, the firm, fresh dew drop; still sliding;

His mouth to my nipple, drenching me with his saliva; I run my hand over his burgeoning self, which becomes monumental; he stands before me erect, stylish, strapped, cold steel, precise, an idea constructed made real, sharp, strong; who commanded structure, who is naked; yet I see the curves, the boy has curves; we face each other, pushing back; stimulated, excited, open, listening, hearing, noting, thoughts, warm, opened, entered, plunging into me, contained; who is raised in me;

Swaying back and forth, legs wrapped, intertwined, then around, swaying back and forth between man and woman, my shoulders wide, his chest is broad, he has hips, slender legs, his hair is curled, who is strong, who is weak; who is linear, who is cyclical; mmm m m

pulling out, sitting up, facing him, commanded, ordered, demanded, submitted, obeying, swaying between man and woman; who is man, who is woman; surrounded him, all angles, around him, reaching a momentarily ah, but holding back, grasping tight, drawing out until I have more, that thick, sturdy, swelling, swollen, big, that bone mmmm; relaxing, until I see more, all sides; who is known;

Swinging, riding, slow; to not respond, to inhibit, to let it grow, let the feeling mature, to extend the thought, holding on, clamping it, loosening, relax, allowing, letting it emerge; swelling, reaching the height, holding, hold and holding back to heighten, oo the rush starts, extend, connecting the minor peaks, stringing the many, extending, connecting them, strengthening, tightening, up, up, reached more, deep, fresh; raised the feeling begins to flow out, onto shore, who is brought to; who is reached; mmmm

Now fast; rocking; I am with my love; between him and I are two mirrors and two images that are indistinguishable; two fabrics stitched together, I have sewed together the inside and the outside, I am an image transposed onto his, we are one, have become one; I am man and I am woman, who is, both are, an ideal human, epicene;

I am ripe, empty yourself in me, make me bulge with life...

Orgasm; from the very depths, from the very bottom, coming, reached, followed by the rush, the oceanic explosion, the last moan, the deep lullaby, his voice ripe with pleasure; the desire fulfilled, flushed, the final peak, came, reached, a long sigh and solace in the blankness of mind emptied through climax, coherent, flushed out, cleaned, resting listless, yet coherent in an awakened dream state, smooth, attentive; who is realized, known.

Now the pumping of the fresh feeling, all feelings, sorrow, happiness, a pure feeling, this empty abstract Love filling up with the depths of passion; our act of love which is the exploitation, the appropriation; and some where in the middle is respect, somewhere in the middle is the selflessness, the place where he snugly fits in, connected, a part of me, inside, where I love him as him, and as a part of me, I want us inseparable, but tonight it feels, it does, that we are merely together as two, a heartless bond, because I did not feel it, his love returned, no love, so he does not see me; yet has had me; it can't-- be; is; as he now looks not at me, but ahead of me, around me, above me; strangely impersonal, cold (has he forgotten me though I am right here?), he kisses my forehead, leaves, falls to my side making a slight breeze, who is resting by my side, separate; him, who I have loved, sometimes more than myself.

"Hey, I was thinking that tomorrow" he brashly interrupts me, "I don't want to hear it right now; I am too tired for plans." "Right." My jaw drops with disbelief. "My friend Erin is back in town." "Nice." "She--" "I am tired."

I normally would not mind. I would normally not let it get to me. I should not get upset. I am going to get some water and take a deep breath. He is just tired; it is not a big deal. Only now I am sobbing. Could it be? It can't be. It isn't. Is. It is only my love, only mine; not ours; horrified, I slink down to the floor and accept the tears; these tears, because I love, have loved, still very much want to love, but can no longer. I have been holding on too long; I have not been paying attention, instead I have been daydreaming, imagining us, while he is his own; he is not with me.

He has been my longest love, the hardest love I have had; two summers now, and then this fall. I feel myself shirking; a marriage, ha! sure, yeah, truly an eternal bond, sht.; good thing divorces are so cheap these days, I saw that sign, the neon sign I saw earlier today proclaimed wills thirty dollars, divorces thirty-nine, how lucky for us, our separation will not be too draining; and all our time together, that too amounts to practically nothing, because we stopped gaining, stopped creating a long time ago; I almost wish I never noticed this, I could have continued dreaming us forever, funny thing after all, it was me holding on, being in the real love I told him so long ago I didn't think was possible.

I have always thought deep down we were like for like, exactly, similar, and I thought there could be no other for me, but I have been fooling myself, there is only dis-alike, maybe familiar, but always dis-alike and no two people can replace each other, there is no eye for an eye, no like reaction and no trading one for any other; and certainly no alike forever; and it is time to love myself more than him, like I used to, back when I was doing my own thing, before I was saturated with him, and I have to find

I am very particular about the way I lay the pots and dishes after I wash them. After I wash the pots out, I am very particular in the way I stack them on the counter. I am incredibly particular about making sure very little sound is made when I lay them on top of each other. I try to stack them gently on top of one another so that I do not make a lot of loud crashing noises. One of the most unbearable sounds is the loud crashing and clinking of pans and pots and dishes against one another. The medium sized noise of utensils and pots crashing and clinking and clanging against one another can be loud and annoying if I am not careful and particular about the way I stack them on top of one another on the counter after I have finished washing them.

After dinner and late at night is the most quiet part of the evening. I am very particular to make sure and stack everything quietly on the counter, so that I do not upset the most quiet part of the evening. In the quiet of the evening, instead of making too much noise, which I am particular to avoid, I like to watch the quiet of the shadows and listen to the hush of the evening. There is a hush in the evening after the day is over and when I am finishing all the tasks of the day that is over I like to hear and I like to watch the quiet tucks of shadows being cast by the pots and the pans. I like to look at the pots and the pans stacked gently on top of one another, casting shadows.

I like to listen to the soothing sound of the water running out of the

what I have left of me, what I have become now, what I can be now.

I smirk; every time we are together, I feel like I let him into a brothel, this dilapidated house, the flowers stomped on, the porch that needs fixing up, the roof that needs new tiles, the paint chips off the house, and it is all built on a slanted graveyard of old selves; the inside of the house is wretched too, the sheets are stained, there is rust on the hinges, the kitchen floor is crooked, the carpet is raggedy; and then there is me, oversexed and aging; ahh, but in terms of love it is a mansion, full of eloquent chambers, a hall of mirrors, which reflects memories of people, their faces, their laughs, their gestures as I walk through and see myself in them, and there are wide corridors that echo the sounds of quiet loves, loud loves, passionate loves, silly loves, whiny loves, tender loves, light loves and at the center is the desk where I have written down my lessons, and there is small, but snug bedroom, which is all my own, that I keep locked up for safe keeping; and in the core there is always a feeling of youth and celebration. I never seem to cease or tire, but instead add on and let in and I am always scrimping and saving trying to feed all the stomachs I have, but never succeeding, because I am always craving more; I am insatiable, just when I am filled, I stretch, just when I am satisfied, a new hunger strikes me, pulling me away, leading me down more halls; it seems like I am always building, making a new addition and refurbishing old rooms; and then I laugh, with him gone, I will have much more room for myself! My small bedroom will be completely mine again! Getting back in bed, and taking the blankets left over after he covered himself, I put my back against his body and enjoy his warmth for the last time. How comforting to be near him!, how comforting my soiled sheets!, how comforting the sweat of my face clogging my pores!, how comforting my stale, hot breath!, how pleasant the heat from the intrusion, the burning reminder of the desecration!, how base and inglorious my existence has been!, how raunchy and foul!, how profane!, how deliciously profane!

faucet while I clean out the sink and I like the sound of soap bubbles popping as I wash them down the drain. The most soothing sound in the hushed evening in the quiet of shadows is the water pouring gently and clearly from the faucet while I am rinsing out the sink. That is my favorite noise in the hush of the evening. I like to watch as the last bit of soap tumbles down the drain and the sink is rinsed out. I finish wiping off the counters and the table and then I hand the rag quietly over the arch of the faucet and I turn around and turn off the kitchen light and being to head towards my bedroom.

My favorite part of the hushed evening is turning off the light and gently tip-toeing across the smooth floor and then hitting carpet and making no noise at all, but just listening to the cracks of the house as it adjusts and I like the feeling of the heat pouring out of the vents and I make my quiet climb up the stairs to my bedroom. I walk at a slow pace and listen carefully to the house adjusting and cracking and to the sound of the heat pouring from the vents, the warm air is as soothing as the sound of water pouring out of the faucet and I smile as the shadows fall all around me as I climb up the stairs quietly to go to bed in a house where all the lights are off now and there is only the shadows.

I enter my room and I quietly shut the door to make sure and not transgress the quiet of the evening and I close the door very quietly so that I do not transgress the gentle hush of night.

As I lay down my bones being to relax and my muscles being to relax and my mind begins to relax in the calm, soothing hush of the evening, the hush that comes from shadows and smooth noises and the sounds and sights of this house. Now is the time for rest and all around me is the quiet and gentle sound of a cracking, adjusting house that puts its arms around me and keeps me warm. It is in the hush of the evening that I pull everything together and rest after the trouble of a day. It is the gentle hush of the evening that helps me pull myself together and relax after the troubles of a day. I gently turn on the lamp by my bed and look at my tiny, rice paper hands that are fragile and thin. I liked the sound of the gentle click of my lamp combining itself with the gentle hush of the evening.

Putting my hands down to my sides, I sigh and I think about Shannon again and the calm she has about her and how she is the gentle sound of water rushing from the faucet and how her voices when she speaks is as satisfying as the sound of pots and pans touching each other making only a little bit of noise as I place them against each other in my particular way that I have to stack them. She is as sweet and gentle as the dark shadows and as warm as this cracking, adjusting house and she wraps her arms around me to keep me warm as I turn over into her and fall asleep.

In gold sandals, dawn, like a thief, fell upon me
- Sappho

Round Seven
Saturday

“Hey girl.” he leans over to me.

“When you leave this morning, honey, you got to understand, you leave for good.”

“Wha--”

“Come on now.”

“Alright... alright” stretching his arms out, I lean into the center of his chest, my home, he wraps his arms around me.

“Always,” I whisper.

“Yes, always,” he kisses my forehead, a painful reminder of last night.

“Leave.”

Round Eight

As I am left in the wake of two children running past me, I take in their exuberance, relieved, for this morning warms my skin and the whole of me explodes with sudden vitality; the last few, but severely injured warriors of my dwindled last bits of self rise from the battlefield after the detonation of heart break, I am becoming restored to myself, a sudden feeling of exhilaration, I close *my* eyes, touch *my* skin, run *my* fingers through *my* hair, scratching *my* scalp; I have forgotten how wonderful I am!, but I am slowly being reminded, and I am sure there is a lesson that will result after the last strains of pain leak out of me; entering the diner through the revolving door, there is a hint of me in the glass but inside the shadow I cast there is people, booths, the counter, I see the reflection of the trees and a horizon, turning, revolving, the transparent images, the outside in me, and I in the outside, I push forward, out, going in, to see the girls already here, waiting for me, Erin looks up, waves slightly, now returning to her menu, she stares intently at the choices; this morning! is a fresh pot of coffee simmering on the burner, the newly brewed coffee is now being poured, with each revitalizing cup brimming with a bit of recaptured youth and energy, entering into the old soul sipping. The inside of this diner is a magical shelter, for these four walls designate more than just any space, this is a god damn sanctuary, the only true sanctuary for humankind, and everyone is encased in the forgiving stream of the soothing luminosity of the generous splendor of the multitude of dawning worlds; this place is running on a fervor, a deep rooted ecstasy, the waitresses move with great agility and speed, the sparkling, radiant, and haloed people are scooping up their food, shoveling it down their throats anxiously, hungrily, whetting their appetite, the mood is merry, people are pleased from their toes to their shoulders, from their halcyon minds to their cooing words, from their jolly bellies to their ebullient utterances, for I hear nothing but jovial conversations and laughter is emitted from all directions, “Hello; sorry I am late” “We ordered

you some coffee, is that okay?" "Yes, great! Thank you"... This place is so gross, I wonder what we used to always find so great about it, it stinks, the smell of garbage wafts from the back room to the front, there is a visible layer of dust in the air, the coffee tastes old and stale and has soaked the taste of annihilation into my mouth, I swear this must be the taste of death, there are dead bugs and gnats and spiders stacked up in the corners of the windows, in the light fixtures, the floor is sticky, and the servers are ugly, their hair is greasy, some still have big bangs, others have perms, the one is missing teeth. I look at Shannon beaming with happiness and Lee Ann sitting there staring into her cup, both of them obnoxious ... "Are you ready to order?" "Yes," the three chime nearly together, "I will have special number two, but instead of pancakes, may I have French Toast?" "Depends on the cook, but most likely." "Okay, either way it is fine; and I would like my eggs sunny side up" "You?" "I would like an order of chocolate chip pancakes, three scrambled eggs, a coffee, some orange juice, some water, a bowl of granola with fruit and milk." "And you dear?" "I will have two slices of wheat toast," Lee Ann demurely folds her menu and hands it to the waitress, as the waitress picks up the other two from the table, folds them under her armpit and begins her rushed walk away "Oh miss," Shannon lures her back, "I would also like a side of hash browns!" "Anything else?" "Nope." "Thanks, ladies..." The coffee is so dark. I am peering into the dark, dark coffee and swirl the darkness with my spoon and I am swirling the darkness and watching the dark encircle more darkness... "Erin, tell us more about New York or something, you must have some good stories, tell us what it is like." "I cannot tell you much, mostly about the library, where I spent all my time; I have only the story of my shortcomings"... Here she goes again. This could be rich. "Well, tell that then..." "Who am I but a scrawny fool that spends most of her time scribbling things down on paper with pen; and while everyone else is flying about in planes, I am sure that I am on some outdated, archaic canoe; and then there is the fact that I am lazy, so lazy even glories untold could not rouse excitement into the lethargy of my blood, the sluggishness sunk in my bones, for there is nothing to work for, nothing to work on, nothing to be; I no longer believe there is greatness, and I can only be mediocre, as if all human potential and human excellence has been exhausted, depleted as if the world has gone around too many times, the ancient and sacred in us must tire after all; and all I want is a simple mud hut crafted of the best ideas and to rot alone in that hut, so I could then die happy."... "I see"... "uh; oh yeah"... Is that all they have to say? Emerson said our interactions with others are oblique, casual; how right ...our waitress's eyes sparkle, she moves very smoothly, sliding our plates on the table with a cheerful stealth and the moist aureate lard is coating the crisp brown toasted wheat, soaking

it a nice yellow, the round slices of pale golden bananas site gleefully on top of the granola, and the scrambled yolks are refreshingly yellow and bright, as bright as the sun splashing on the table top, she comes back with coffee, precise, leaving just the right amount of room for cream... ugh, this food is so meager and looks gross, perhaps if I drown the eggs with salt, I will be able to manage eating them. A woman; a woman in green catches my attention, walks can crosses behind the waitress reaching up to grab a plate, a spoon drops somewhere behind me and that man turns to look over his shoulder, his mouth and eyes wincing, another man with a beard in a flannel shirt, his back to me, laughs, a grotesque laugh and all this futility hangs over us and in the musty air, how useless loves, hopes, lives, all of us pitifully surviving, I hear two men at the counter wrenching out complains, sounds like the rusty crank of a machine, deafening, ear-splitting and catatonic; listen to me, I sound like a rusty crank... "Erin, are you going to eat your bacon?" "No, have it." "Thanks"... Something has to change. Shannon was right last night, I see only the ugly....The crow outside the window is deep black and the sun is reflecting off the deep, tar black feathers, the light is warm on the dark, tar feathers, and the black is so pure. The tar black of the crow reflects the sun and shines so cleanly and so purely. The dark tar black of the crow is pure and the sun make the dark, tar black black black so shiny and pure...a momentary flash, sun bouncing off a bumper, and I am seeing what I never expected to see, it is the puritanical way she is sitting, hands in her laps, staring mildly out into the landscape; she looks trim, as if floating in a cloud of lavender; I slide the tip of my tongue along the back of my teeth as I begin to apprehend what I have been hiding from myself, I am inundated with an overwhelming desire, forgetting to chew, choking on my food. "Cough." "Excuse Me."... She gracefully sits there and now, oh, she moves her hand up to touch her face, I am trying not to stare, she wipes away a few hairs that fell across her cheek and she takes the stray stand and sets it gently behind her ear, now her hand falls, she touches her neck, she tilts her head a bit, her face shows a restrained longing, her hand falls further down her chest, brushing her nipple, down her stomach and falls slightly back into her lap, I imagine resting on her leg, I am fascinated, I can see the curve of her breast under the thick quilt of her layers of shirt, and there is a hint, a hint of the curve, and that hint is everything, it shows the sex that emanates from within her, the force she covertly dwarfs, and she is there, right in front of me waiting to be unleashed... "Lee Ann, are you done?"... "Yes"... "can I have your last piece of toast?"... "Yes." ... I am so moist with a craving to touch her, to christen her body with sweat, to have her kiss me, I long for her, to be buried in her, she is my salvation...The stagnant light streaming through thick glass encloses me in stagnant air full of particles of dust, a dust

shower, I am breathing particles of dust and the dark of the crow shines so pure in sun...I could never have, oh, I would not even know how to approach her, I can barely breath, I am gasping for air, breathless, shivering with desire, craving, something, craving "Erin, can I have a cigarette?" ... "Yeah, yeah, here" ... lit, and gratified, at least that desire is gratified, how could I have never noticed her. What a fool I am! How even the most experienced of us prove to be endlessly blind...of course I never belong, I alienate myself, I am the one bitterly fighting to not conform, so why do I look for company, companionship, I want to be alone... "Let's get out of here," Lee Ann says suddenly, "I mean that, let's get out of this place, see what we can find." ... "Okay, okay," as the two girls see... "I have to back by Monday, that is when I work." ... "Okay," says Erin, "are you both done eating? I am." ... "Yes" ... "Yeah." ... "Let's go then." "Erin, you are getting the bill, right?" ... "Um, yeah. Of course."

"Who is driving" ... "I will" ... Erin volunteers, Lee Ann nods with approval, Shannon getting into the front passenger seat, Lee Ann in the back; Shannon instantly turns on the radio, *I am very pretty, quite pretty, pretty and gay* "Mmm. Sarah Vaughn; it seems like some station is always playing your tune" "or some one is singing your song," Erin adds ... *and charming, so alarming this charm I feel* "or some woman singing some man's song," Lee Ann adds bitterly... "Well, get this girl some Joni Mitchell; man, Lee Ann you really know how to kill the mood," Shannon prods, shutting off the radio... I am never going to do anything great with my life; I probably won't accomplish half of what I want to; I am only going to be this measly, selfish twerp... tick tick tick click click click tick ticking rickety click click screech click click rickety lurch tick tick of her ring hitting, tapping, impatiently tapping tick click on the window... what is this mad woman doing; hitting all the potholes and curbs erratically driving, rushing to stop signs, pressing the brakes too hard; and why sht. this is the wrong way, the wrong way to the interstate... who cannot do anything, I cannot even figure out my life, who put me in charge, put me behind this wheel? I have no goal, no route. I have nothing ... She is going in circles; we are progressing nowhere "Did we take the wrong turn?" ... "No, Shannon, we did not" does she doubt me too? ... "Are you sure we are going in the right direction?" Lee Ann joins in... "Have we taken the right road?" ... "Don't be bothersome" I don't know where I am going... she is frustrated, Lee Ann and I wink at each other, "Hey! Stop at that gas station. I want to get some snacks." ... and all these distractions, detours "Okay" ... "Do you want anything" ... "NO" ... "What a loony," Lee Ann whispers to Shannon as they walk to the store ... I have no faith. I have lost all faith. Assert, I always say. Believe I should always say, if I am to believe in something, it should be me and the measly twerp and selfish brat I am; Believe, I say, have faith, affirm, have to, like

my father said; and believe, believe I always say... "Here, we got you some potato chips"... "Thanks," Erin quips sarcastically... "Do you want me to take over the wheel, you look flustered"... "No, I can handle it"... "Okay, tyrant commando Erin; please just get us to the interstate, take a right out of the parking lot, head straight for a mile, take a left turn onto the ramp, heading west"... "Stop being a smart-ass"... "Stop being so defensive," Shannon sticks her tongue out at Erin... "Real mature"... "Suck it."... "ooh."...so we have embarked, for a second time, embarked, as I veer the left and the city fades in the distance, the brown hided, pale derivative of New York, buildings basked in glory with encouraged straight spines, rising against the gravity, it is something to see, today, to me, the city is less than a spectacle, more of a miracle; especially given how prone to blunders, oversights a human is; and this land of placid rolling hills, leaves glittering like a dream, but something about this idyll and sweet air could not convince me, cannot stick with me, I could never stay here, live here, I will never catch it, never assimilate...we are a furious, streamlined torpedo, she is convinced, the drive is much smoother and she grips the wheel... "Continue West?" "West!" North? North! East? East!...just like we used to, flying, hovering over the road, driving nowhere in particular over highways, roads, side streets through junctions and cross walks that are now decorated with stores, houses, wooden fences and posts, which all contain the rough, rugged residue, remnants of the frontiersmen and cowboys, a howdy still spelled out and posted on restaurant, bank signs; driving past mountains, ridges, hills with trains snuggling, hugging the curve of thin tracks, while zooming past cars, staring up at the trails of planes, the designs woven into gray bluffs, blankets of jagged stones, and rough rocks, gray ogre toes covered in soft green blankets; flowing into valleys on razor sharp curved roads slicing through fertile farmlands, a rainbow falls overhead... "South?"... "South!" through dry patches, our car careening, skirting the edge, the rim above the canyons, as two playful gods chase each other with bows and arrows leaping from rock to rock, pieces crumbling, falling down to the road...I am remembering him, his body, the way he leaned back in his seat at the bar in his jacket, sipping his beer and I would approach him, touch the back of his neck, sit down and he would just stare at me, I loved how he stared at me, "Do either of you have pen and paper?" ... "I do"...

Sometimes I think it is better to never have truly loved than to withstand...well, to have loved. And us? Love? The love you stopped returning long ago, the one I reminisced, holding on to it for myself, waiting for it to bloom again, waiting for another life together; about that love, I had to stop waiting, had to abort the love only I nurtured; my dear Charod, there will be a void in me forever, in the place you once occupied, and I am eternally damned to seeing you in everything, in every glance I give, in every thought I have, and for that I am thankful. How close you came to defeating me, my love, how close

indeed! How much I will miss you. Yours, S... “Please stop at some place so that I can mail this, okay?”... “Of course”... “do you think that general store will have a place?”... “I’ll see.”... “M’am?” “Yes?” “do you have stamps I can buy, a place to mail a letter?” “I have stamps; and I can take care of getting it sent.” “Thanks,” I buy the stamp, she takes the letter, places it in her apron, and goes back to sweeping her store full of barrels and smells and candles; I always hope she forgets to mail it... “Look! A rose garden”... an irrigated patch of color in this desert... “I want to stop!” Lee Ann practically jumps out of the car while it is moving she is so excited... “Come on!”... She gaily gallops, while Shannon ambles behind her, Erin lies on the grass, her eyes staring at a most beautiful dandelion, tall and reaching up... sprawled out letting my heart beat and pound against the earth, alive... She excitedly glides among the rows of thorny bushes covered in vibrant hues and explosions of color, red, magenta, pink, red with white tips, yellow with red tips, purple; I follow her, we exchange innuendos masked in pleasantries, but soon silenced for lack of wanting to pursue any further, I do not want to push her before willing; she stops at a light purple, an almost silver, rose, she unfolds the curled tips of the rose, she traces with her finger tips the petals, she pulls down a petal, placing her index finger underneath, holding the tip with her thumb, almost plucking it out, holding it taut, takes her other hand, smoothes the petal out with command, as if this hallowed nature was at her bidding, at her mercy, the nature that could be destroyed by her hands, if she so wished, she could pull each and every petal out, dismantling it, but she resists, and instead continues to smooth the soft velvet, her fingers gently touching, oh, smoothing out the soft petals, and I want to touch her, for her to touch me, “Look,” she says, “Look” she wants me to see her discovery, I am scared to get too near to her for fear of clobbering her and ripping off all her clothes, but I restrain myself well, and she shows me how the petals glitter, glisten in the sun... “You feel it”... I lift my hand and place my finger on the petal where she had just touched it, I felt it and as I pull my finger away, I touch her hand, drag my finger along her arm, lightly; she pulls away oh! You libertine, keep your hands to yourself! You are too anxious! and moves on the next plant, the next hybrid and instantly I wish I had not transgressed, worried I have lost her trust, but at least my intentions are known. I continue to follow her, as she delights again and again in the flowers, but I am growing tired of trampling about and beating around the rose bushes, and suggest we get going... “Yes, yes”... to find Erin resting, eyes shut, on the ground... Lee Ann, upset inquires, “Did you even go in the gardens?”... “Yes, beautiful, but I wanted to rest my eyes; can we get going?... “Of course”... “Sitting still is depressing me, I am happiest when on the go, when we are moving, in the middle” in the speed, in the action, in the movement there is no

sorrow, no place for it to fester, to sink in; go, go, going, never stopping, youth, like extending youth; I never want to go back, never want to sink in old traditions, always the fresh, the new, America, I am beginning to like you, I am a little bit like you, I never want to turn around, I am not progressing, just going forward; but with no end, no destination, only the gray area and ambiguity of the fleeting ... “And now?” ... “South!” ... “Yes, South! Deeper! Deeper!” ... “South, then.”

We are driving past the back doors of warehouses and restaurants, people crowded outside, sitting on buckets and benches, on their smoke break, couples on their porches sitting in chairs, people working odd jobs, working, living forgotten stories, mountain men still mountain-ing, meat packers still packing, carpenters still building, railroad men working, sparks flying from the rails they saw; and I see ugly silos that need mending, industries steaming, fires burning under bridges and outside of country side shacks for warmth, for cooking; retrogressing through towns that never quite left the nineteen fifties, complete with retro signs for hotels, motels, and the police stations; we are driving through horrible natural and unnatural smells: chemicals, soap, tar, sulfur, cow, and I begin to find what I like about this country: the local, local shops, the local events, local creations and one of kind original capturing the local flavor, local legends and small towns; but even more I like the back road, back yard tour of shoddily self-built mishaps called barns, which were built in an attempt to contain, cover, store the amassed junk, now in piles, in stacks, in rows: old trucks, broken down jalopies, or school buses, huge vans stuck on the side of the road, and large buckets, barrels with holes caused by the elements, rusted wiring, tires, old refrigerators, chains, broken musical instruments, and junk. I like driving along desolate, empty streets in run down parts of any town, city blocks of abandoned lots, scrap metal industrial yards full of gutless planes and rotting train cars, broken down gas stations with no gas to pump, awnings broken and hanging down about to fall off, bullet holes in the glass of the vacant store, worn out neighborhoods that cry with broken glass, cheap restaurants with huge portions of food, old buildings, abandoned warehouses, paint chipping and stripped from the condemned houses, children running about at odd hours of the night, main streets with empty store fronts, the windows chipped, diners without cars, the neon sign is off, the door boarded up with plywood; I like hearing the unheard songs and being in the communities that are waiting to be revitalized, waiting to be brought back to life, the forgotten community waiting to be remembered, waiting for a surge of inner pride to begin rebuilding, I like the places that go unvisited, the people that go by unnoticed, and something in me sinks; failure, the un-success, the left behind which dots the landscape with something real, and yet, I feel it, here, too, in the midst

of the folded and broken down, the unhinged doors, the unused corroded metal, and defeat, and amongst the hurt there is still an excitement, the spirit, the spirit of this country the entrepreneur, the industrious mind, the desire for construction, building, creating, the value of work and the feeling of ambitions is still there, living while its products rot, living in the hearts of sunken eyes, and the smell of freshly pressed and cleaned, well-tailored business suits and the new and unbroken remains in the dusty, left behind air, air that filters up to girls lying on their beds, whispering into phones, saying see you soon, see you tomorrow; other girls sneaking out their back doors to meet up with their girl friends, music blasting, screaming, wild; as the mariachi music fades, as the life of an old legend who lived unknown glory days fades, he reminisces the height of his career, thinking proudly of the renown he received of his community, when he was in charge and famous, never scant of fine looking women or good friends to drink with and talk all night with, now most of them dead or far away, and the women married, smiling, as he smokes alone, at the pictures they have sent, them, their children. ... The land is plowed and ordered, buckled down and restrained, conquered, controlled; but the bridges and wires and poles look nearly as natural as nature, a synthetic accordance with a negotiated and mediated nature; we ride over the land, the soft soil and rich earth, the tender, passive, sensitive soul and the aggressive mental machinery, the carnal, violent demands of rationality putting as at war, against the world, against ourselves...I feel so much joy. The joy I feel is ineffable. I have so much joy in me. I have all this joy and I feel so much joy. We spoil so much with words. I have so much joy and feel so much joy...

"We need some music," Shannon demands, after searching, "There is only country music and choir singing; what is your choice?" ... a unanimous "country" ... "Tell me, what do you want from life?" ... "To escape it" Lee Ann bawls... "I want transcendent knowledge, to be all knowing," Shannon beams... "To enjoy life, the free gift of the world around me" Erin remarks with her change in heart, as another evening descends, and in the distance is a light... "A carnival!"... Lee Ann's childish eyes grow big, "Stop, we are going to stop and we are going..." "Alright," we are going to this monstrosity of junk and, uh, I mean, going to a celebration, to jubilation... Lee Ann and Shannon are satisfied to eat their cotton candy, but I am not, "I am going to dawdle and find the funnel cake..." "Okay, we will wait here on the bench for you to return..." she lets me feed her the cotton candy, she takes small bites, nibbles a little on my finger when she takes her bite, "Let me feed you," she opens her mouth, and I lay my finger on her tongue, as she closes her mouth around it...All these flashing, colorful lights, the illusion of something magnificent, mediocrity looming larger than itself, a bright fantasy world, a transparent supra reality covering a meager

one, one falling apart; this whole fair is magical, part of the exceptional everyday complete with the glories of the average, just average; but this is a special kind of mediocrity, a different kind than big America, because this is a more rusted, older one, the poor, broke-ass kind, with bolts nearly coming out of the rides, the clowns have strings hanging from their tattered and stained costumes, stitches have come out, the material is flashy but over washed, the stuffed animals have stains on them too, the people are fat, dirty, the children are covered with bruises, running around with no supervision, their hair greasy, but for one wonderful twirling night of pleasure, it is magnificent, it is heaven, and being here amongst these people makes me feel larger than life, regardless of how average.

Back to the road, a thin, dark road...repeating myself a thousand leagues through, I feel limitless, invincible, a universe contained within an universe, infinitely multiplied, compacted within each other...The two girls sleeping, I, too, am going to stop and rest...She is breathing slowly. Her skin is so delicate in the little bit of light seeping through the window. Her skin is smooth and you can see that it is smooth and gentle and shining in the light that comes in through the window that announces the day which is breaking. Her chest is moving up and down slightly as she is breathing. She has elegant fingers. Her knuckles are knobby. I have never noticed how knobby her knuckles are. There are thin creases on them you can see in the light coming through the window. Her arms and her hands are resting by her side and her head is tilted against the window and her chest moves up and down and slightly as her skin shines and gleams in the little bit of light seeping through the window. She has smooth round lips. Her skin glows. The face of her skin glows and has a sharp nose that slopes gently into her cheeks. Her eyes are close and she does not see me... I am being carried; I see Shannon dancing, she dances in a triangle; Lee Ann is walking behind others, her head down, she wears a wool coat, a cape; it is a procession, it is icy... I am staring at her chest that moves up and down and slightly as she breathes and I listen as she blows air out of her mouth and she blows warm air out of her mouth as she breaths and her chest moves up and down . Her hand; she has placed her hand on the top of my head and is putting her fingers through my hair. I have been caught...she leaps away from me "come outside with me, let's go see what is out there, watch the sun rise." she nods...the two grab hands... "I have wanted to say to you, Lee Ann, escape is the wrong way to think of it. How long this life has felt already, how much I have seen, how layered in dirt and sweat I am; I feel like an old woman with a cane that has traveled over the dust, gravel, stone, feeling ancient deep down in me, and with all of me, I want to clean the dirt off, wash my skin, clear my mind from the residue of pains, take more care of myself, to rest"... "fix up, patch all the cuts, incisions, stitch the tearing and

ripping, resetting the broken bones”... “but there is no escape, I thought when you said you wanted to escape, there is only redeeming, lifting layered in dirt, only redeeming one’s past, making a situation better and being optimistic that you can make it better, a better place for yourself, I mean, and always having a bit of that desperately needed innocence, idealism, be able to find the beauty amidst the savagery, even find the beauty of the savagery”... there is a long time before either of them move...totally unexpected, she lays down on her back and told me to kiss her, tightening my lips to hide the increasing desire, her so willing, mmmm... “No, no; sit up, face me” I trace her oval face, her chin, her face, her eyes, kissing her... “Swallow, honey, you are barely breathing, don’t be so nervous”...I tuck some hair behind her ear, touch her face, her neck, her breast as she did earlier... “Look at us, some hick version of some cut out scene of the Bacchae; we are not barbarians, we should put our shirts down, lie on top of those” ...She grins at me...We press our nipples against each other, push our breasts together, hug ...tight elastic of underwear, the waist of her jeans coming down, I like the muscle of her thigh, the line down the side, I pinch her bony knees, glide the pants off, pulling them from around her neat ankles; shaking my head “These scars”... “stigmata, you mean; I stopped the pain from where it started”...Her long elegant fingers...Enfolded in a wet heat of flesh, her layers, a canyon; but she is holding back, I want to have her scream; sneaky, sliding, trying to find her intensity, her face bends, a sound begins from out of her deep down, loosened from what was back, behind; making her loud, her noise so fierce... “Shouldn’t I? I mean; you?”... “Seeing you pleased is the greatest pleasure I could have”... She nuzzles into me, we are warm, wrapped... Mmm.... Right. Car. A sign on the side of the road Border 12; I dreamt; Awake. I wonder where the other two are, no matter. I dreamt last night; I was in a coffin, and even though people were holding the handles of the coffin, it felt like they were carrying me by the arms, I felt my muscles being stretched, I was in pain, my head was bobbing up and down. I thought it would snap off. I was dead, but sentient; I was a ghost hovering right over my body, able to see through the wood, could see all the people in black, thick wool, and the snow, I could feel how cold the snow was, everyone was mourning, chanting a somber low moans of a chant. I am dying, with every second, every minute, I should be enjoying myself in my last minutes, my last seconds of this life fading as I live it. I have no plan, but I cannot go back home. I cannot go back to the east, the wool coated east, I cannot go west. I want to explore and find new roads; to write what has not yet been written, find questions yet to be asked. Who am I? Nothing more than an undefined, a blank open-ended being, a girl, a traveler, a frequenter of parks, a walker of streets, with a vision of many crossroads and layers of

moments; it is the worst part of me, that I see a billion paths, but will only be able to walk one. Where should I go? Where do I belong? Perhaps I should always strive to go exactly where no one wants me; hah, and a border is mere miles away, I am going to walk, cross, and walk some more. I am inspired!... She took my chin and pulled it at her and looked at me, she looked at me and looked at me the way Shannon looks at you, with a thick happiness creased in her forehead. She looked at me and whispered to me and we let go of our hands. I smiled at her. She did not say goodbye, but it was a good bye because I realized that I had better get going. I have to get back. I am going to go back because it is time to go back....Lee Ann begins to walk away... "Wait"...Is she calling me back? I wonder why she is calling me back. I will not be able to stay with her. I want her to ask me to stay here anyway. I want to stay with her. "Look, there goes Erin; we will blow her a kiss and wish her good luck, hope she finds what she is looking for,"... "Good Luck," they both holler ... Shannon sits. Shannon is staring off in the distance and she stares off in the distance. I have to turn around again. I have to around again without her and there is nothing to say to her and I will turn around and leave her staring in the distance and sitting... She left a note...

To Lee Ann; From Erin

A father, son, and daughter--
Noble, fair, and true,
This father, son, and daughter.

The season had arrived, father sent for son
Time had revolved, he did say
Gave him one more night and some father advice:
On women: be wary, seek a decent girl, do not be taken in by lust.
On success: it is not for every man, but every man must try
On humility: a wise man knows that arrogance is always checked by the
 gods.
On loyalty: never forget your father, a man never dies once he has the
 affections of his son.

The next morning the boy left, to make his name
to meddle in affairs and try himself against the game.

She, with loyalty and cheer stayed,
taking care of father so,

mending pants, chopping meats
 pressing shirts and cutting fruits,
 the chores persisted, plentiful.

Alas! The tiny home soon became a cave.
 in night's wee hours she began to feel a slave.
 Outgrowing the darkness, the customary shade
 of the dingy, confining walls she knew she had to go.

She wept to think of leaving her father
 how untidy, she thought, will get his den
 yet she began to think of all the bother it had been.

She left in midnight's hour
 with exhaustion she soon did fall, but
 waking in a patch of brambles,
 she saw flowers beginning so to bud.

Now facing the learned light,
Obscurity has made her ferocious,
 the premise! conclusion!
Timid by all appearances,
 written in her blood, has it's ink. Victory!
She is bold, ready for the fight.

Lee Ann begins her drive, the tough stretch of the road home, but in good humor, she even cracks a slight grin; turning up the music, her heart pounding as loud and steady as the drum, snares and bass, the car filled with the poignant, mostly nonsensical then existential, then elegiac sentiments, lyrics mumbled, muttered atop of guitar chords, she recklessly plows the metal forward into more of the middle of nowhere; "damn, damn that I am taken away from my love, separated from her damn the world that makes it so" she soon became, tired, cold, silent, her energy drained, head spinning and pained, the excitement worn off, she looked into the rear view mirror, to the side of her, her empty car, filled only with silence, the resources were gone, the only food was the last bit of twenty five cent convenience store junk food, and a few cigarettes, which she smoked to fill the boredom, tossing the butts out, littering the world she damned, the land rolling on a wasteland, the trees gangly, the air vapid. "I had that day with her, at least I had that day." She drove most of the way home on fumes, not gas, which has run out long ago; spinning and sick with road until the city

appears, looking like rubber or scenery of fine balsa wood of an all too collapsible world; she is home, the tin container creeping to a stop, the tires choking on the bits of gravel, stopped, put into park; hurt, alone; I remember her last words to me *you decide, it is all yours; make it your own, take some, and give more* and with large, wide, courageous eyes, Lee Ann through tears, smiles.

Finis