

E C H O

A JOURNAL OF CREATIVE NONFICTION



NOVEMBER 2017 • ISSUE 1

ECHO

JOURNAL OF CREATIVE NONFICTION

Echo: Journal of Creative Nonfiction- Novemeber 2017

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Text Set in Times New Roman

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ISSN: 2574-4569 (online)

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Echo

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About Echo:

A heart echo test, or echocardiography exam, is a painless test that examines the structure and function of the heart, according to the National Institute of Health. This test may involve the injection of saline or a specific dye into the patient's veins to showcase the heart.

We choose the name "Echo" because we expect the work to come from the heart. We want to publish the greatest creative nonfiction that we can find in our quarterly issues.

We are accepting creative nonfiction all year around, and would love to read the work that you have for us.



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“WAITING FOR ROBIN WILLIAMS” | MARK BLICKLEY

Twenty-nine years ago I was an off-off Broadway playwright clerking in a chi-chi toy store for grown ups on the Upper West Side when in walks Robin Williams. I was speechless. He smiled and nodded at me before exploring the various aisles. I knew he was in rehearsal at Lincoln Center for Samuel Beckett’s play, *Waiting For Godot*, so as I sneaked peaks at his inspection of the store, I tried to think of what I would say to him should he approach my register.

The owners of this unique store were a master framer and assistant film director who took great pride in laying out their merchandise in a setting that looked more art gallery than retail establishment. They had many celebrity customers and would often threaten their employees with termination should any fuss or attention be directed at their famous customers. These employers also insisted that we ask all customers to give us their address for a mailing list catalogue they were preparing. Less than half of our customers were willing to comply.

Twenty minutes later Robin Williams strolled up to my register with a handful of purchases. As I punched them into the register he told me what a wonderful store it was. I worked up the nerve to tell him I knew he was going to appear in *Godot* and timorously asked, “Are you going to portray Vladimir or Estrogen?” The moment the name Estrogen escaped from my lips I knew I had just made a colossal ass of myself. The name of Beckett’s character is Estragon, not estrogen.

Although there was only a couple of other people in the store, Williams immediately launched into a verbal and visual riff, “Ahhh....Estrogen, a man going through changes!” I was so humiliated I wish I could better remember his brilliant impromptu performance. He transformed himself on the spot into a sex change candidate, complete with manic gestures and

undulating voice. After handing him his purchases, I dutifully asked him for his address and to my shock he gave it to me. He was staying just a few blocks away on 75th street, between Columbus and Amsterdam Avenue, a temporary rental for the duration of the Mike Nichols directed play he was co-starring in with Steve Martin.

That night I confessed my embarrassing story to my girlfriend. When I told how surprised I was that he gave me his address, she immediately said I should send him a produced play I had written, *The World's Greatest Saxophone Player*. It was a one-person comedy about a saxophonist who played his instrument without using a reed.

I was hesitant. If my employers found out I harassed a celebrity by sending him a script, I would be immediately fired. Besides, I reasoned, his address was probably bogus and he probably just gave me one because he was sensitive to how foolish I felt about my verbal mis-cue. But she was very persuasive and I did mail off a copy to him on 75th Street.

A couple of weeks later Robin Williams re-entered the store, this time with a small child. I got really anxious. The owners were there and I was afraid he would tell them that I had harassed him by mailing him a script, as I figured how many strangers would know the exact address of where he was staying during the six week run of his play? To my relief, he left without making a purchase and I assumed he never got my script, or if he did, he simply tossed it.

Months later I got a phone call at my apartment. It was from Hollywood. The speaker identified himself as a representative from Michael Menschel's office, Robin Williams' agent. I was in total disbelief. He said Mr. Williams isn't looking for theater pieces, but would be interested in seeing a screenplay. He asked me if I could write one and although I had no idea how to author a film script, I told him, "of course." Then he asked me for my agent's name. I told him I did not have one; I had dropped by an agent a year earlier. The tone of his voice im-

mediately changed, and he asked if I had an entertainment attorney. When I said I did not, I could hear that the respect he had for me at the beginning of the conversation evaporated. He instructed me to notify him when I completed a draft of the screenplay and he would send me a release form.

I hung up the phone very upset. I felt as if I had just blown an amazing opportunity. Michael Menschel had thought I was a more established writer, not just an unknown off-off Broadway playwright. I knew that sending a script via a release form was not only the sign of an amateur, but dangerous. A writer had no protection with a release form and could not sue if similar material somehow ended up with his client. But what else could I do?

I wondered if Robin Williams had read my script and liked it enough to pass on to his agent, or if he just forwarded my manila envelope to Menschel's office, where it was read. The fact he did not simply ignore it still astounds me.

It took me many months to learn to craft a screenplay and adapt my one-person show. When I completed it, I immediately called Menschel's office and learned that Williams was no longer represented by them, but had moved to the CAA agency. I did not have a contact within that agency and so was at a loss over what I should do with my first screenplay.

I decided to make a list of a dozen or so top agents/agencies and then wrote them a very good cover letter explaining the "heat" I had generated with Robin Williams' agent. Most of them responded back to me. One even wrote that he didn't know if the story I was telling him was true, but it was so convincingly written he'd be interested in meeting with me. For the first time in my life I was in a position to pick and choose, thanks to Mr. Williams.

I went with a Hollywood agency. My script was optioned twice yet never made into a film, but it did open doors for me I never knew existed. Unbeknownst to Robin Williams, just

making that superficial contact with him changed my life even though I only spoke briefly with him that one time.

I was vacationing in New England on August 11th, 2014 when my former girlfriend (now ex-wife), the one who had convinced me to send my play off to that famous customer, texted me a single sentence, “Robin Williams is dead.”

“BOWLS WITH BOWLES” | MARK BLICKLEY

In June of 1980 my manuscript submission had won me a place in the School of Visual Arts pilot program of study with writer/composer Paul Bowles in Tangier, Morocco.

At the time of my acceptance to the program I was working as a regional reporter at the Record, a newspaper in Northern Jersey. I hated it. I wanted to create stories not record them. Paul Bowles was a hero to me. His exotic and disturbing fiction seemed like an oasis; my writing was confined to mental health center openings and traffic accidents.

Right before I left for North Africa I saw an ad in the Village Voice for a play, In The Summer House, by a Jane Bowles. Knowing nothing about Mr. Bowles' biography I called the theater and asked if Jane Bowles was the wife of the writer Paul. An angry feminist voice shouted at me that Jane Bowles couldn't possibly be married to Paul Bowles. Jane Bowles was a lesbian'

Sorry.

The first time I laid eyes on Paul Bowles was in a classroom with about a dozen other writers, mostly aspiring writers. I realized manuscript strength wasn't as important as financial solvency when candidates were selected. Six weeks cost fifteen hundred dollars and included three college credits. I was three credits short of a City College degree.

Mr. Bowles, a frail, elegantly dressed man of about seventy with a full head of white hair, strode into the classroom about twenty minutes late and told the truth. He said he hated writing workshops and didn't believe they could help a writer at all. He was quite low on funds and agreed to lead the workshop because the money was pretty good.

I thought that was wonderful. The last thing I wanted to do was to spend six weeks in an academic environment. I just wanted to explore Morocco and earn three credits in the bargain. Mr. Bowles proposed, or maybe it was another student's idea, that instead of meeting X

amount of times in a formal classroom setting, he meets individually with each writer for a few visits over the six week term. After a short discussion on where these visits should take place, Mr. Bowles suggested his apartment. That way he could keep his own hours and expend the least amount of energy in service to that SVA check.

All the writers jockeyed for immediate appointments. Not me. I wanted to explore North Africa. My man to man meeting with Paul Bowles wasn't for a couple of weeks. In the interim I had a dangerous and surreal extended visit to the Rif Mountains that began three days after being introduced to Paul Bowles. I was gone for over a week and no one at the SVA compound knew where I was or what had happened to me. When I returned I was severely chastised; the police had been called in. But that's another story.

I was quite nervous before my meeting with Mr. Bowles. I was comforted by an attractive actress, Antoinette Bowers. Ms. Bowers, who looked quite familiar to me, was a steadily employed film actress, disgusted that her age (I'd say mid to late forties) had begun to drastically limit her workload. Because of the declining acting offers she wanted Paul Bowles' advice about a roman' a clef she was working on about the film business. She said she and Paul had quite a few mutual friends.

Ms. Bowers was scheduled to meet with Mr. Bowles right after me. It was her second visit to his apartment. She volunteered to walk me over to where he lived. Antoinette laughed when I told her my Jane Bowles theater story. I was then informed that Jane was indeed Paul's late wife as well as a lesbian. She insisted I tell Paul the story because it would amuse him. I told her no way was I going to bring that up. I'd be too embarrassed.

I quickly climbed the stairs inside Mr. Bowles' modest Tangier apartment building. A maid opened the door and led me to a room without chairs; there were only throw pillows on the floor.

Paul Bowles entered from an adjoining room. His watery blue eyes seemed to regard me with a kind of bored amusement. We shook hands. I couldn't take my eyes off the smoke wafting up from his elegant cigarette holder. The cigarette was quite thick and looked homemade.

His speech was measured and his diction level was incredible high. But what I noticed most was his whistling. Whenever an s word slipped from his lips it turned into a whistle. Paul Bowles plopped himself down on some pillows and motioned me to do the same.

An awkward silence followed.

The maid re-entered the room and Mr. Bowles asked me if I'd like some mint tea. He signaled the maid to bring two bowls and then asked me a few questions about myself. I was hoping he'd mention the story I had submitted for his critique. I fantasized him pouring forth praise and excitement over the discovery of a major new talent. But the only thing poured was the mint tea and it was too hot to drink.

After some small talk about the current political situation in the U.S. -- Ronald Reagan's presidential campaign, our hostages in Iran -- I made Paul Bowles laugh. Desperate for conversation, I told him the Jane Bowles theater story.

He howled and said Jane would have loved it. When I asked him a few questions about his wife he told me Jane was poisoned by an evil maid she was in love with. Mr. Bowles asked me if I indulged in the smoking of cannabis. When I answered in the affirmative he produced a bag of what he called kif -- a mixture of hashish and tobacco. I nervously rolled a cigarette but was afraid to smoke it.

You see, Paul Bowles had the sharpest mind I'd ever encountered. His manner was so eloquent, his eyes so piercing; I knew I needed all my resources, unimpaired, just to keep up with him. I was quite intimidated by the man. He was the first author I ever met and his fantastic surroundings and unique style made him bigger than life.

After a few puffs I relaxed. He pulled out my story and gave me a detailed critique of it - a grammatical critique. Without mentioning one word about the story's merit or content, Paul Bowles simply produced a sheet of paper that catalogued all my wordsmith's faults. When I finally asked him what he thought of the story he shrugged off a reply.

Okay, Paul Bowles did not think much of me as a writer. Humiliated, I told him I was really interested in writing for the theater. He said then that's what I should be doing. Telling Paul Bowles about my passion for theater really animated him. He told me he had written the music for Orson Welles' first New York production and had written a few incidental scores for Tennessee Williams' plays, including *The Glass Menagerie*. Mr. Bowles informed me I had missed Tennessee Williams by a couple days.

Paul Bowles then launched into a description of his musical career. I had no idea he was such a respected composer before turning to fiction full time. He told me amusing antidotes about his failed collaboration with the zany Armenian writer William Saroyan on an opera, as well as funny stories about Gertrude Stein, whom he met when he was a teenaged poet in Paris.

I told him about my frightening yet exhilarating experiences in the Rif Mountains. He laughed and said an American visiting the Rif would be the equivalent of someone visiting the United States and staying in the Appalachian Mountains.

Mr. Bowles didn't think much of me as an artist, but he did delight in my sense of adventure.

Puzzled over the treatment of females I saw, I asked Paul about a woman's role in Islamic culture. He answered me with a wonderful story:

One morning he was writing in bed as he always does, and heard a loud commotion outside his window. He called in his maid and asked her to find out what all the noise was about.

She left, stood out on the balcony, and returned saying it was simply two people arguing in front of the building. Paul continued to work until the angry shouts became so disruptive he couldn't concentrate.

Wondering how two people could possibly make all that noise, he got out of bed and threw open his window. What he saw was more than a dozen people screaming at each other, but only two of them were men.

The escalating effects of the kif reduced to me to a grinning idiot. Bowles saw this and decided to choreograph a musical exit for me. He told me about this fantastic music he had recorded live. It was performed by Aborigines blowing shell instruments inside a cave. Paul said it sounded remarkably like electronic music.

He handed me a pair of headphones, slapped a cassette into a tape player, pushed the play button, and disappeared into another room. But it wasn't primal musical sounds that invaded my ears, but a slurred woman's voice alternately laughing and cursing.

I was embarrassed. Obviously Bowles had given me a tape of his late wife by mistake. When the author/composer reentered the room in what seemed an eternity later, I didn't know whether I should tell him about his error. When he asked me how I enjoyed the music I simply grinned my appreciation. As I was preparing to leave I encountered Mohammed Marabet, a short man of Herculean proportions. He entered the apartment with an affectionate greeting for Paul and a sneer for me. I did not know who he was, but I did know that he intensely disapproved of me being there.

Marabet stared challengingly into my face and said that he had killed men, several men. Paul smiled and watched me. I summoned up all the stoned courage I could muster and answered him:

“Yeah, I've killed men, too.” A lie. “I was in the Vietnam War.” The truth. Mohammed

walked over to me as if to strike me. Although I was terrified I stood my ground. He stood inches away from me, grinding his teeth, looking me up and down. Blood rushed to my head; I instantly became sober.

Paul ended the stand-off by uttering a few words in Maghrebi. Marabet's animosity instantly dissolved. They both laughed. I was then treated to a broken English diatribe by Mohammed about how great a writer he was, even greater than Tennessee Williams or any other of Bowles' friends. And he, Marabet, didn't even know how to read!

I later learned that Mohammed was one of Paul's illiterate protégés. Bowles translated many tales Marabet had dictated. The muscular Moroccan had quite a cult following.

But in the summer of 1980 I just wanted to escape from these two North African literary giants. I jolted down the stairs of Bowles' fourth floor apartment and ran out into the blinding Moroccan sun, sweaty but safe.

Despite the curriculum that stated I must meet with Paul Bowles at least two more times before the term ended, I never saw the man again. But he did give me wonderful advice on places to visit in southern Morocco. And a passing grade.

FROM GRUNT TO SQUID | WAYNE RUSSELL

Guns and bombs were never much my style, but to escape a miserable childhood and an uncertain future, I joined the Army National Guard.

I was 18 and right out of high school, in boot camp, Drill Sargent Tower stood me and PVT Fields up in front of the platoon, and laughed at us for "only being cooks."

The platoon laughed, I felt like an inch high, God knows that Fields felt the same way, minute; and insignificant in the grand scheme of things.

Silently, I vowed to get the last laugh, when I returned from boot camp and my MOS training, the laughter continued, my family laughed when I told them I wanted to attend college.

My mother jeered.

"Oh so you want to be one of those college boy snobs?!" "Well, you're not living here in my house while you do that non-sense."

My step father was the devil in the form of a potbellied 5'3 Viet Nam vet, he told me that "College was for losers, it's a waste of time and money."

and so the next day

I packed my belongings and moved underneath the I-95 underpass, life as an outcast was getting a bit stale.

I was scoffed at by the seasoned veterans of the homeless scene and beaten over the head by an 85 year old lady, that thought I was trying to snatch her purse.

But

a few days later a Navy recruiter appeared by my old high school, so I picked up my ruck sack, slung it over my left shoulder and ended up joining the Navy, this time it was active duty, once again, I

would have a roof over my head and food in my gut.

I told my Navy recruiter that I was "already an official member of the Army National Guard unit out of Fairhope, Alabama."

Promptly, he took me down to my NG unit and had me swiftly discharged.

My old weekend warrior buddies called me a "traitor, and a defector," I just remained silent, awaiting for the day I would have to repeat the entire cycle of boot camp and training all over again.

UPDATED RESUME | NOOKS KRANNIE

It was the number 11 bus that was taking me from Parc to Ridgewood. My fingers were meshed like soupy ice cubes within the polyester mittens. The twin girls I babysat for 5 days a week - Julia and Jeanne, were learning to crawl and today when their mother came home from work and sang *come to mommy* to them, they crawled on their soft little knees towards me, racing each other to be the first to touch my toes. I looked at the mother and she looked more miserable than me. Jeanne was larger and rounder than Julia. The mother had told me that she had managed to eat most of her sister's food in the womb and had leeches on her oxygen supply for a good chunk of time before she showed me an hour of the birthing video. Julia was always coughing up formula and room temperature breast milk on my shoulder before squeezing my little finger in her tiny moist hand, as if she knew she will always be second at everything, the less beautiful one who almost died from forced anorexia. Before I left, the mother shared with me that when Julia came out she was hideous compared to her rounder sister, who was also hideous when she came out but less hideous than Julia and she wished more than anything for her to not grow up ugly and I silently wished she would just get to grow up. The mother then handed me my paycheck and told me that I didn't need to come anymore except when she needed an occasional babysitter on certain Saturday nights when she and her French husband go out to see a beautiful ballet filled with beautiful people dancing to the saddest songs but being so beautiful collectively.

A yellow tea kettle I bought at Sears a couple of months back had broken earlier in the week and the ceramic pieces were piled on top of the trash bin because I had lost my steady babysitting gig, I figured I didn't need to throw out the trash since I didn't have any money to buy

more trash. I filled the red tea mug, a souvenir from the 2013 Montreal Formula One, with boiling water from the kitchen and nuked it for 3 minutes in the microwave before brewing a lipton green tea bag in the hot water which seemed to be gathering a milky white froth at the very top. It tasted like dust and paper leaves and I decided to eat nothing but dried apple slices for a week.

During the middle of 2015, I wanted my then boyfriend to be my ex boyfriend but I had a short form and long form birth certificates in one hand and no pride in the other. There was a name that I wanted to never take out of the envelope, I wanted the paper to devour it because it was not mine. I asked my boyfriend if he could drive me for 22 hours to Nova Scotia so I could get on a ship and tell the government that I didn't want my name, it didn't smell like me. We reached an agreement where he'd drive me and I get to watch him jerk off to hentai haven. I bailed at the last minute because animated cum is too much for me and asked you to drive me instead. We left at 2am because you had to prove something to me and made it to New Brunswick and I had to pee so bad, I thought about strangling myself after digging out my bladder with your Swiss Army Knife that your brother gave you as a fair warning against false diggers. We got a flat tire and the car almost flipped over in the worst downpour since that one time when a man hit a moose with his car and the moose hit the car back. It was raining so much that the man freaked out when his blood became the moose's blood and ran a shared river down on King George highway. Your were losing patience and I was losing consciousness. We locked the car and went into the country grass and knocked on houses in search of bladder relief. The first house we knocked on, a grey older woman with two Shih Tzu puppies on her feet answered, she stood behind her front door and I saw real fear in her eyes. She refused to let us in and told us to try another house. She said she didn't trust us and I

thought she had no reason to. I felt like we were Bonnie and Clyde in a bad Bonnie and Clyde made for tv movie with voiceover moaning closeups for sex scenes. By the next house I felt like this is the end. I tried to make myself pee but I couldn't. I blamed the rain and my vagina simultaneously, I could feel the pee inflaming my organs and I cursed my uterus for lacking in room. A big man with a big beard with all shades of white let us in. His house was carpeted in a combination of red and green and his walls were a rolling graveyard of antler heads and tail skins. He pointed at the bathroom down the hall and I didn't care if my skin would leather his couch next. The toilet seat was cold and I layered it with fresh toilet paper before sitting down. That was the best pee I ever had. I saw my life flash before my eyes and heard doves singing through the cheap liquid soap that smelled like stale plastic. I was free and didn't care if I got brutally murdered in New Brunswick. As we left his house, the big man told us how he wasn't sure if he should let us in his house at first because *you never know nowadays*. He suddenly seemed less big and his beard wilted under his big chin, hiding from rain and the everythings of nowadays.

We drove to a Shell gas station and you filled up the car tank. Your hands were swollen and your skin was bubbling in fragile transparency on your palm. Your hand had slipped while changing the flat, you kept going anyway because you hated the rain the most and the ground was covered in oil clouds. It was pouring so hard that real life outside seemed like a 90's virtual reality game, pixelated in deep melt of technology. You had been driving for 10 hours straight or something and were on the verge of real tears. We decided to park at the Shell gas station and you slept with my rain jacket under your head. I tried to force sleep and drown out the rain by focusing on the jacket label under your ear - the starry A in the pink all caps GAR-AGE embroidery turned into a fire lit Ferris wheel and I dozed off into an uncomfortable

dream. I saw a faceless mother disappointed in me and a recognizable shadow trying to touch my breasts, I saw my neighbor's dead cat multiply into more cats, I saw snakes and cockroaches withering under my silk pillowcase that I had left at home and my face was made of boiled eggs with gaping holes and I was smiling. A tree branch sprouted blackberries and my childhood friend Runa broke her foot, green beans and giant ants came out of her bones and she grew hair all over her body. I rubbed her foot and she told me she liked me the least amongst all of the other breastless hula hoops that joined hands around her and sang to her death. She whispered in my ear about hating her yellow foamed owl and I smelled golden stardust on her breath.

We drove for another 5 to 6 hours before fatigue started to become unbearable again, especially for you. We stopped at a Subway and I got lettuce topped with Swiss cheese and you got a chicken teriyaki on Italian bread. You showed me my fake ID that you had ordered for me on one of those highly obvious fake ID websites and my name was appropriately North American. I was going to use this ID to get on the ship because I had cut up my real ID due to bad memories and lack of identity and too much seedless oranges. My real ID was not real either, not to me. My fake ID said I was Alicia Norman and I couldn't help but think how suitable that name is for a middle class serial killer who likes to kill men in their sleep because she's too scared to do it when they're awake because of childhood trauma and blatant patriarchy and too much religion or perhaps not enough of it.

Both of us now were reasonably psychotic from lack of sleep and were entering deranged territory taking baby steps. We were only an hour away from Nova Scotia and we had to make it if

I was going to make the ship before it left and I had to, the next one left in 4 days and I didn't have money to stay that long in Nova Scotia. You were crying and begging me to keep saying things to you so you don't fall asleep at the wheel and I started to talk in a stranger's voice about body hair and how I was genuinely concerned about the extra bone that had been growing on my right foot, I was hysterical and screaming at this point about the giant golf ball bone that was protruding next to my big right toe and how it hurt when I walked. I looked at my foot, I felt my head throbbing with bone pain and my muscles were burning with fever. You were full on sobbing now and I was screaming at my foot with aching intensity when we suddenly found ourselves in a line behind 10,000 cars. We had made it without dying mostly. We were in the line for my nameless ship, with other thousands of people. The quiet set in and we didn't speak or acknowledged existence.

Alicia Norman showed her ID to the check in lady. The check in lady didn't glance at Alicia Norman and gave the ID back to Alicia Norman. Alicia Norman said thank you and the check in lady said you're welcome.

At the last minute, you decided that you were going to come on the ship with me. You gave your real ID to the check in lady. You said you didn't go through all this shit just to see me off. You wanted to see me get my name to be mine. You wanted to see me change as a person, I told you that's not how it works. You said you'd get me food and got a jumbo bag of Mars bars. We sat on reclining seats and saw the ocean move, becoming bigger than our bodies.

We were driving again. It was nighttime and the sky was eating the ocean. The stars were the

most abundant in this sky. The ship had dropped us off at Labrador and it seemed to be where earth and all the skies met to ponder over everything that's wrong with us and our petty lives. We had to drive another 10 hours or so to reach St John's in Newfoundland, which is where I was going to get my name to be mine. I had already brushed my teeth and doused my face in my acne cream in the women's bathroom aboard the ship. I looked like shit but at least clear shit. You had gotten some sleep in your reclining seat so were okay to drive. I took out one Mars bar but remembered that I had already brushed my teeth so I put it back.

The day came and it was beautiful with running blue sky and no moose on the highway despite alarmingly vast amount of moose warnings. As we entered St John's, I thought we entered Andy Warhol's death. The houses were painted in the brightest, happiest colors, all shades of reds and orange and yellows, blues and greens, mustard grass and people laughter. It was clear that it was a touristy city the size of a town heart. The houses were lined up and down on tiny, steep hills and the one street long downtown was lined with seafood restaurants, taverns and bars, all clean, all fluent in accomplished money. There was an air of cheeriness and openness about the place that was carrying welcome signs for most rational people. Maybe because it was in the middle of summer and everyone was happy to be covered in their neighbor's sweat instead of their own wet or maybe it was the over priced broiled salmon and raw oysters, who knows and no one cared. As we got a lemon sorbet each from the best ice cream shop in town, we now had to answer the tough question: Where do we stay? I was in such a hurry to get here, I had forgotten to give a fuck about booking any place to stay. I was going to camp out in front of the Vital Statistics office building and chant a rhyming mantra I found on a very purple website, till they opened the next day but it seemed like a bad idea now, the bright colors were messing up my head. As we called upon the Google gods to help us find a basically-dirt-cheap

place, we found a room in a house that was not too far from the office building. The place was worth exactly my one arm and one and a half legs, good thing I was used to cutting off my limbs on a daily basis for survival and mouth foods so it was not a big deal. I just hoped they didn't mind the dried blood and bone fragments attached to my limbs due to cutting them off so often.

The little room was enough for one night. The tiny window was shaped like Beyonce's Illuminati symbol and I thought that was cool. The walls were blue and I took it as a real sign from the Queen. I woke up in the middle of the night to the ruffling of the plastic bag that I had put the unopened Mars bars in to stand in later for a wholesome breakfast. I woke you up because you were not bothered by the sound and that bothered me. I turned on the light and holy fuck it was a mouse. I yelled fuck to get some reaction from the dead you and saw the mouse jump and run off, slipping under the door crack. I ran to my bag of Mars bars and closed them tight and hid them under my pillow. I turned to face you and you were sleeping with one eye half open.

Next morning was the day where I make my name happen. I had 2 Mars bars for breakfast, you were still high from the early morning Prozac that you had taken to wake yourself up but not too much. You parked the car in front of the Vital Statistics building but I made you move it, I wanted to give the impression that I was independent and self sufficient. I pointed to a spot far enough and hidden under 100 year old tree trunks aping rocklike veins, to park your car. I was going to go in alone and make sure they validate my independence by exhaling slowly through the mouth so I can rub my indifference into their worn out, state funded chairs. It reeked of air

conditioned cigarette smoke the moment I entered the office, there were 3 middle aged women working behind the Customer Information desk and one middle aged man with plaid open chest hair shirt and khaki trousers standing in line that was all his own, he looked in my direction as my indifference touched the back of his head lightly. It was underwhelming and I was told to wait as someone will be with me shortly. I sat on one of the chairs that looked like it was on its last leg, it was soft but in a deflated, burnt out sort of a way. After less than 5 minutes a big, smiling woman came out from behind one of the closed doors and asked me to follow her inside. The room was small, with a simple desk and a chair on either sides. It could fit in as a police interrogation room if it weren't for the giant open window in the middle of the wall and bird excrement resting on the window sill. She asked me how she could help, without breaking from her smile even once. She had kind eyes and her lips were mauve with tiny smooth lines that can be easily missed if you're not paying close enough attention. I put the short form and long form birth certificates on the table and told her I don't want this name but I wanted my own. I expected her to ask me why or anything, but she didn't. She took out a sheet of paper and told me to write the name I want as I wanted it, clearly and left the room. I started at the closed door for a few seconds, underwhelmed. I wrote down a name that looked like me, that I searched Google for but didn't find, the name that I lost many nights sleep for before seeing myself in it and the woman came back after a couple of minutes. She took the sheet and looked it over, smiling and bright eyes. She told me I should get my new certificates in 3 to 4 weeks, they'll be mailed to my address in the form, addressed to my name. I asked softly, pausing after every word, if that was it and she said yes, that's it, I could go and be my own name. I walked out and stood outside for a moment. I had wrestled with this decision most of my life, I had planned this trip for a year and it was done in under 20 minutes. I felt lightheaded and my joints filled with air. I had nothing left to do with myself.

We drove away and I cried into my hands. You asked me if they were happy tears and I didn't know if they were. We went to the little blue ivy room and you saw the mouse this time, you chased after it with your Aldo shoe and I spaced out and forgot I didn't live here. We had a huge fight before we left when I said you didn't care and you said I already knew that. I called you a *coward* and you called me *disgusting*, we screamed and threw around shit that didn't belong to us. After we were bruised in some places on our bodies, the house owner called and told us the neighbors were scared and bothered and called her about our violence. She told us to get out within 10 minutes because she had already called the cops on us. You pretended to be calm and blamed me for everything. We gathered ourselves and spilled into your car. You parked in an abandoned parking lot under August heat and slammed the car door in my face. You screamed inside and outside and I left myself inside my head and drifted into heavy space. Before we left the city, you said you were sorry and took me to The Keg Steakhouse for a medium rare steak topped with grilled shrimp and sea air, your breath was light and regretful with a promise of an encore.

On the way back we spoke less and slept more. We ate more than sugar and Subway meats. You smiled more and I smiled less, I hated you more and you hated yourself. We stopped at diners and drank addictive black coffee and ate maple syrup eggs and maple syrup everything. We saw a moose almost hit a car and completely hit another car. We saw no rain and you paid for a private room on the ship because you were still regretting. The room had a shower big enough for not one person. The ocean smiled in sharp blindness and I felt as if all of this was enough to die. We slept for 8 hours on the ship or was it 5? I took a shower for the second

time in 5 days. There were fried eggs and bacon, toast and beans, pancakes and maple syrup. I drank coffee with a spoon of maple and no cream. I watched a woman tell how she lost her son to marijuana on tv and blame dreadlocks and head dress flute music for the evil in society. We got off Nova Scotia and you drove us to the Millbrook Cultural & Heritage Centre. We saw stones, wheels and sticks. We heard drums and history legends. You whispered in my ear how you felt your heritage killed their heritage. We met a beautiful First Nations woman, she sang for us a tale of injustice and death. You donated extra dollars for whispers in my ears and applause for death. We drove back 22 hours and stopped for power naps and gas tanks. The rain didn't come this time and New Brunswick looked a tender pasture sprouting emeralds and hazelnuts in squirrel mouths, bagging the hush hush of everyday. I thought of asking you if we should stop by the big man's house where I peed but wasn't murdered, I remembered his big man beard and the wilt was not something I wished upon him again so I didn't say anything. We entered my city and it was still August but with my name. I looked at my neighborhood with my name and it felt okay to call it mine. You stopped in front of my apartment building and asked about the bruises you gave me in St John's and I showed them to you. You were regretting that your bruises were healed. You called me by my name and I thought I had never met you before. I gave you the leftover Mars bars and didn't invite you up. I said *thank you, let's never be in your car together again and together*. I went up the elevator and texted my ex about my name. He said he doesn't know me anymore and asked for my Netflix password. I took a long shower and stared at myself in the fogged up mirror. I said my name and looked around. I looked down at my hands and my skin was clinging to my bones. Red mug of F1 beeped for a long second in the microwave and went dark. I updated my resume with a name and my ears felt hot at the tips.

There are no mirrors in heaven. I'm certain of this. I am also sure that gold is virtually worthless, since they pave the streets with the stuff. Asphalt? That might be pretty dear. Ex-spouses, loud neighbors, and calculus professors will be absent, no matter how virtuous they have been. They will inhabit a separate paradise, as they have no desire to see you, either. Perhaps the afterlife is an infinite stream of high-rise buildings, each hosting a score of loft parties attended by those members of the elect who can stand one another. The breadsticks on the buffet are truly endless and the bar never, ever runs out of wine.

In heaven, there is a lack of affect. No one is falsely glad for anyone else, and no one applauds if the orchestra doesn't move them. Facebook pages are fairly uniform: "The sun shone today when I wanted it to do so. Other times it went in. Likewise, the temperature stays at an optimum point for each inhabitant, so no one has to pretend to be warm or cool in an inhospitable room. They simply are comfortable. Contentedness courses through them like the current of an immense ocean and whatever their neighbor is doing—playing the harmonica or fishing with dynamite—is all right with them.

Picture yourself floating down an endless pacific stream. No, wait, that's plagiarism. Picture yourself on an endless down a pacific stream. Summer, spring, winter. It does not matter. You are in a better place, as they said at your funeral. Don't worry about what lit the fuse, what wound your flower. You are a rocket, an electric eye socket, you have died and are now reborn.

Welcome to bliss.

I stare at the folds of skin around my midsection. I can see my pores there, stretched indentations that line the surface of my stomach like moon craters. I'm some sort of foreign body, circling what it used to be, gravity pulling at it until it wore down. Like tidal waves that splashed but never sucked back in. I turn my eyes to the bathroom mirror and twist sideways. Not too bad. You can't see the way my stomach sags from this angle, especially when not wearing anything. I flash to how my skin spills over the top of my jeans when I'm sitting on the couch, nursing my newborn. It puddles and drips, lacking substance, searching for somewhere to go.

I face forward again, picking up a sliver and rolling it between my fingertips. I marvel at the texture of it, like dry silly putty, or a deflated balloon after being blown to its breaking point. I gained way too much weight while pregnant. I shouldn't have let the miscarriage before scare me away from exercise. The doctor told me the running I'd done a week before the bleeding began didn't cause me to lose the baby. Still, I'd been so afraid to move, to shift something, to scare my body into realizing we were developing a third little human. Three pregnancies, two children. A body not matching my head. I lift that extra skin until it's crumpled and hidden behind my cupped palm. My belly button itself appears painted, the skin five shades darker than the rest of me. The dark streak continues up my stomach, stopping just beneath my breastbone. Stretch marks arc around it like an abstract painting. The kind you have to pretend is beautiful.

The baby's muffled squawk reaches me through the bathroom door from where my husband is rocking her in the living room. I turn away from the mirror, trying hard to ignore the way my arm jiggles as I pull back the shower curtain to start the water. Four months post-

pregnancy, sixty-five pounds lighter, and still not feeling like myself.

I jump into the warm rush of water as Layla's squawks turn into cries. I hear her six-year-old sister Maya insisting, "You're okay!!" in a loud singsong tone. Water pulses over my forehead and drowns my ears. It's not that I feel bad about how I look. I'm just not feeling good.

Waiting on my DVR are episodes of *My 600 lb. Life* and *Skin Tight*. Tomorrow while Maya is at kindergarten and my husband is at work, I will sit and watch these people trying to lose extreme amounts of weight or getting surgery to remove excess skin after losing whole persons from their frame, while my baby clings to my boob. And I'll reach around her to pluck at my wreck of a stomach after two breech babies and think how it would take just one little snip, two little stitches, and I would feel better.

Except I wouldn't because my belly isn't the only problem area. In the shower, I lift my arms overhead and squint down. That's where my boobs should be, higher up my chest. Not the middle of my torso. And breastfeeding actually makes them fuller and perkier but even so, they droop. And when I'm done milking them...I drop my arms and reach for my poof, not wanting to continue down this spiraled path. I spread the suds over my leg. My flesh ripples, flowing out and away as I scrub. It's unfamiliar to me, how soft I've become.

As I turn off the water and reach to open the shower curtain, I watch my arm skin waving away again, and it reminds me of Adam Sandler's version of a lunch lady, with her waggly arms and greasy food spoon. I might as well don a hairnet and apron.

And suddenly, I'm back in the cafeteria of the school where I work. I'm seven months pregnant, waddling everywhere I go and way too aware of how large I am. I'm not even hungry but know it's not a good idea as a pregnant woman to skip meals, so I make the trek down the stairs to grab something. I'm coming in halfway through the lunch period so there's no line

for food at this time, and I wait patiently for the cafeteria lady to see me from where she's washing up dishes in the back. She comes out, smiling and wiping her hands. She's nothing like a stereotypical lunch lady. She's pretty with light pink lipstick, and she's incredibly pleasant. She hands me a styrofoam tray with a chicken patty and, like every single person who crosses my path, asks, "So when are you due?"

I cringe because I hate this question. I hate it because I know how she is going to respond once I tell her. She waits, silver serving spoon rustling against the plastic glove she wears over her hand. I plaster on my good-pregnant-woman smile and say, "January 26."

And there it is. Her eyes widen. She puts her hands on her hips and chuckles. "That long yet? My goodness, but you're big!" The spoon waggles in front of her, circling in a mimicking motion of my stomach. "You sure there's not twins in there?"

It's not meant to be hurtful. It's light-hearted and casual, and something people have been saying to me since I was five months pregnant. Friends have assured me I'm not that big, that women always pop faster and look bigger with their second child, that I just carry out front more. Heat creeps up my spine and splatters across my cheeks. I freeze my smile in place and duck out to the cash register. Another cafeteria worker waits for me there, an older woman with round spectacles. She's always wearing a black shirt under her tan apron, and she always asks me if she owes me an extra punch on my lunch card. She's nice but she's going to talk to me too and I just don't want to answer her, because if I do the tears will be apparent on the edges of every word. A large trash can sits before me and I'm tempted to toss my tray directly into it, then sprint to the girls' bathroom and hide in a stall, like something out of a teen movie. I hadn't even wanted to come down here in the first place. I wasn't even hungry. And this is why. Because I'm pregnant and overweight and on display.

I make minimal eye contact with the cash register woman and dash away before she can pick up her hole puncher. She'll owe me one next time. Every step back to my room hurts. My toes are pinched in my flats and my foot is actually so bloated it's spilling over the top. I can feel it jiggle with every step. I reach the door and rush to my desk where I throw the tray of food and sob. It gushes from my throat, an audible sound, and I'm mortified. I'm crying over a woman asking me about my pregnancy. I'm crying because she made me feel fat. I'm crying because I do feel fat, and nothing like myself, and I hate that I'm the kind of person who doesn't enjoy being pregnant because my identity is so tied to the skinnier, high-heel-wearing fashionista I am when not looking like I should be carrying twins.

As I towel dry off, I realize it's not just pregnancy that stole my confidence. It's the aftermath as well. Here I am, lighter than I was when I got pregnant, and I'm still scrubbing the self-doubt from my skin. Because this post-pregnancy body isn't me either. Everything is just so...*loose*. I don't like feeling pourable.

Even so, I slide on my most-loved and threadbare sweatpants and the nursing bra I've worn for three days. Dried milk stains line the inside of the fabric cups but it's the best one I have and I haven't had a chance to wash it. I pick up a t-shirt from the floor and crawl into it as I walk out to the living room and scoop up the grumpy four-month-old.

Construction paper sprawls across the living room floor, crayons everywhere. Maya's embedded in the middle of this chaos, her legs are bent at the knee and her bare feet scrunched over each other. I sneak a peek at what she's drawing. A portrait of us. She always draws us: Mommy, Maya, and baby Layla, the *tres muchachas*, only occasionally including her father and our dog to avoid hurting their feelings.

Layla reaches around and grabs onto the skin at the back of my arm. She nestles her

head against my chest and she's suddenly no longer grumpy. I place my lips to her bald little head and close my eyes. My body isn't what it used to be. My life isn't what it used to be, either.

“Mommy! Don't look; it's a surprise!” Maya exclaims, realizing I'm behind her.

“Okay, I won't look,” I tell her, plopping onto the couch. I notice a lump under my butt and extract a dandelion yellow crayon.

She stashes her drawing at the bottom of her paper stack and jumps up to retrieve the crayon I'm holding out to her with a raised eyebrow. She takes it from me, then as is the way with six-year-olds, impulsively kisses her sister, rocking her wobbly little head back, then throws her arms around my neck. She squeezes a little too hard and knocks me slightly off balance. “Okay, okay, thank you,” I sputter, tapping at her elbows like an MMA fighter signaling submission. She backs away, her blue eyes inches from my tired green ones.

“Mommy,” she says, suddenly serious. “You're wonderful.”

I smile at her and swallow against the tide rising in my throat. Layla's hand adjusts its grip on my arm and she sighs contentedly, her breath skimming my collarbone.

My body is not what it used to be. It has a C-section scar that has bore two little girls. It's blotched with moles and freckles and skin tags. It has a dog bite scar and tattoos that I want to improve. My ankles are thicker than necessary and my hips never got the memo that my children wouldn't actually be passing through them. The dark circles under my eyes are never completely covered by the foundation I spread over them. But my six-year-old thinks I'm wonderful and my four-month-old finds safety against this battered frame.

And suddenly, I stop thinking about celebrities who have babies and emerge bikini-clad with stomachs unblemished. I stop wondering if anyone will scrutinize my arms when I wear

tank tops in public this summer. I stop believing, at least in this moment, that my worth lies in the smoothness of my waist. I pull open the camera on my phone and look at myself, and I see who I am: I am a woman. I am a mother. I am a human who lives and breathes and thinks.

I find myself again. As Maya hands me her finished portrait and Layla giggles at her big sister, kicking against my thigh, I find who I want to be as a woman raising girls, because I don't want them to lose so much time over worrying about their bodies. I don't want them thinking that the most beautiful parts of themselves are stitched inextricably to their jean size. I want them to know their bodies are part of their beauty because of what it is *capable* of, not what it looks like. For mine has given me so much more than stress and doubt and resentment. It's given me them.

I balance the baby on my crossed legs as I lower to the floor and pick up a crayon. Maya scooches over and presents me with a slightly crumpled but blank piece of paper. I color with my daughters. And I don't once think about that saggy skin around my belly button or the soft loose wiggle on the back of my arm. I'm too busy creating to care.

Maya draws a circle on her paper, poking dots all through the middle. "I'm making the moon, Mommy," she quips, trading in her gray for a bright yellow. Her hand moves across the paper, placing pinpricks of light all around the edges. They make the moon glow.

Layla kicks her legs in my lap, pulling them in and out, until she rests them straight in front of her. I'm reminded again of tides, of the ever-changing surface of this world, and suddenly I know why we call our earth Mother, because her bodies of water shift and bend, constantly moving, always sustaining life. Layla pushes against me, cooing at her sister's picture.

"These dots are called *craters*," Maya tells me, pointing at her circle. She's back to the gray crayon, darkening her marks, widening them. "They're all over the moon."

“You’re right. Kinda weird, huh? I guess the moon’s all bumpy and hard to walk on.”

She loops around a dot, then colors it in, tilting her head to the side. “I like it.” She tilts her head the other way. “Like a artist made a pattern. It’s beautiful.”

My body is full of pinpricks and craters. They don’t have to be flaws. And though this is something I’ve known for a long time, it isn’t until now I feel it. Perhaps, like the surface of anything, my body is just weathering, being sculpted like canyons by determined rivers. Or like construction paper by crayons wielded by a determined kindergartener. Experience leaves its marks.

I press my cheek to Layla’s smooth one. I place my palm to Maya’s slim back. I breathe them in, the way I do when in front of the ocean. I’ve given so much of myself in having them. And here they are, returning it to me.

“Yes,” I whisper, and I see myself reflected in the eyes Maya turns my way. “How beautiful it is.”

THE SHOOTER | VALERI PAXTON-STEELE

“he was cleaning his gun...”

that’s what they said
four daughters and a son
that was his legacy
a beloved wife
who bustled at home
in a flowered housecoat
hanging christmas cards
at the holidays
she collected nesting dolls
canned her own garden vegetables
and made the world’s best goulash

their kids grown and gone
to the state’s farthest reaches
making lives and families
of their own far away
they had only each other
in that four bedroom house
built by his company
for all their employees
who toiled in the factory
making shoes in the 20’s

his only son a big burly man
with a full happy beard
like a ginger Santa Claus
gone too soon from
a heart attack at the wheel

the old beloved wife died a year later
graced with beautiful Amish fat
his first great gentle love
her kidneys, then her heart
yes, he ran the machines
that created the shoes
and before that, in the war
a prison guard at Leavenworth

for years they had an old cabin
complete with an outhouse
near the green hammock
in the autumn woods where
he tapped sugar maple trees
and boiled down his own syrup
a hex sign above the A-frame shed
he sculpted figures from forest wood
he fed fat grey raccoons
tablescraps under the picnic table
next to an old tire swing
which curved, slightly sagged from
decades of little kid's bottoms

they had love and family
then he just had aloneness
and a fine old gun collection
isolation in an empty pink house
prone to creaking in the wind
up narrow wooden stairs
to empty daughter rooms

German Luger pistols
souvenirs from the war
pump-action hunting rifles
his blue eyes traced the memories
fanciful yellow matryoshka dolls
cut glass crystal candy dishes
and boxes of old christmas cards

his children could not
assuage the old man's sorrow
a bit of his pink-stained skull
found embedded so shallow
in the bullet-hole plaster
above the red flecked formica table
where so many bowls of goulash were served
the expert with firearms
had tears in his eyes
made the falsehood look real
a showman's grand illusion
and the daughters said to the world
"he was cleaning his gun..."

ATTICA | VALERI PAXTON-STEELE
Thursday, September 9, 1971 - Monday, September 13, 1971

We have no voices any longer.
You cannot hear our prayers.
Rebellion, riot, demands, negotiations, death.
The savage convicts were armed and masked.
They beat and bruised us into submission,
only then to guard us just as we,
the officers, used to guard them.
Gross inhumanity toward our fellow man.
Better food, better medicine, better sanitation.
A stop to cruel treatment, have fair visitations.
Rights versus punishment and suffering.
Concessions to some, balking at others,
the arrogance of Governor Rockefeller
took all of our voices away.
Ruthless and bloodthirsty, the brutality continued.
The police and national guard came out to play.
We had each, to a man, held our own,
heeding our own dusty inner council.
Forced into becoming terrified hostages,
we stood our ground long days and nights
against vicious assaults of barbarism...
bloodied, battered, captive until that morning-
for two full minutes clouds of smoke and tear gas,
sweeping interminable seconds across the yard,
the rage and agony of deathscreeams and bullets.
Fish in a barrel both good and bad alike-
having nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.
They slaughtered us at Attica prison.
Rebellion, riot, demands, negotiations, death.
We have no voices any longer.
You cannot hear our prayers.

Getting picked last in gym class is a death sentence to the social life of a boy. But really, I was hopeless in gym class even when we weren't picking teams. Chin-ups and rope climbing were one and the same to me, as they achieved the same effect: failure and shame.

When forced to attempt chin-ups, my skinny legs dangled helplessly beneath me as I strained to elevate my chin above the bar. One would think being a frail, skinny child would have made this feat easier. It did not. As I hung from the bar like a sheet hung out to dry on a calm day, I saw all my classmates watching down below.

Laughing.

Climbing a rope was a similar ordeal, but rather than my legs dangling in the air, they would straddle the rope like a dog humping a flopping fish. I always ended up exactly where I started – at the bottom of the rope, but with newly chafed hands.

I would suffer a similar humiliation in middle school when I attended an adventure camp that required me to climb an enormous, outdoor climbing wall. I got no further than 10 feet up before losing my grip and crashing back into the wall as I hung from my harness. Meanwhile, the rest of my classmates made it all the way up with seemingly little to no effort.

My fear of heights, combined with my lack of physical coordination was the driving force behind my decision to pass on an adventure ropes course suspended high above the treetops. I didn't even deliberate on this one. Of course, my refusal to do it only led to more humiliation from my peers than had I at least attempted it.

I fared no better at recess. Unlike most kids, I dreaded recess. I preferred the relatively safe, supervised confines of a classroom. More specifically, I dreaded the ample opportunity it brought for my bullies to find fresh and exciting ways to torment me. While the cool kids

played sports during recess, I dug holes in the dirt beneath the swing set, far away from the athletic field where my classmates played and increased their ever-growing popularity.

As though gym and recess wasn't humiliating enough, my last name in itself brought a whole other degree of ridicule. And it was all due to the popular childhood game, "What Time is it, Mr. Fox?"

My experience with this game often went something like this:

"What time is it, Mr. Fox?" ...

...followed by taunts such as:

"Time to kick your butt!"

Which, by time I reached middle school, morphed into this:

"Time to kick your ass!"

However, none of these challenges measured up to my true elementary school nemesis, dodgeball – the bane of every elementary school dork, freak, and other form of social outcast. There's something inherently flawed about a game where the object is to throw something at somebody. Not *to* them, so they can catch it, but *at* them, so you can hit them as hard as possible. In some ways, dodgeball is a tamer version of boxing. Of course, no school would ever dare force students to box. Some might even argue that football is more brutal than dodgeball. That might be true, but when football is played in gym class, tackling is prohibited. Furthermore, the primary aim of football is not tackling, but rather to bring the ball over the goal line. In dodgeball, violence *is* the goal. It's the elementary school rendition of survival of the fittest.

The original *Hunger Games*.

The sinister origins dodgeball can be traced back over six hundred years. Originally

played in Africa, there are early variations on record in Korea, China, and Germany. In the game's earliest incarnation, the game wasn't played with rubber balls. It was played with rocks. In that context, guess I should count my blessings.

In the early days, once an individual was struck, their opponents continued to pelt them until they were finished off for good. It was up to the struck man's teammates to defend their fallen comrade by pelting the attackers with rocks of their own. This ritual was believed to encourage tribal teamwork in preparation for skirmishes against other tribes. It also helped weed out the weak from the tribe.

With the exception of rocks, not much has really changed.

In the late 1800s, an English missionary named Dr. James H. Carlisle witnessed the ruthless game, and introduced a "tamer" version of the game back home. In place of rocks was a leather ball, which was still painful, only less lethal. In this more domesticated version, smacking somebody with a ball simply wasn't enough. A player was only knocked out of the game if they were knocked to the ground. If they remained standing after a blow, they remained in the game.

A few years later, the game made its way over to the U.S., with the first official rules drawn up in 1905. Soon, colleges across the country were playing one another in competition, opening the floodgates for school-sanctioned, team sport bullying. Instead of having to throw objects at victims when authority figures weren't looking (or, in some cases, *were* looking) bullies were now actually encouraged to take aim.

Anybody who has ever played the modern version of dodgeball understands there are three types of participants usually left standing: the *cowerers* and the *champions*. The gap between the two – eventual loser and eventual winner – couldn't be any wider. The champions

manage to knock off most of their opponents, while simultaneously avoiding getting hit themselves. The *in-betweeners* are the middle ground between the champions and the cowerers. At least they *tried*. And then there are the “early birds”. These are the participants who are smart enough to pretend to get hit amidst the chaos of the game’s opening shots, in an effort to avoid getting hit for real – sparing themselves the pain associated with actually getting nailed by a ball. Looking back, I should have settled for the early bird option. But once a cowerer... always a cowerer.

Last – and *certainly* least – cowerers outlast almost everybody – not out of sheer athleticism, but for the sole reason that they spend the entire game glued to the back wall, cowering in fear, and using everyone else as human shields. As the others are eliminated one-by-one, cowerers suddenly emerge as easy targets because there is nowhere else to hide. It is only a matter of time before cowerers make their maker. Unlike the participants who got knocked out unnoticed early amidst the chaos of the game, the eyes of the entire class get to now witness your demise – as you – the noble cowerer – run back and forth against the wall in this most dangerous game, until you find yourself curled defensively into a ball on the floor, awaiting your inescapable fate.

For me, games of dodgeball more often than not came down to myself and my nemesis, David Murphy.

Bully #1.

David, of course, was a natural at this game, licking his chops at any opportunity to play – even going so far as to beg the gym teacher to squeeze in a game at the end of class. For David, life was one huge, neverending dodgeball game. Presumably, my gym teacher was no different than David Murphy when he was a kid. The only difference between the two was a teaching certificate.

If there was one silver lining, it was that the jocks were more concerned about knocking out other jocks in a demonstration of their uber-competitive-jockiness. It wasn't that David was especially athletic. He wasn't. It came down to the fact that this game was a bully's paradise, allowing him to pluck out the weak one-by-one, usually followed by the more athletically-inclined in the class, who could easily beat David in every other sport on the planet, except dodgeball.

David always left me for last. This allowed him to maximize the humiliation he so relished. Like a predatory cat with an injured mouse, David taunted and tortured me by intentionally missing me six or seven times to prolong my misery to the amusement of the entire class. I cowered in the fetal position, where I remained until the gym teacher finally, reluctantly, told him to finish. Then he'd plunk me and have a celebratory dance like a cocky receiver after a touchdown. As if he'd done something difficult.

David even organized playground versions of the game, independent from gym class. It was the only organizing he was capable of, but boy did he put his all into that. David always sought me out on the playground to join in. I went along with it as I was desperate to "belong" even if it means having balls hurled at my face.

Unlike gym class, where the game was mandated (simply opting out would have been viewed as insubordination), I could have opted out of the playground version, focusing instead on digging to China beneath the swingset. But I was driven by fear, with no choice but to take my lumps.

Fortunately, after generations of traumatized youth, dodgeball has been banned by many schools across the nation. Where it isn't banned yet, rubber balls have been replaced with softer sponge balls – the kind that doesn't leave welts. The type of ball made all the difference in

the world. I was not so lucky.

Twenty years later, an unexpected opportunity for redemption arrived in the form of a dodgeball tournament aboard a Royal Caribbean cruise. I was naturally hesitant at first. An entire childhood plagued with dodgeball and now I was expected to volunteer for it? For fun?

But what did I have left to lose. Even if I totally sucked, I could prove I was no longer afraid. And maybe ... just maybe ... I had a shot at success. Maybe ... just maybe ... I could purge my childhood demons once and for all.

Perhaps it had to do with the abundance of fruity cocktails consumed. Or perhaps the strong Caribbean breeze aboard our vessel, making it difficult for the lightweight ball to soar more than five feet, which somehow made everything seem less intimidating.

Suddenly, my first taste of athletic confidence took over my body.

The tournament began. I sat on the sidelines with my team – comprised of all age groups, spanning all walks of life – eagerly awaiting my team’s chance to take the court.

When my team finally took the court, I took several shots, all of which hit their intended target. Eclipsing my confidence was a simmer of frustration. I wanted to do better. But as the game progressed, my teammates went down one by one. By some divine miracle, not only was I still standing, but I was no longer using my teammates as body shields. I’d suddenly become aggressive.

Driven, like an animal.

No longer a cowerer, I charged toward every ball, rather than dodging them.

I was silently disqualified in the middle of the pack – not by a bean, but by an opponent’s catch. It was a worthy throw, caught by an even more worthy opponent – a college-

aged frat boy. This was as close to redemption as I was going to get. And I could live with that. I could finally hang 'em with fearless grace. This was no *Rocky* moment, but I didn't need one. All I needed to know was this: I could stand tall. I could throw the ball. I didn't have to be afraid.

I was no longer a cowerer.

Pissing in the streets of Paris on New Years. Those were the words that I heard when skyping with my friend, Alex, who was studying abroad last year, and I immediately thought that she was weird for urinating in a public place. She continued to describe the people in the streets flowing towards the Eiffel tower that was supposed to sparkle at midnight. Then she thought about my statement that she was weird for going to the bathroom in the street and posed the question, haven't you ever peed someplace you shouldn't. I was taken back because the girl that I knew would not be so straightforward. I started to go through my past and realized that I had done exactly the same thing. Well, not exactly the same thing but pretty close.

It was raining again in Clarion County, Pa. It seemed to always rain in the morning when I was on my way to A.M. kindergarten. Sligo Elementary School sat on the corner of Madison Street Extension and Shamrock Drive right beside the park with a \$2 Tuesday swimming pool. My grandmother pulled in to let me off, and Mrs. Shook, a petite woman with a hairdo the same size as her, greeted me at the door. The day went as it always did, the book bags went on the rack behind the wall, we practiced our colors, and learned to tie our shoes, but the most important part of the day was when Mrs. Shook announced that it was time to retrieve snack from the cafeteria. Snack helper was an honor that could only be compared to receiving the Congressional Medal of Honor. This time I was not going to be beat by Rachel, the girl with a perfect smile and off centered pig tails, again. I had a problem. My 5-year-old bladder was not going to be able to hold up for the long run. The extreme pressure of all 400 mL on my bladder made my kindergarten brain work in double time to think through the situation. I took my chance, and executed my plan when Mrs. Shook turned her head.

I stepped quickly with my sandal covered feet, and tiptoed behind the rack where the book bags hung. This spot was ideal. I had the privacy of being behind a wall, and it was in the back of the room. My plan worked. I released all the pressure from my bladder on to the knock off white marble linoleum. Once my plan was done, I walked back to my seat, taking into account that Mrs. Shook had not yet picked a helper and had not noticed my quick but relieving disappearance.

She asked again for a helper to go get the snack. This time my hand shot up, and she looked around and she winked her bug-like eyes in my direction. All of the anticipation was built up. My stomach almost doubled over, my name getting ready to roll off her tongue. Before she was able to announce my name, a shriek came from behind the backpack rack. I thought my plan was falling apart fast.

Mrs. Shook darted back to find Mackenzie, a small girl that slightly resembled Piggy from Lord of the Flies, lying on the floor in a puddle. We all heard Mrs. Shook's disapproving words and even her tell the girl the location of the bathroom from our seats. I knew Mrs. Shook thought the puddle had belonged to Mackenzie. I started to laugh underneath my breath knowing that she had slipped and discovered a well-hydrated surprise. Mrs. Shook now in a state of shock had instructed Rachel and myself to go find the janitor and on the way back to pick up

snack. This was not my ideal scenario, but I got the opportunity to push the milk wagon down the hallway and that was all that mattered.

After I had told Alex this story, she realized that this was the moment in my life where “the Austin does what he wants to get what he wants attitude comes from.” This attitude has gotten me in trouble more than once, but it has also got me to some of the best moments in my life. In all honesty, I do find it embarrassing that my 5-year-old self would have the audacity to go to the bathroom on the floor by the book bags. Also, after my prefrontal cortex had fully developed, I feel a bit of remorse toward Mackenzie’s slip and fall. But that moment when I was pushing that milk wagon down the hallway wearing my Blue’s Clues outfit is still one of the proudest moments in my life. The only thing that my attitude can not fix is jealousy because I am not the one pissing in the streets of Paris.

“It’s time to take you home. Just sit right here Dad,” my Uncle Bob says to my grandfather. I get in on the other side of my Aunt Sally and Uncle Jim’s car. My uncle is the backseat with my grandfather and I. We are about to head over the mountain to North Adams. My Aunt sits down in the car and we wave off my grandmother. She is in my mom’s car for the ride home because at least there she could smoke her cigarettes. Plus she didn’t want to ride along with my grandfather. She couldn’t even look at him.

He was still my goofy grandpa, despite the circumstances. He had grown quiet with age. He still laughed and tried to tickle my toes though. He even still danced on his frail legs in his clunky no slip sneakers from Wal-Mart. I knew the photos of him and I dancing around the table were real moments from his ever-present silly persona, even though in recent years, he lacked the same vibrancy for life. Even now as we buckled our seatbelts, he was lifeless and oblivious to our trip back to my hometown. I hoped he would perk up to tell me stories of the place he grew as we crossed the trail, but I relied on my aunt to tell the stories this time as my Uncle Bob comforted his father.

We started on Route 2, also known as the Mohawk Trail. It use to be a bubbling tourist attraction. Tourists would stop at a number of Native American stores along the way. When I was young, one of the stores use to have a petting zoo. Now the trail is dead. None of the Native American stores are open. People pull off to look at the large stereotype Native American statue or teepees-stereotypes that were not even practiced by the Mohawks. Other than these fading locales, a few small towns dabble along the Deerfield River along with recreational companies that offer kayaks or canoes for rent. It’s quiet and I recognize the way the roads turn from the many trips we took when my brother and I were kids to my Aunt and Uncle’s house in Greenfield. We use to be a family then. I follow the river weaving next to and under the road, dodging between the right side and left side. I hardly notice the bridges now.

Soon we are in the thick of the woods, surrounded by the mountains. It doesn’t look the same as it did when I was a kid. The small pull off park that had a man made lake was full of sand now. The river doesn’t run as rapid, the erosion from bad flooding from Hurricane Irene in 2011 made the river look puny. The trees are full and green though, unlike they were two weeks previous when my mom, brother, and I took a quick trip home to get stuff from our own eroding home.

We had one more town to pass through before we reach North Adams, the town where I was born and raised. After winding through the mountains and driving around the notorious Dead Man’s Turn, I see the small white sign. Welcome to Florida. I try to imagine my grandpa growing up in this town. Walking to school. Living in his small house with his brothers and sisters. The small general store that my family use to own. The jokes they use to make about how it was snowing in Florida. Some Northerner must of thought it was a pretty funny joke to name a small mountain town in Massachusetts, Florida. A large sign with a snowman use to welcome travellers to the town, but in the last year it’s disappeared. My Uncle Bob points out where my grandfather’s parents are buried to him. My grandpa is still silent. I reach out to touch his hand, but retract.

I take a deep breath as we leave Florida. We were heading to my least favorite part of the ride. The Hair Pin Turn. Anxiety built up in my stomach as we slowly veered around the sharp turn. I sigh in relief as we head down the mountain and into the valley where North Adams lie.

I was home again. We pass the Cumberland Farms. We pass Beaver Street, the street I grew up on. We pass the old mushroom factory. We pass the library. We pass MCLA, the local liberal arts college. We turn right. We park by the lake.

There is a green tarp out already. It's noticeably fake against the real grass. I don't say anything as my Uncle Bob walks my grandpa over to it. My grandma paces near my mom's car with a cigarette her mouth. She put me in charge of greeting everybody and getting signatures for the book. I'm glad. It keeps my thoughts quiet. People start arriving and I do my job. Introducing myself. Showing them the book. It has some nice quotes. It lists all the family members. My dad shows up and I manage to say an awkward hi to him. I shake my mom's ex tiny hand as he makes a remark about how I am just like my mother. I gag on the inside. I find my cousin and we talk about her recent college romance. We all make small talk.

Once everyone is there, I look at the white marble urn. A picture of my grandpa when he started at General Electric lies on the ground. He is smiling answering the phone. It looks like an old National Geographic ad for telephones. Next to it is his favorite Red Sox Christmas hat. He wore it all the time when he was in the nursing home when his head would get cold. His love for the Red Sox was certainly transferred to me. The priest came and we all pretended to be Catholic for the thirty-minute ceremony. I struggle with my "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" hand motion in the back of the crowd. I say goodbye to grandpa with some humor and let him know I was glad that I got at least one more trip with him, even if it was only in spirit.

Crying babies, distressed mothers, and screaming old men fill the depths of the waiting room of the emergency department at Johns Hopkins Hospital. Hunched over, sitting in a puddle of tissues, I shift myself to get a better look at the receptionist desk. I turn white. A girl from my sorority, wearing a volunteer badge, is seated behind the desk, fixated on the computer. She is a friend of a friend, but I fear that she will recognize me and make false assumptions about why I am in the emergency department on a Tuesday at 11 pm. I hear a doctor call out my name. I stuff my tissues, sticky notes, and scattered Twizzler bags in my small knapsack and rush to the doctor, looking down to avoid contact with the friend of the friend.

The doctor escorts me to a stark, cold patient room. Then he leaves. I stare at the desk with medical supplies lined up one after another: cotton swabs, tongue depressors, syringes. I reflect back on when I would get excited just looking at such first aid items, imagining my future life as a physician. Another doctor enters the room, a smile plastered on his face. He looks far too cheery for 11 pm. He keeps the small talk to a minimum and asks what brought me to the ER. My cheeks turn crimson as I contemplate what to say. Why am I even sitting in this room? Shouldn't I be in the psych ward? I put together a half-true, half-fabricated story on what happened that led to me going to the hospital. My mouth dries. I am mortified. And terrified that I am in the ER for the first time in my life due to something non-medical.

After the doctor leaves the room, a security guard enters and asks me to come with him. I walk through hallway after hallway, through 'authorized access only' doors, to arrive at a bleak expanse of adjoining rooms. The curtains are drawn, only the quiet shuffling of feet fill the quiet void. Another security guard approaches me and asks for my belongings – my backpack, Canada Goose jacket, Frye boots, even my Nike socks. I wonder if he will take my cell

phone. He leaves, but returns within a minute.

“Ma’am, I need your cell phone. It is unsafe for you to keep it.”

Unsettled, I mull this over, wondering what he could mean by “unsafe.” He asks for my cell phone again. I take it from my back pocket and reluctantly hand it to him. He examines my phone screen, mutters something to himself, and then returns to his desk.

My wheelchair is planted in front of the nurse station. Without my phone, my hands itch for something to grab onto. I sit up in the wheelchair. A coat of sweat covers my back. I hunch over and bury my head in my hands. I lift my head to the sound of a stretcher rolling by. I make eye contact with the woman lying on the stretcher – she has charcoal-colored short hair, stark blue eyes, and is wearing a bracelet with her name printed in all caps, EVELYN S. I see a beautiful, frail older woman whose eyes tell me she is lost and frightened. Our eyes still locked, I manage a half smile and wave at her. An outline of a smile kisses her lips, and she lifts her free hand to wave back. Something about this brief interaction with Evelyn strikes a chord inside me. Maybe because I am currently in the ER of a hospital, or that I have been staring at doctors pass by for the last hour, I feel moved to do something for this woman. Not just for her, but for everyone needing such moments of warmth to cling onto. Maybe I will become a doctor, maybe I will work in geriatrics, maybe I will aspire to help women like Evelyn. This sudden flurry of thoughts tires me and I begin to zone out.

The same security guard nudges me awake. I orient myself and realize once again where I am. Drool covers half of my face. Tears prick my eyes. The security guard lifts me up, and helps me walk to the opposite end of the hall. I see six beds, each separated by a sheer white curtain, with roughly half of the beds occupied by women shrieking and writhing in their sleep. “Go to bed number 5,” he orders, appraising me from top to bottom. I comply.

My legs are cold. The meager piece of cloth, which the nurse called a blanket, covers my chest and belly. The cold keeps me awake. So do the intermittent screams of a woman whose bed is a few feet away from mine. Every 10 minutes – yes, I have the intervals precisely timed – a nurse appears at my neighbor’s bed and offers her medication to alleviate her chest pain. Every time after she leaves, I turn toward her bed and offer her a tentative smile. She returns it with a glare, mutters something incomprehensible, and turns over so her back is facing me. Why is she here? I begin to count the crevices in the wall. One, two...I am cold...my bladder is going to explode any minute...where is the doctor? I start singing to myself, ‘99 bottles of beer on the wall, 99 bottles of beer. Take one down, and pass it around, 98 bottles of beer on the wall.’ This does not help one recover any sanity. I feel like I am standing in the middle of an abandoned road, screaming for help. But no one hears or sees me.

What seems like hours later, a doctor wakes me, sits on the side of my bed, clasps my hand, and begins, “So, can you please explain why you were brought into the ER for suicidal ideation?”

