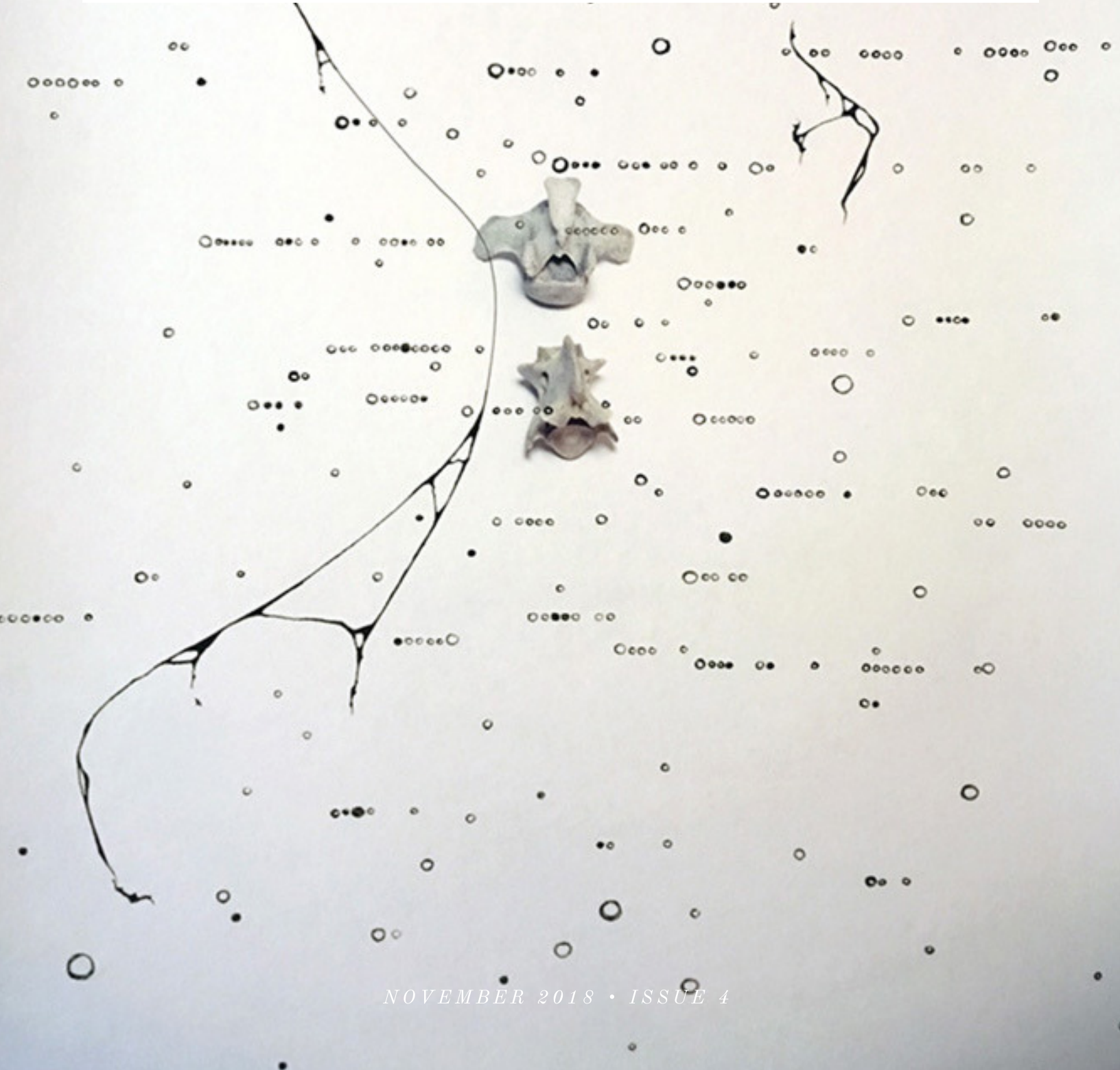


ECHO

A JOURNAL OF CREATIVE NONFICTION



NOVEMBER 2018 • ISSUE 4

ECHO

JOURNAL OF CREATIVE NONFICTION

Echo: Journal of Creative Nonfiction- August 2018

Cover Art courtesy of canva.com.

Text Set in Times New Roman

All authors retain the rights to their work. All work that appears in this journal has been published with the author's permission.

ISSN: 2574-4569 (online)

Want to be published? Submit your work on [Submittable](#).

Echo

Editor in Chief Sara Stevenson

Consultant Austin Shay

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.



November Surprise

Written By Gabrielle Rivard

November 7

I took Harry to nursery school on Monday morning. He was happy to leave me and ran into the living room of the old house in Southeast Portland to the arms of Miss Monica, his teacher. He joined a group of a half-dozen toddler children, the offspring of the city's working parents, who left the school on bikes equipped with baby seats and orange safety flags, or in Subarus weighed down with multiple car seats.

In the picture from his first day, Harry's wearing a green patterned bandana to help mitigate his runny nose and chambray Toms slip-ons. I took the photo with my iPhone, full of excitement — not for his day, but for mine. After dropping him off, his baby sister would hopefully take a good nap, and I would have three hours to myself: a novelty, a sensation unknown to me for months. I returned home and lay sprawled the rug with my phone and my coffee, watching the news on TV and scrolling mindlessly through social media, alone; the guilty sensation of having committed a criminal act nipping at the sides of my tentative enjoyment.

Enrolling Harry in school for two half-days a week had given me a three-and-a-half-hour break in the procession of hours that make up the life of a mother of young children: a sea of hours, a mountain of hours to be gotten through, like a penance, and simultaneously treasured, rolled over in one's palm like precious jewels.

As I nursed four-month-old Frances I tried to focus on her little face, her baby sounds; to commit to memory the gentle feeling of her soft body nestled sideways on my lap as I sat on the floor; her blue eyes half-shut, hand clamped crablike to my index finger. I knew even in the moment that this time would slip away — that I couldn't hold onto it in the way I wanted, and my eyes welled up with emotion, as if to acknowledge and formalize this fact. The instant, punctuated by tears and properly recognized, rolled away and joined the million others I noted every day and uselessly tried to collect into some palpable thing I could pick up and take with me. I looked away from her face, back to my phone to scroll through the fusillade of dispatches from the campaign.

When you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything — grab 'em by the pussy.

Already behaving erratically since his debate on Monday, Trump imitated Clinton's pneumonia-induced collapse from last month and fired off the most grotesque, personal, and fact-free attack at the nominee yet.

Such a nasty woman.

We had long since broken the unspoken national pact that expected our leaders to behave in a certain way. We were, as a country, lost in a no-man's-land, where presidential candidates were accused of peeping on girls in beauty-pageant changing rooms, and nobody blinked. Where presidential candidates were associated with judging beauty pageants, period. The stories coming from Washington dripped through the paper-mâché crust of my sleep-deprived mind like water torture, each more enraging than the last. I slogged through the daily barrage of news in a fugue state, humming with a whine of anxiety.

To say that I was having some difficulty with the precious jewels of parental life was an understatement.

ment.

Rather than carrying the moments with my daughter in a safe place, too many of the hours were saturated with a dry, helpless anger that seemed to well up from a spring of despair and frustration I recognized from other times in my life but didn't expect in the context of motherhood. It was the frustration of having to ignore catcalls on the street. Of being ignored in meetings. Of listening to a boyfriend dismiss my feelings with a cruelly timed word. It was the helpless rage of womanhood, writ large. The trappings of being female. How was I supposed to know it was a real trap? Steely teeth, sprung tight onto my leg, or maybe my breasts: it had looked shiny and real. They don't tell you about the rage.

Here was the thing I wanted — a baby — and in place of the dreamy-eyed joy I'd been promised I was greeted with sleeplessness, an odd sense of loss, a misplaced feeling of finality and loneliness. Nothing in my previous postpartum experience had brought forth this kind of furious sadness.

Anger crept in around the edges of everyday interactions until it became a constant, simmering fury that burst out through clenched teeth, directed at anyone in my vicinity, most often the children. I usually managed to remove myself from their presence before I hurled the Tupperware across the kitchen or used too many four-letter words, but not always.

At the end of the day, softly touching their sleeping faces in the dark, I was horrified and full of regret, certain that I'd inflicted irreparable damage to my two-year-old's psyche that all the soothing apologies I made couldn't fix.

* * * *

Frances was born in June. In four months the world had morphed from a mostly tolerable, sometimes enjoyable place into a grim landscape of hunched shoulders and bleary eyes. I'd had visions of waking in the dreamy haze of predawn and sitting with her on the outside porch, sipping coffee, savoring moments: Harry's babyhood had been this way, a sweet period of new tenderness and awe. I'd expected the same of my daughter's first summer.

She was born one day after what would have been my grandmother's 89th birthday. My mom had started hoping for a June 25 labor as soon as she learned my due date — June 29. "Well, maybe she'll have Mormor's birthday. Wouldn't that be sweet," she said, wistful.

As if I had any control over it. I would have been fine with June 25; I'd been counting down the days since March. At 32 weeks: the baby would probably be OK if she was born now. At 35 weeks 5 days: I'm as pregnant as I've ever been. At 37 weeks, full-term: I'll take it.

I loathed being pregnant; it felt so alien. I looked enviously at women on Instagram in tight-fitting maternity dresses, their hands curved along the radius of distended bellies, backs arched, luxuriating in gestational bliss. I thought they were full of shit. I was also jealous: not for one second did I feel attractive, or sexy, or "womanly," that catchall descriptor for everything round and feminine, during those long months. I wanted the baby, and I did feel excited. But any anticipatory tenderness was eclipsed by the feeling of being invaded; conquered by biology and the hormonal directives of the placenta, which I learned was programmed to override a woman's body — even going so far as to force her blood pressure up to dangerous levels, all in service of the fetus.

I ran my hands over the distended plane of my abdomen and gingerly checked for stretch marks, hoping I could emerge from this ordeal unscarred, as if from a fire.

It wasn't just the discomfort: I felt vulnerable in a way I never did while not-pregnant. The extra weight and the awkward slowness rendered me helpless and clumsy. At five feet ten and nearing two hundred pounds toward the end, I was a bloated distortion of myself: caged in a sweaty costume of extra flesh, short of breath, slow to stand up, unable to tie my shoes, lumbering through Target. I couldn't run if someone were to lunge at me out of the bushes; I couldn't conceal my bulky form if I needed to hide. I couldn't even sit for longer than it took to eat dinner, a heavy pressure building up in my pelvis, pushing on my cervix. Every minute I spent upright, my mouth flattened into a straight line of anxiety, certain that the force of

the baby's head and the weight of the amniotic fluid would finally break through my mucous plug in a wet pop — a decisive and potentially disastrous end to what had been a normal pregnancy.

I knew what came next, if that were to happen. That story was the tale of the premature baby: wires and oxygen masks, an antiseptic smell hovering around the hard, clear plastic of a NICU crib. I'd read enough first-person accounts from mothers on BabyCenter that the scenario was familiar. I tried to stay away from the internet for a while, but it didn't take long to get sucked in to the stories of women in my "Birth Club." I bookmarked several particularly tragic posts and followed these unlucky women as they endured the worst time of their lives: stillbirths; 26-weekers who almost made it; the woman who learned of her fetus's anencephaly early on but insisted on following through with the pregnancy to its inevitable end. In the photos, the doomed baby sat cradled in his mother's arms, dressed in a tiny blue doll's hat, his family gathered around him, smiling for the camera at his birthday-slash-funeral.

* * * *

Frances stayed with me for thirty-nine weeks, five days, twenty hours. She was born June 26, 2016, at 8:16 p.m.: 20:16, 06/26/2016. A full-term baby. I was glad she was healthy, but when they passed her to me through my bloody legs and up to my chest, crouched backward on the hospital bed, I could have been crying with happiness, or it might have been with relief. My only thought upon holding her body — waxy, white and gigantic though she weighed only seven pounds — was joy that it was over. And that I would never do it again.

I don't remember whether I said this aloud, if it alarmed the nurses. The baby felt ancillary to having my body all to myself; to never again feeling that kind of anguish, and not just the wretched pain of birth: the months of being cocooned in a dull sheath of worry and fat, unable to feel anything beyond a baseline of nauseous or not nauseous, exhausted or slightly less exhausted.

"It's over, it's over!" I repeated, lulling myself into a kind of anticlimactic stupor as they wrapped Frances in a blanket and pressed her to my chest.

There is no applause at the end of the grandest, most gruesome performance of your life.

* * * *

November 8

Driving home along Division Street, the oranges and browns of the autumn leaves pixelated into crunchy, heavy swirls, stark against a thin blue sky. The neighborhood was a forest of Craftsmans, yard signs planted in evergreen gardens out front.

I'm with Her
Black Lives Matter
Big Money Out of Politics!

I nodded in solidarity from my Volvo wagon, Beyoncé's Halo turned up to full volume — a rare treat, to be able to listen to music loudly, with no children in the car, only my own eardrums to worry about. It tamped down the hum of anxiety, a nagging presence that in recent months had reached a heady crescendo of barely contained panic.

*Everywhere I'm looking now
I'm surrounded by your embrace
Baby, I can see your halo
You know you're my saving grace*

My personal election anthem: a rallying cry to Hillary Clinton — this omnipresent woman I had been taught to despise growing up, but who became a savior for me, for women, for rational people who

looked on in horror at the rise of the loathsome caricature of Donald Trump.

Halo played over and over that week, the last days of the campaign. I sang along in the car, in the kitchen. It was my wooden stake, a talisman against the sickness that had seeped into the air over the past year, when Trump had become a fixture of our everyday lives, glowing repulsively orange on TV, spewing his disgusting rhetoric; a bloviating clown.

*It's like I've been awakened
Every rule I had, you break it
It's the risk that I'm taking
I ain't never gonna shut you out*

The election took on a shape of its own; it became a real and controlling force in my life. I thought about the election as much as I thought about food, or friends, or, sometimes, the children. The Election.

As the weeks limped toward the day we could exhale and watch Trump slither back to the rubbish bin of quasi-celebrity, I rode the roller coaster onto which the country was unwillingly strapped. In the group text called, among other titles, “Benghazi Architects,” “beta cucks,” “don’t get too close to my libtard fantasie,” we exchanged memes and news all day:

It couldn’t happen. Look what he said!
Look at this email thing. What a load of shit.
He’s disgusting, he makes me sick.
God, what if he won?

“Bring back Mitt Romney. I’d vote for him,” my husband says, not joking. My stomach took on a fluttery nervousness that usually only showed up for things like international travel or surgery.

By early November, turning off NPR or being away from the television for a few hours — to say, sleep — was problematic. Every morning I groped on the floor for my iPhone to scan the alerts that had piled up overnight.

Whenever Something Happened we’d lob texts back and forth, trying to one-up each other on how ridiculous everything sounded:

“That’s it, I’m voting for Trump, I love grabbing pussies.”
“His supporters are so smart. MAGA!”
“You cucks just aren’t patriots like me, get on the TrUmP TrAiN”
“Lock her up!”

The absurdity of a Trump win made it unthinkable; we joked, but beneath the sarcasm there was a cold dread. Unthinkable, but millions of Americans actually supported this classless man, and the Republican Party was willing to abandon any pretense they had of caring about “family values” and throw their support behind a reality TV douche who called Mexicans murderers and rapists, bragged about sexual assault, and clearly hadn’t the faintest knowledge of policy or history. The man had been married three times and had five children with three different women. He called Barack Obama an illegitimate president. His campaign rallies attracted the repulsive underbelly of America: the racist, putrid mess that had been stewing and festering in its own dark hatred for forty years, as the GOP strung them along, promising them they’d be allowed to carry assault weapons into grocery stores to “defend themselves” against the coming tide of brown-skinned foreigners who were coming to take their jobs and fuck their women. The rich man — who literally lived in a gilded tower and had probably paid for half a dozen abortions — was somehow their

beacon of hope: a voice for the coal miners and the religious zealots, the evangelicals and the billionaire hedge-funders; the gun freaks and the closeted racists, all of them emboldened, screaming their lunacy on Twitter and town squares.

How could this be? I was shocked into a numb resignation.

That we'd reached this point as a nation left me breathless, indignant, and full of rage: I could not wait to watch him lose and then banish him from my life forever, an idiot TV person I never had to lay eyes on again.

* * * *

That August, I'd taken Frances to Powell's on the bus. It was one of the only times I took her out alone; her sleep schedule had become so arduous that we'd given up on dinners out or excursions in the car. Harry had often slept in his car seat under the tables of San Francisco restaurants, but Frances required silence and a strict routine that quashed any thought of venturing out. That afternoon I was alone with the baby and climbing the walls, desperate to grab some tiny slice of summer before it disappeared. I made sure she was fed, and figured I had an hour and a half, tops, before she started to lose it.

At the bookstore, she gifted me with a nap as I browsed the aisles. Doris Lessing's 1973 novel *The Summer Before the Dark* is the story of a woman in her forties coming to terms with her children no longer needing her during the course of a summer in which she reflects on her life. I liked the title; I brought it home.

It sat on my dresser, and I'd consider it while nursing the baby or preparing for bed: What if this is the summer before the dark? The summer before Trump is elected — the last summer before the darkness?

I shook off these hallucinations, reassuring myself with poll numbers.

It's not going to happen. We're safe.

I didn't know that unwelcome visualizations of grisly potential events is a common symptom of postpartum mood disorder. Grisly imaginings came to me in vivid scenes: the plane going down; the dresser as it tips and pins the toddler beneath, squirming. In an instant, a fully formed narrative played through my mind like a movie reel, complete with narration: I'd bought the apple at Whole Foods and picked it out especially because of its perfect coloring. As I put it in the basket I had no idea it would be the thing that killed the baby. My training as a copy editor kicked in, and I'd see the headlines in front of me as the airplane left the ground: Two Hundred Killed in Horrific Air Accident.

I watched the soft spot on the top of the baby's head pulse gently in time with her tiny heartbeat: What if someone put two thumbs on it and pressed? I shut my eyes, shook my head to drive the thoughts away.

A morbid retrospective attached to everyday objects; the nightstand, the stairs. Kitchen knives. They tangled around my mind like choking vines, leaving me unable to complete basic tasks unencumbered. *The Summer Before the Dark* sat mutely on my black Ikea dresser.

After the election, she couldn't believe it had been true: the book had foretold what was to come. Donald Trump had won, and that summer truly had been the last one before the darkness set in.

* * * *

November 8

A rush of solidarity with my fellow Portlanders: We won't let him win. Hillary is going to show Trump and all of his disgusting supporters just what women are made of. We're going to blow him out of the water. We've got to. Instagram was full of photos of Susan B. Anthony's headstone, decorated with "I

Voted” stickers. I posted a photo of Hillary from the 1970s: #imwithher.

I made breakfast, tried to clean up the house, played with Frances. She had to be nursed to sleep for her three naps, had to be carried and held close, could not sit up on her own. I tiptoed out of her room after putting her down; any creak of the floorboards would send her into a wailing frenzy. A few days earlier I’d ventured out with friends to dinner, and spent ten minutes in a bar bathroom sucking out my own milk, my breasts uncomfortably full and leaking through my shirt: the secret rituals of motherhood.

2:00 p.m.

When the first returns from the East Coast started to come in, a cold tingle crept down my spine. It was still early, but the results were not in line with the latest polls.

“She’s not going to win.” I said aloud, surprising myself in the empty kitchen. I stood up sharply, trying to shake the thought out of my head like it was just another scene from the disaster reel: Impossible.

Signing my name to my mail-in ballot the week before, I’d felt a surge of pride. I couldn’t fathom anyone willingly voting for Trump. I knew I lived in a bubble, but the televised Trump rallies, the police shootings, the horrific slaughter of innocent civilians at the hands of men with guns that should be banned during that hot, chaotic summer had shown what was outside of it, and I wanted no part of that America.

5:00 p.m.

I did my best to ignore the dull fear in my chest, to will it out of existence: a tightening in the abdomen, mouth pressed into a sharp frown of concentration; the same feeling as when the airplane wobbled mid-flight, not unlike the sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach when Harry threatened to come seven weeks early and I found myself lying stiffly on my left side in the hospital, sucking up an intravenous cocktail of anti-contraction drugs through my arm.

6:00 p.m.

I had the TV on, but I could barely bring myself to look at Steve Kornacki as he traced frantic circles and arrows across an electronic whiteboard, red and blue lines snaking through the flat image of America. There was too much red.

What would defeat look like?

A blackened hellscape.

The country unrecognizable.

A clown for president.

The anticipation, building for months, froze into a hard rock in my throat. The returns were not good. I ordered pizza and set the table in mute terror.

“Gabby’s a little scared,” Nate told our friends, who’d arrived to watch the TV coverage with us. They assured me that it was still early. I put the children to bed and opened a big can of beer, ate the pizza without tasting it, and sat tensely on the bottom stair, where I could hear the TV but couldn’t see it. I refreshed Twitter on my phone.

It was starting to look bad.

7:00 p.m.

The others downed dark, sticky shots of Fernet. I couldn’t bring myself to get drunk to dull the sensation of being sucked underwater, my face frozen in a stiff grimace. I went up to the baby’s room; I didn’t want any witnesses to my doomsday panic.

The plane is going to crash.

Someone had told me once to curl up my legs and stretch my arms out in front of me in a prayer

pose to ease anxiety, and I dropped to the floor of Frances's room, despondent, and tried to do something like praying. I stuffed my ears with earplugs so I couldn't hear the groans and swearing from downstairs.

On Twitter, people were freaking out.

It feels like someone has broken into my house.

Guys, there is no blue wall. It's gone.

The darkness has won.

9:00 p.m.

Walking past the grim silence of the living room, I went outside to the frigid porch, cowering under my hoodie. I drank another beer, something close to hysteria bubbling up in my gut. Where were the crashing airplanes? Missiles? Asteroids? The curtain had been ripped off of reality: I had no idea what lay underneath.

The street was quiet. No one else was outside, trying to escape the catastrophe that was happening to us all on the television. I rocked back and forth in some primal attempt to soothe myself as I cried.

"Don't even tell me. I can't look at it." I went upstairs without watching a single minute of the election coverage I'd anticipated for months, mourning the loss of the feeling I'd wanted so badly: to share in the exuberance and joy of millions of women; to watch Trump slink away into the shadows.

Nate came upstairs. We lay silently in the damp hum of the humidifier. I went down the list of possible ways out, grasping desperately at fraying ends of hope: the electoral college. Voter fraud. Recounts.

"Maybe they haven't counted everything in Wisconsin. Maybe —"

"It's over," he said unceremoniously. "It's done. There's nothing we can do." We shook our heads dumbly, blinking in disbelief. I suggested we have sex, to stave off the sad panic building in my chest.

The next day felt like a purgatory. A horrible thing had happened, yet it hadn't really begun in earnest, and we were suspended in a dark place between two worlds. A dull stupor throbbed in my head. I couldn't bring myself to turn on the television and switched on the 1970s clock radio I'd bought Nate for Christmas. Frances and I sat on the floor, letting the calm voices on NPR soothe the room, an audible balm. There was a call-in show, everyone shocked and terrified. The host at one point outright called Trump an idiot, and I got a little glimpse of what the next months and years would bring: it was a sudden pivot from feeling confident and protected, of respecting the person charged with representing us to the world, to all-out disgust with half the country — a division that played out every day online and on TV and in living rooms where people sat, dejected, worn out, utterly spent.

We had to go to a teacher conference at the Treehouse School. I pulled on my Hillary sweatshirt again, red-faced and angry. As my mother arrived to watch Harry I brushed past her rudely on the porch, not speaking. That she could smile on a morning like this made me acutely aware of the ocean of difference between us.

We stopped for coffee on the way to school. I sat with my sunglasses on in the café, everyone around us discussing what happened. I looked miserably at my daughter in her baby carrier and pulled out my breast to feed her, in some kind of personal demonstration against the evil that had been let loose, released into the air and spread out over the country like smallpox. A woman at a table across from us wept openly into her arms as her friend patted her back.

"I'm sorry about that," I said to my mom, stiffly, as we returned home. She left looking sad. What did she expect?

Months ago, I'd set up a recurring donation to the Clinton campaign and they sent me a little sticker. I put it up in the front window, too late.

On Facebook people who hadn't posted anything in years were sharing horrified disbelief. Camaraderie surged up through the bitter anger and sadness: we were all in this together. Whatever it was.

Rachel Maddow came on the air at 6 p.m. as usual. I looked to her for something; solace or hope. She had clearly been up all night, her eyes red and bloodshot, fatigue that makeup couldn't conceal. She

was as horrified and upset as the rest of us. I switched off the television and didn't turn it on for a month.

I did not watch Hillary's concession speech. Twenty months later, as I write this, I still haven't.

A couple of days passed. I read everything that was coming out, people trying desperately to organize and stop him from being inaugurated with the electoral college, people trying to get a recount, trying every avenue to stave off this absurd thing from becoming real. My Republican parents sent an email saying they thought it was better that we cancel Thanksgiving this year.

When Kate McKinnon as Hillary opened Saturday Night Live singing Hallelujah by Leonard Cohen, who had died that terrible week, I wept. It felt like a wound.

November 12

I booked two Airbnbs at the coast, four days away from the city and our daily lives, which had been hijacked by the news. I continued my television moratorium but listened to NPR in the car as I drove Harry to and from school. As the media tried to figure out what they'd missed, where they'd gone wrong in pre-election reporting and analysis, Portland mourned. There were protests and clashes with the police. I found myself breaking down into tears spontaneously during the day, my daughter staring up at me from the floor.

We drove to the Pacific for a few days and I declared a news blackout. I turned the radio off and put on Hail to the Thief. "I never thought I'd be listening to this and crying again."

I will
Lay me down
In a bunker
Underground

Everything was imbued with new meaning in the post-election world. Things I had always taken for granted had fallen apart or come into question: the stability of the United States government. The legitimacy of our elections. The idea that despite its flaws, America was still inherently a force for good in the world. The feeling of shock and exposure seeped into everything: if this could happen, anything could happen. I waited for the other shoe to drop, tight with nervous tension.

I won't let this happen to my children
Meet the real world coming out of your shell
With white elephants
Sitting ducks
I will
Rise up

At the coast we put the children to bed as early as possible and drank wine in the hot tub of our rental. We watched Twilight. We drove to a lighthouse and tried to look at the tidepools, but the wind was strong and cold, and I returned to the car with Frances, nursing her in the front seat as I watched the ocean churn. There is a photo of me on the balcony of the condo at Nye Beach, holding a glass of wine, eyes closed against the glare of the setting sun. I was worn out: with the collapse of democracy, with the betrayal of so many of my fellow Americans, with Frances' waking up five times a night. We made a little bed on the floor for Harry and he got up and fussed several times, confused or scared, and I yelled at him more than once for waking me, overflowing with anger and regret at the same time.

I am so tired. I just need to sleep. Please go to bed. Please go to bed. Goddamn it, Harry.

November 24

We spent Thanksgiving at home, just the four of us with too much food. Nate cooked all day, and the air in the house grew hot and close with all the windows closed. At four o'clock we set a plastic plate of mashed potatoes with gravy, cut-up green beans, and pumpkin pie in front Harry and settled Frances in her swing next to my chair, halfheartedly filling our own plates and topping off our wine glasses. The sense of giddy, carefree merriment I usually felt on national holidays had evaporated, leaving a bland feeling of detached cynicism. Harry ate the pie and the rolls and started to get restless after ten minutes; Frances squirmed and fussed, and I begrudgingly put the Sauvignon blanc back in the fridge to nurse her. We put them to bed and set about cleaning up the colossal mess in the kitchen, the day turned back into every other: full of chores and the vague, constant sense of loss and disbelief that had begun to darken the edges of existence.

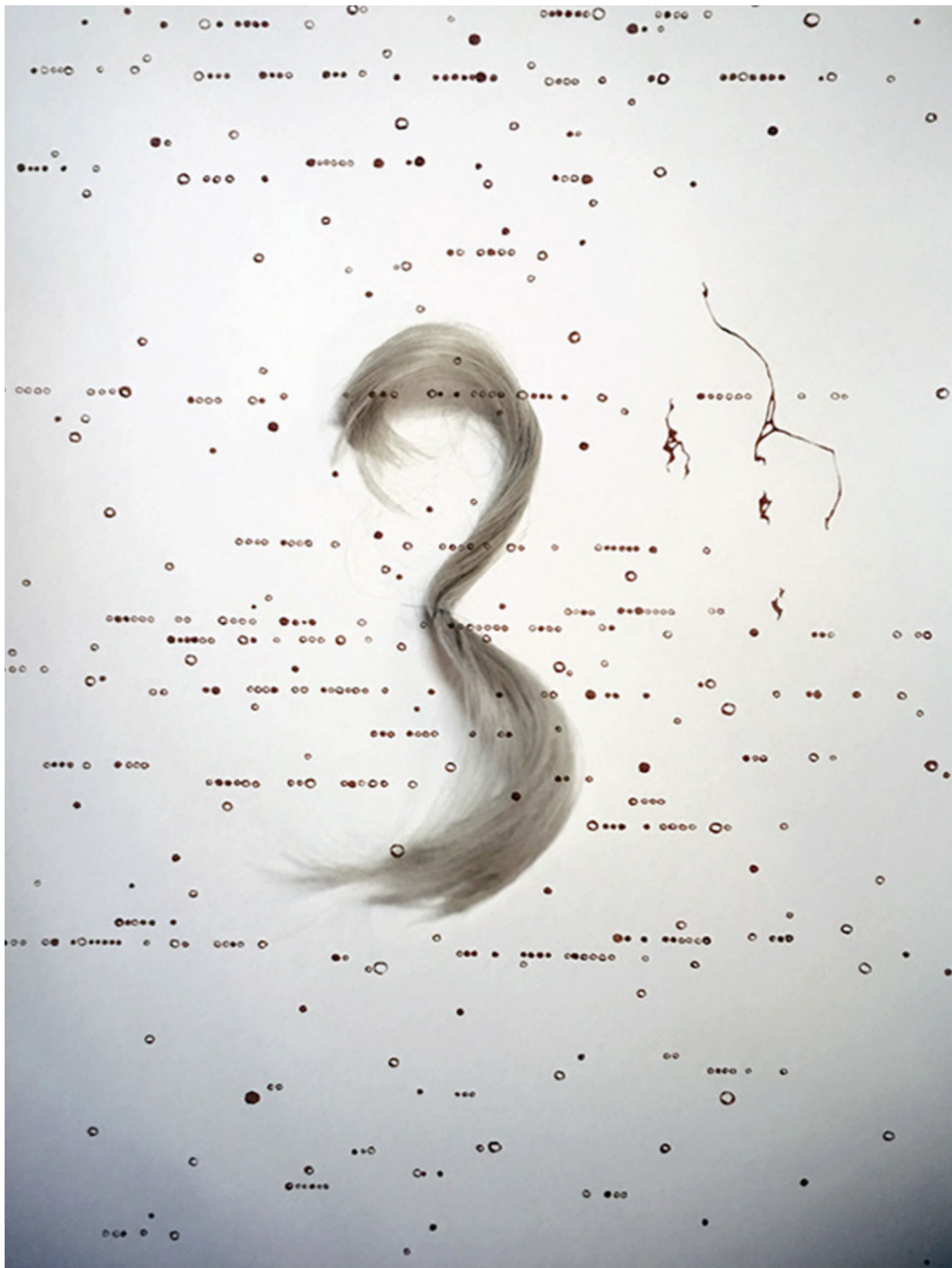
November 25

My mother gave me a coffee mug for my birthday: "I Am Not Arguing, I'm Just Explaining Why I'm Right."

Every morning the dull fact of the election took a few minutes to settle in. What had been an absurd joke had become real. No one knew how to live here.

In Portland's bleak December light, I stared in dismay at the Lessing novel still atop my dresser, unmoved since summer, its prophetic title stabbing me with little pricks of irony. How was I supposed to know that was the last summer anything would feel all right? Ridiculous fantasies in which I discovered in October that the title was a clue flitted through my mind. I figured out Trump was on track to squeak through with enough votes and made a frantic call to Jennifer Palmieri, who thanked me for my incredible detective work and redoubled the Clinton campaign efforts in Michigan and Pennsylvania.

I turned the book to face the wall.



In The Glow of the Theatre Screen

Written By Vanessa Smaletz

The animated characters danced across the screen, painting with the colors of the wind. It was the summer of 1995 and the coolness of the theater provided a reprieve from the blistering sun that glimmered off the cars neatly lined up in the parking lot just outside. I sat with my small legs dangling off the folding seat, delegated to the endcap of the small group that consisted of my friend, a girl about my age, as well as her little sister, and their father. I was four years old and could enjoy Pocahontas without the adult world's social concerns around the accurate portrayal of the grim history of early settlers.

As was the case for many people who were young during Disney's princess movie revival in the late 80s and early 90s, Disney had always been a staple in my life. Although I wasn't normally so lucky to see the movies in theaters, my dad had collected a catalogue of VHS tapes to play ad nauseam, that I watched with eager eyes as I donned my best Princess Jasmine nightgown. This of course, around the same time that my grandma decided I was more of a Princess Belle. The year before I saw Pocahontas, per my grandma's decree, was the year of Beauty and the Beast. At home, I was free to litter the floors of our family's two bedroom apartment with plastic magic carpets, Aladdin dolls, and Jasmine Barbies. At my neighbor's apartment (the same neighbors that would later take me to see Pocahontas), I would crouch in front of their sizeable tan recliner and watch The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, only to later argue about who got to pretend to be the Pink Ranger and if the long-haired White Ranger was a boy or a girl. But at my grandma's house, there was no questioning which film character reigned supreme. At least once a week and often more, we would drive the short, five minute route to her home, a 1000 square foot townhome that felt like a mansion compared to our apartment. For a long time, I never knew that anyone lived in bigger homes, excluding the princesses tucked away in their castles.

Despite its modest size, there was nothing else modest about my grandma's house, decorated with glittering popcorn ceiling, plush peach carpet, and embossed white wallpaper. In a dining room narrower than most dorm rooms, she hung a monumental crystal chandelier. Around Christmas, she would bring out a white tree to complete the sparkling pastel aesthetic. A child of the Depression, nothing was too bright or flashy for her. In the house that borrowed its sense of style from Dynasty, the scent remained simple and classic Americana. Grilled cheese, apple pie, and fresh pancakes wafted through the air. She would produce cans of Coke, which my health-conscious mother would never keep in our own home, for us to sip as we built a wooden block fortress for who else, but my plastic Belle figurine.

The reason my grandma associated me with Belle so much wasn't entirely physical, though we both possessed a mop of brown curls. Like Belle, I was bookish before I could even read. In addition to the plastic figurine, my grandma found and hand painted a ceramic figurine of Belle and the Beast dancing. She had insisted that I be Belle for Halloween, fine by me since I always wanted to be a princess, and sewed me a pretty yellow dress. For the three years our lives intersected, she doted on me as if I really were a princess. In the back bedroom of her house, the one that used to belong to my dad when he was growing up, you could find my toys scattered across the carpet. One day, when my mom came to pick me up, she ordered me to clean up all the toys. My mom, for the record, had been trying to get me to pick up my toys from the moment I learned to walk.

"Grandma can't be picking up after you," my mom told me.

My grandma had other ideas and flatly refused to let me lift a finger. She was a woman who would show up to her doctors' appointments at whatever time she chose under the conviction that the doctors would see her at her convenience. Knowing my grandma was to know that there was no arguing with her.

Then there came the time when the costumes, and the toys, and the make-believe games stopped. While most people transition away from these things like a car in neutral, unable to keep its momentum, for me this was the jolt of an inattentive driver looking up to see a red light and slamming on the brakes. My grandma had been diagnosed with breast cancer before I was born, but I didn't know that. She had lived with it for years before she had to leave her beautiful home, the home she had arranged to her liking since becoming a widow. The dingy white walls of a hospital replaced the bright, cheery white walls of her own home. The warm, welcoming smells of fresh-baked whatever yielded to the pervasive sterile scent of the inpatient ward. I did not think all these things then. In fact, I rather liked hospitals because of my grandma. She used to read me a book about a girl named Jenny who breaks her arm and has to stay overnight in the hospital. At first Jenny is afraid, but the hospital staff are so welcoming that she learns not to be scared. That book and my grandma had sold me so entirely on hospitals that when I coincidentally broke my arm that same year, I was disappointed by how fast the doctors could give me a cast and send me home. So it wasn't too unnerving when I found out my grandma had to stay overnight.

There were probably many days she was in the hospital, but then again, maybe not. I don't remember those days very well except for one. When visiting hours ended, my mom tried to pull me away to take me home. My grandma was my favorite person in the world by this point. I was never inclined to leave her, but I also wanted to know why my dad (my other favorite in the trifecta that consisted of my mom, dad, and grandma) wasn't coming with us. He was staying the night at the hospital with his mother.

"Daddy has to take care of Grandma."

I put my foot down. "I have to take care of Daddy."

That was that. My mom went home without us. My grandma spent the night in the stiff hospital bed, while my dad leaned in the visitor's chair and I slept curled up in his arms.

The next memory that I have after that is learning that my grandma had passed. The exact words my parents used to tell me made no difference. In college, I would learn that children can't understand death until they are five years old, but they can sometimes grasp the finality of it when they are four. I was just three years old, but I came to understand that she was dead. I wouldn't accept it at first. I was so young at that point, I remember thinking: "People don't die in real life. That's just something that happens in movies." It was November of 1994. My dad would later tell me that he regretted not getting her Christmas decorations out for her. It was one of those many tiny griefs that would make no difference to the person that was dead.

In many ways, there was life before my grandma passed away and life after. My parents had tried their best to maintain the status quo, despite the gaping hole that was left when there were no more trips to grandma's house. I continued to go over to my neighbor's apartment to watch *The Power Rangers*, but now something was different. My friends carried on watching the candy-colored heroes, their eyes glued to the TV as much as ever. But instead of joining them in front of the recliner, I hid behind it. I didn't want to watch the fight scenes anymore, and I didn't want to see the *Power Rangers* getting hurt.

"What are you doing?" an adult had asked me, as I huddled behind the furniture, my back nevertheless to the television.

"I'm pretending I'm in the show," I lied.

Then in the summer of 1995, the catastrophic happened. The TV show about teenage ninjas fighting aliens became so popular, the brand released *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers: The Movie*. Outwardly I was still a fan, loath to admit that at the grand age of four years old, I was now frightened by the shows I had loved when I was three. The grownups had decided that it would be fun to take the kids to see favorite show on the big screen.

Although I couldn't explain just how afraid I was to my mom, inwardly I despaired thinking of any plan to get out of the movie play date. It was one thing to hide in the safety of my neighbors' living room and pretend to like a show that I clearly wasn't watching. It was something entirely different to avoid watching a movie 50 feet wide in the darkness of a theater with nowhere to hide. Unfortunately, strategy

generally isn't a strength in someone so young. I contemplated keeping my eyes closed the entire time. I wondered if I could pull it off. This was my chosen plan when the day to see the movie arrived.

My parents had allowed my neighbors' father take me with his two daughters, not feeling very compelled to come themselves. Our small troop marched across the asphalt parking lot to the theater, the sun beating against our faces, and I lingered a little in the back. By this point, I worried that if I kept my eyes closed the entire time, someone would ask me why I wasn't watching the movie and I would be left with no explanation. I was also worried that I might really fall asleep and dream of the fights. Then the miracle happened. When my neighbors' dad tried to purchase the tickets at the counter, he was told that the movie reel had caught fire. If we still wanted to see a movie, we would have to see Pocahontas instead.

And so we sat watching a better story than real life, with a happier ending than in the characters' historic counterparts' lives. We watched a movie in which strangers fall in love, and kindness prevails, and only the wicked suffer. For a moment, just a moment, basking in the glow of the larger-than-life screen, I was safe and warm again.

Reflections on A Dystopian Homecoming

Written By Micaeli Rourke

1. Take the red-eye South African Airlines flight direct from O.R. Tambo to JFK International. Cry outside security as you bid your Afrikaans lover 'totsiens,' although your trip is a mere ten days. Acknowledge that something feels slightly apocalyptic, though you don't know why.
2. You have an aisle seat and half a Xanax but still you are perturbed. The mother and daughter duo next to you have a pair of awful head colds and won't stop hacking up phlegm. Stifle your visual disgust; Feel righteous in your self-control. The flight is only 16 hours. Fall asleep over Namibia and wake up six hours behind, in a part of the world where distance is measured by miles again.
3. Make an ugly face in the automated immigration machine at the International Arrivals Terminal. Take a photo of your immigration mugshot and send it to your Mom, telling her you've arrived safely. You are wearing your lucky JFK t-shirt, like you always do when flying in or out of JFK. A screen printed portrait of your country's first Irish Catholic President, emboldened with his Presidential campaign slogan "Kennedy: Leadership for the 60's." It has become a talisman of protection in your frequent ritual of international airline travel, just like your instinct to recite Hail Mary every time your flight descends for landing.
4. At Immigration your passport is flagged and confiscated. You are escorted into the white-walled purgatory of the communal US Border Patrol and Homeland Security holding room, where people are brought and dismissed at differing intervals. It is 7am on a Sunday. You stay there for 7 hours, writing in your journal, texting your Mom from the adjoining single bathroom, and crying, wiping your nose with the sleeve of her army green J. Crew jacket that you half-appropriated, half-stole before absconding to South Africa the previous year. You don't really have much on you, aside from your jacket and your purse. But you do have a cellophane bag from duty free with a 1kg bag of biltong and a glass jar of Mrs. Ball's Chutney for your stepdad.
5. When you leave, you are removed in handcuffs, flanked under both arms by Port Authority Police Officers. You're escorted through the vast arrivals hall to the squad car waiting outside an emergency exit. Wonder if any of the arriving international travelers notice the irony of your t-shirt.
6. In the holding cell at the Port Authority precinct, the words 'stay strong' are carved onto the wooden bench that you use as a makeshift cot. You use a roll of toilet paper for a pillow under your head. The message makes you burst into tears. Officer Diaz brings you maxi pads and calls you 'baby girl.' Officer Angerhausen brings you a cheese sandwich and lets you talk your Mom on the phone for as long as you want. Once you hang up he tells you that you "actually look really pretty when you cry."
7. Spend a couple hours thinking about white privilege, about how different your experience would undoubtedly be so different if you did not look the way you do. Say a few Hail Marys.
8. You're taken to Queens Central Booking in the back of another squad car with an obese man in a wrinkled tuxedo who you passed sleeping in a neighboring cell when you were brought in. The handcuffs have caused your wrists to start bleeding. As the police cruiser drives down the Brooklyn Queens Expressway, you pass the exit for your old neighborhood of Astoria, where you resided a mere 11 months earlier. The Jets

game is playing on the radio.

“Excuse me? Officers?” You ask the time, polite as an alter server.

The Officer riding shotgun scoffs. “Why? You got somewhere to be?” He looks like a fat chipmunk dressed in a police costume. The man in the wrinkled tuxedo beside you says nothing.

Spend the rest of the ride peering out the window at Queens and thinking about injustice.

9. You are fingerprinted for the third time. Mugshots taken, forward facing and profile. The sleeves of your Mom’s jacket are sopping with tears and snot. Your eyes are nearly swollen shut from crying. Notice how the whole aesthetic of the jail reminds you perfectly of Boston Legal episodes from the mid-90s. The dismal, flickering lighting alone is uncanny in its resemblance to the portrayal of television shows about jails. Acknowledge that everyone working there seems severely depressed, sluggish, irritable-- obviously lacking the benefits of natural sunlight, seeing as there are no windows.

10. Another holding cell. But this one has blankets! Oh, Glory be! This holding cell also has another occupant— Tiffany Henderson of Corona, Queens; single mother of 3 babies, and technical violator of a temporary restraining order, the specifics of which get a bit messy in its explanation.

11. You meet with a public defender whose business card is printed on flimsy printer paper. He calls you ‘Michele-ah’ and is very open vocal the fact that he’s only passed the bar four months prior.

12. Wait handcuffed in a line with other prisoners in a long hallway for what seems like hours. Time does not exist here, so it doesn’t matter much anyway. Urgency is a foreign concept and timeliness, a privilege reserved for the outside. Here, you didn’t matter. Your time was not yours. It was revoked along with your passport and personal effects. The control of time, and of waiting, makes the CO’s gluttonous with power. It is how they assert dominance. By making a task that could’ve taken twenty minutes last three hours, just because they can; By pretending that you didn’t exist.

13. A female bailiff walks you through a door and suddenly you’re in a proper courtroom, just like the set of The People’s Court. Acknowledge that you have never felt less informed, despite your extensive mental catalog of mediocre courtroom drama plot lines.

14. The man who appears before the lady judge before you had been arrested for beating his pregnant wife (again, as it seemed.) When an officer arrived at the scene to arrest him, the man put the cop in the hospital with twelve stitches in his face. Watch the smugness permeate the defendant’s face as his bail is set at a measly \$1,500.

15. The public defender tells you what to say, as if he’s feeding you lines of a play in which he is not fully off-book. Hear as Michele-ah is remanded for fourteen days without the option of bail. Hear Michele-ah vocally protest to the judge in horror. See the stenographer give Michele-ah a condescending ‘Oh, poor you!’ look. Watch the bailiff squeeze Michele-ah’s arm and whisper, “If you give her shit, she’ll only make it worse for you.”

16. Desperately ask your public defender what “remanded without bail,” means, exactly. As he shakes his head and walks away without answering you, your bowels churn and you recite the Hail Mary the entire walk back to your cell.

17. Tiffany Henderson knows something you don’t. “Remanded?... Oh, shit!” She tells you where they’ll be taking you.

“Wait. Rikers? Like Rikers Island? Like Law & Order Rikers Island? That Rikers Island?”

Her brown eyes filled with tears and she asks you if you’d like to pray with her.

17. Three hours later you're in the back of a police paddy-wagon, once again driving down the BQE. The Jets had beaten the Broncos and a lazy October rain glazes the windshield. You are the only female in the back with six juveniles—all chained together at the ankles and very keen to 'suss you out.' Of your companions, five have already been to Rikers Island, three are Brazilian, two Puerto Rican, and one Guatemalan named Saül who doesn't speak. Their de facto leader explains they are in for 'gang bangin', you know.' (You really don't.) They spend most of the ride free-style rapping, taking turns spitting verses reflecting their current predicament.

18. Before crossing the only bridge from Queens onto the Island of Rikers, the police van drives through the back-channels of residential Astoria. Through the "NYPD" decal covering the rear window, you recognize the awning of a familiar bodega and see the sign for your old street. The van turns, your heart palpitates. Your ride lurches past the unremarkable brick building where you so recently resided, in a 4th floor walk-up with a lover and a cat, neither of whom hear from much anymore. The poetic irony of the situation is just too much to bear and you don't have your journal and even if you did, you can't use your hands, anyway. You notice your encroaching jet lag and you remember that your period that had started on the plane.

19. This perfect storm of emotional variables causes you to unabashedly weep while in the company of a chain gang of compassionate, adolescent 'gang bangers.' Christopher, one of the Brazilians, implores you with quiet sincerity to, 'Stay strong, Ma.' and then asks you, 'Hey Ma, think we could be friends on Instagram?' Still crying, you go to pat his hand in appreciation until you feel the dull ache of the handcuffs again. 'No Christopher.' You are half laughing when you break it to him, 'No, I don't think we can!' He seems unphased and goes back to spitting verses, this time about your predicament instead of his. When they are unloaded from the van at the juvi. wing, they all bid you polite farewells, dispensing unnecessarily kind one-liners like 'God Bless, Ma' and "You're gonna make it through this. Feel?"

20. The song "I've Got A Feelin'" by the Black Eyed Peas plays on the radio of the police van three times in a row. Wonder if you are losing your mind. Or, if perhaps this actually has been a horrifying nightmare, and the music is just your radio alarm clock trying to break through your subconscious. Think, with chagrin, if a crueler joke could possibly exist. You don't know anything about what's in store for you, but you do know that the night will, in fact, be the textbook antithesis of 'a good good night.'

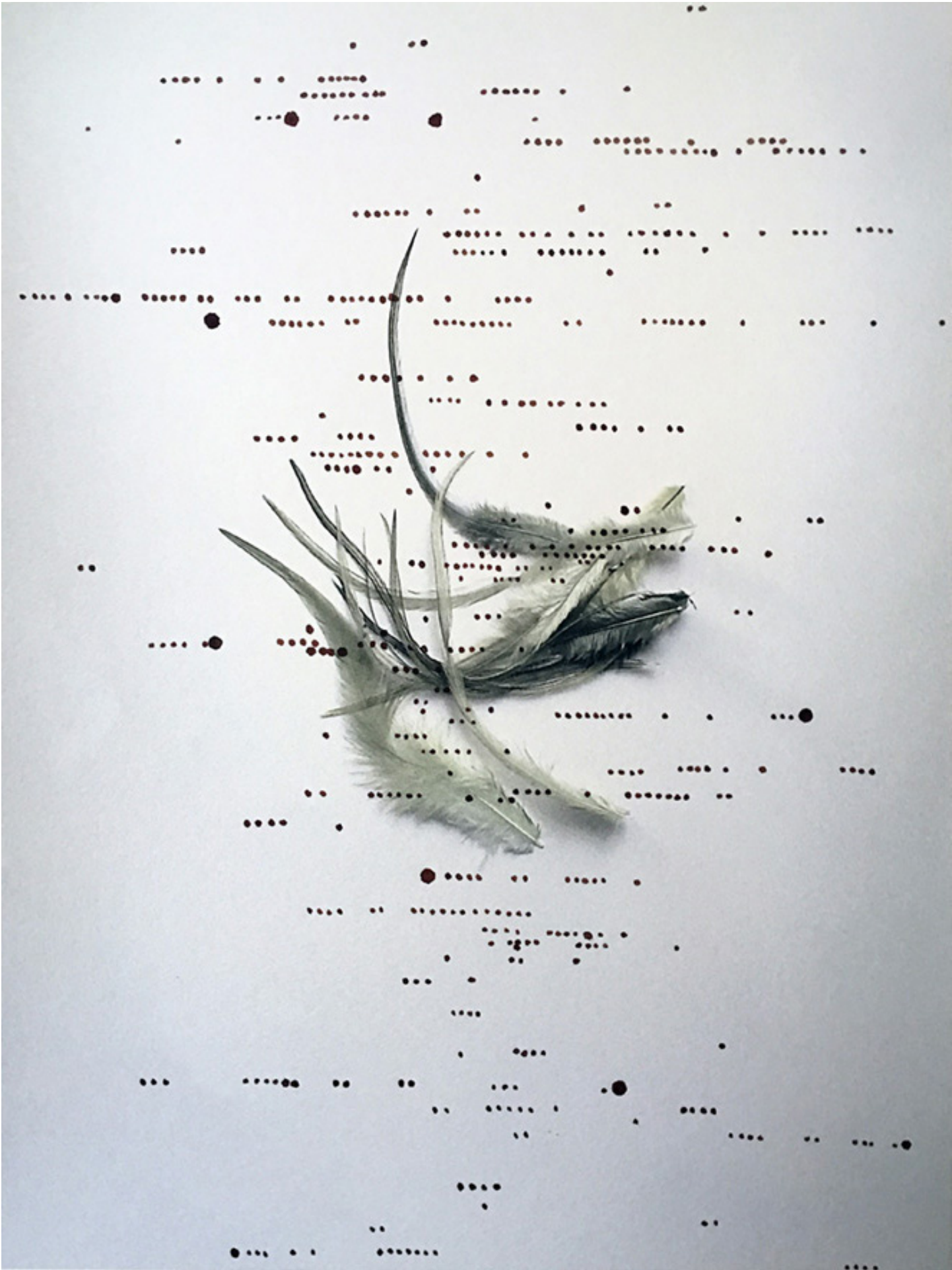
21. The cop escorting you into the women's complex stops walking and looks into your swollen, frenzied eyes. He shakes his head, like you're a puppy that he pities, but can't bring himself to adopt. "You better keep your eyes low and your mouth shut. A'ight? Don't try to make any friends in there."

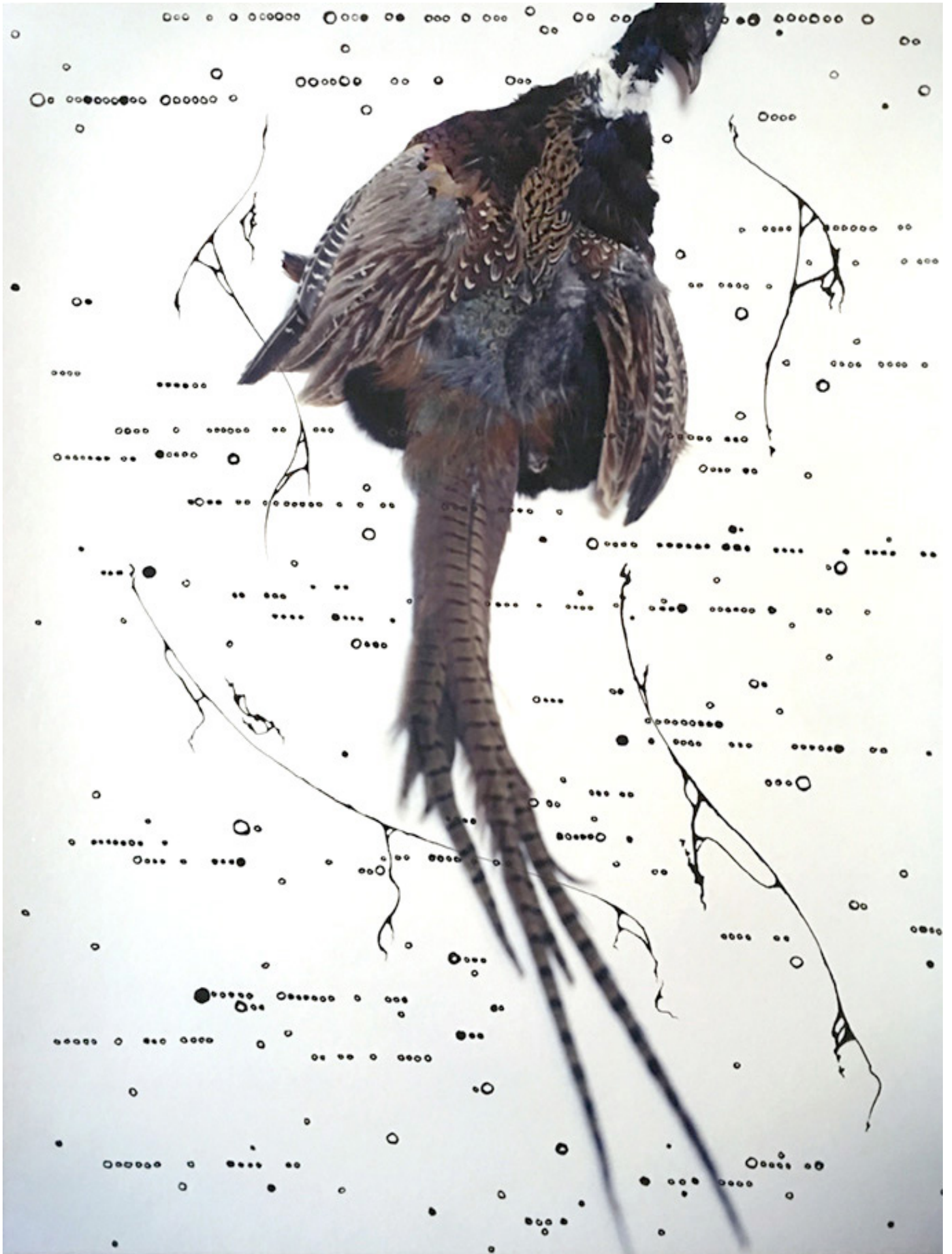
22. Decide to ignore his advice, on principle. Know you've never been much good at keeping your mouth shut; You talk too much when you're nervous. You've always managed to inadvertently attract the strangest of comrades and admirers to begin with, so what difference does it really make. Hope to yourself that these predisposed characteristics help you to survive the nightmare.

23. As the officer brings you through the three sets of double-lock steel doors into the Rose M. Singer Female Detention Facility at Rikers Island Correctional Complex, your t-shirt rips on one of the steel hinges. JFK's screen printed grin is torn, indelicately exposing a huge chunk of your leopard print sports bra.

24. Try once more to laugh. Try to just laugh at all of this. Only manage to muster hollow, guttural heaves, not unlike the coughs of the Mother and Daughter on your flight over.

25. Wake up seventy-two hours later in your childhood bedroom, two states south. Panic until you remember where you are. See your ruined manicure and the bruises on your arms from the compulsory blood tests at the infirmary. Decide that it hadn't been a nightmare, but that it is over. Say another Hail Mary. Go back to sleep.





The Born Again Dog

Written By Jessica Fisher

Growing up as an only child had some perks. I didn't have to share my clothes, toys, or bedroom. There was never any competition for Mom and Dad's attention. Those parts were alright. However, only child life isn't all it's cracked up to be. I yearned for the companionship and confidence only a sibling could offer.

On August 13th, 2002- a month after my eighth birthday, my prayers for a sister were answered. For two agonizing weeks, I waited for the arrival of our furry black bundle. I used a rainbow of Sharpie's to check each day off the puppy calendar that hung above my desk. Each time I checked off a day, my heart did a series of jumping jacks. Although a Labrador puppy isn't exactly the same as a baby sister, my heart felt whole.

When we went to pick out the puppy, I was overwhelmed with glee as I sat on the ground, tackled by a black mob of clumsy, slobbering fur balls. Their stubby tails slapped excitedly against my arms as they yipped and nibbled on my sleeves, each desperate for my full attention. Out of all the puppies, I immediately knew which one I was going to choose. While they all approached me eagerly, there was one who was brave enough to climb onto my lap. Her warm body quivered with anticipation as she rolled onto her back, hoping she'd get lucky enough to receive a belly rub. This dog was fearless. She trusted me enough to roll into the most vulnerable position for a puppy. When the other dogs grew tired of my affection, they swarmed over to check out Mom and Dad. However, the brave one stayed with me. She let me scoop her up and cradle her like a baby. Her puppy breath was intoxicating.

"So, which one will it be?" Dad asked.

Without pause, I hugged that puppy close to my chest and said, "This is the one! She's perfect!"

Dad's eyes twinkled in the sunlight.

"Thought so!" He smiled.

He was beaming with pride. This was his moment. By agreeing to finally bring a dog into our household, he was responsible for providing me with such joy.

Mom and Dad let me decide on her name. Before she was old enough to be weaned off her mother's milk, I spent the waiting period creating lists of potential names for my new puppy. In my teal composition book, I wrote down every name I could think of.

Sparkle. Fluffy. Elizabeth.

Beside the names I really liked I put a single star.

Rosie. Satrina. Yogurt.

Every so often, I called out basic commands to try out the names.

Sit, Sophie. Stay, Britta. Roll over, Shadow.

After great deliberation, I decided her name would be Yogurt- Yogie for short.

"You have to make sure the name fits her personality," she explained.

Mom took me shopping for dog supplies a few days before it was time to pick her up. The cart was loaded with a big bag of puppy chow, two shiny metal bowls, and a royal blue collar with a matching leash. Mom let me pick out the toys. Along with a tennis ball and a rope toy, I selected a stuffed dog dressed in a fireman's outfit. It was yellow and had a squeaker in the center of its belly.

"This one's perfect!" I smiled, holding the toy up for Mom to see.

It was a firefighter, just like Dad. I hoped the new puppy was going to be brave like a firefighter. In our house, bravery was important. Firefighters aren't just heroes. They're real people, too. When Dad took off his uniform and came home, I wanted my little puppy to help keep me safe. A puppy meant a playmate,

but deep down, I hoped she'd also be my protector.

When we brought our puppy home, she spent the car ride wiggling anxiously in my arms and whimpering in fear. She was so tiny. I worried that she'd break in my arms. With every cry she gave, I gently stroked her and whispered words of encouragement into her floppy ears. Nothing seemed to calm her. I knew what it was like to be so afraid. When Dad got angry, I always felt most afraid. The major difference between my cries and Yogie's cries was that mine were silent. My tears were soaked up by stuffed animals that I held onto tightly, grounding me in times of peril. The key to dealing with fear in our house was to hide it. Mom and I pretended everything was normal when we were afraid of Dad. If he broke things, we simply cleaned them up quickly and quietly. We learned how to stay out of his way. I promised Yogie I'd teach her and protect her, hoping she'd someday do the same for me.

I carried her into our house and put her in the center of the living room. The three of us watched as she cautiously explored her new surroundings, sniffing over every inch of the room.

"She's just checking things out," Dad assured me. "It's a good thing for her to be so cautious. That means she's smart."

Dad looked at me and grinned. "She's a keeper."

"Welcome home, Yogie," I said.

Dad rolled Yogie's new tennis ball across the living room floor. She approached it slowly, sniffed at the yellow fuzz, and then continued her exploration.

Mom pulled one of her shiny metal bowls out of a plastic shopping bag and filled it with water. "Bring her out to the kitchen. She might be thirsty."

Eagerly, I scooped my puppy up and placed her in front of her new water dish. Immediately, she began to lap up the water with greedy gulps. Tiny waves splashed out of the bowl and onto the linoleum floor. Once her thirst was fully quenched, she looked up at me, her big brown eyes twinkling with gratitude. A long strand of drool hung from the side of her mouth. It wobbled in the air as she headed back to the living room to continue her exploration. I glanced at my mother, knelt down in front of the water bowl, sopping up the wet mess with paper towels.

"It's just not right," I announced.

"What's not right?" Mom asked.

"Her name. Yogie isn't the one."

"It's not too late to change it. What else do you have in mind?" Dad asked, as he ruffled my hair.

I smiled, "Dribbles. Her name should be Dribbles."

Dribbles grew at an alarming rate. I carried her in my arms until she was simply too big for me to manage. The day I found out I could no longer lift her, I cried.

Dad was never much of an animal lover. Cats, he loathed. Dogs, he tolerated. Although Dribbles was the center of my world, her canine antics and endless energy were challenging for even the truest animal lovers to appreciate. Tipping over garbage bins and scarfing down every morsel of food within her reach were minor offenses for Dribs. She once managed to chew her way through drywall. Even a window frame took the hit one Independence Day when she tried to chew her way outside to attack the evil fireworks.

On a lovely evening stroll turned terribly wrong, she dragged me through the Mifflintown Square in order to chase the car, squirrel, leaf, or gnat... whatever happened to catch her eye. I held on tightly to her leash, my stomach scraping against the sidewalk, refusing to let go of the leash because I knew she'd dart in front of the passing cars.

The day after she was spayed, Dribs got loose. Out the door she ran as her stitches (which weren't waterproof) became caked with snow. Luckily, the stitches held up through the wet, wintery mix. She gave us quite a scare that day, but Dribs seemed to be unaffected by guilt as she traipsed back into the house, leaving wet footprints on the floor as evidence of her jaunt through Mifflintown.

Although Dribs was a master of shenanigans, she was also a gentle giant. If we ever had been robbed,

Dribs would have likely greeted the burglar with a big sloppy kiss, and then she would have begged for a quick round of tug-of-war. She simply loved life. Controlling her passion was another matter. Dad took on a hardened approach to puppy rearing. The day we brought Dribs home, he tried to teach her to stay downstairs. There was too much stuff upstairs for her to get into and he wanted the upstairs to serve as his animal-free zone. Dribs didn't catch onto this lesson right away. Wherever her people went, she followed.

One afternoon, I went upstairs to retrieve the latest Junie B. Jones book from my bedroom.

"Stay here, Dribsy. I'll be back in a sec." I patted her head. I went up a few stairs and turned around to make sure she wasn't going to follow. Dribs sat patiently at the bottom step, her tail sweeping back and forth across the cocoa-colored carpeting. I hurried up the rest of the stairs and grabbed the book off my nightstand. As I picked up the book, I couldn't resist opening up to see how many chapters I had left to savor. Even though I knew I had to hurry, I allowed myself to read a couple of lines into the next chapter. Just as I was about to put the Post-it note bookmark back in place, Dribs appeared in the doorway. She cocked her tiny head as if to say, "Hey, long time, no see!" Then, she scooted past me into my parents' bedroom.

Before I could retrieve her, I heard my Dad's voice, "Stay the hell downstairs," he commanded. Dad emerged from the bedroom with Dribs in his grasp. In one swift motion, he dropped her onto the staircase and punted her to the bottom.

From my doorway, I stared silently in horror. There was nothing I could do to stop him. I had learned that it was best just to stay quiet and wait for Dad's temper to fizzle out. Dribs was still learning the ropes. She was too little to understand the way things worked in our house. I knew better than to disobey Dad, especially when he wasn't in a good mood. Mom trained me to sense the sudden shifts of his mood. They weren't yet obvious to Dribs. She didn't know that his chin jutted out and his neck turned bright red when he was angry. Dribs hadn't picked up on the fact that his footsteps were slightly heavier than usual, and the tone of his voice was crisp and edgy that afternoon. These were all signs promised I'd teach her to recognize.

He turned back into his room and gave the door a slam. Dropping my book to the floor, I hurried downstairs. Dribs was curled into a ball in the corner of the living room. Her tail drooped between her legs and she hung her head. I knelt down and cradled her in my arms.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered, rubbing her backside on the spot Dad had kicked.

Mom was generally his punching bag, but when Dribs entered our lives, Dad found more anger to dish out. One evening, Mom was sitting on the couch with Dribs lying faithfully beside her on the floor. When Dad came into the living room, he tried to take a seat on the couch, but Dribs was in his way. He drew his foot back with the intention of kicking her in the ribs. Sensing his next move, Mom stuck her legs out to guard the dog. Rather than kicking Dribs, Dad's heavy work boot plowed squarely into Mom's shin. The force of the blow left an ugly bruise on her shin, but her defensive move saved Dribs from what surely would have been a broken rib.

Eventually, Mom and Dad decided to purchase Dribs a shock collar. Mom wasn't too keen on the idea, but Dribs was becoming quite out of control. Before using the collar on Dribs, Mom insisted on strapping it around her arm to test it for herself, adjusting the setting to a reasonable level. Mom hated using it, but Dribs' behavior did improve. She thought twice before making a snack out of the scented candles sitting around the house or before guzzling down a belly full of toilet water. A quick, single zap would stop Dribs from jumping all over our guests. It got to the point where we just had to pick up the collar's remote control and she would suddenly stop whatever naughty thing she was doing.

Dad thought the shock collar was a great investment. He used it frequently. Sometimes, he'd give her a shock for his own personal enjoyment. He puffed out his chest and smirked as he bumped up the shock level on the controller. Dad got a kick out of watching Dribs shrink down in pain. On several occasions, he made a show out of her whimpers and cries by shocking her just to get a laugh out of his buddies. Mom was horrified by this, angrily yanking the controller out of his hands and stomping off to comfort Dribs.

Watching Dad shock Dribs made me feel like a failure. There was nothing I could do to comfort her as the jolts of electricity surged through her neck. I used to imagine strapping the collar around his neck, giving him a taste of his own medicine. All I could do was hug Dribs tightly after her pain had already been endured. Dribbles was merely a pawn in his sadistic game of control.

Weekday mornings were always a blur for Mom. There was much to be done. She was responsible for getting me dressed and fed. Dribs also needed to be fed, watered, and taken outside. Mom usually tried to squeeze in a quick load of laundry or a sink full of dishes after getting herself ready for work. A few minutes before eight o'clock, she rushed me up the hill to Fermanagh Elementary School.

One morning, we were ready to walk out the front door when Dad emerged from downstairs. He usually didn't start getting ready for work until we left for the day. Dad was never a morning person, but on this morning, he bounded down the stairs wide-awake.

"You leaving for work?" He asked Mom.

"Yep," Mom said, handing me my lunchbox.

"You know, I think I'll take the dog up to the woods and shoot her today." Dad's voice was eerily calm. It was the same tone he used to discuss the weather.

Every part of me wanted to reach out and push him down. I wanted to scream. I wanted to take Dribs and run somewhere we'd never be found. Reality held me back. No matter how hard I shoved, I'd never be able to knock Dad down. Screaming would only instigate things. My feet stayed planted on the floor because there was nowhere safe for us to run.

I felt my eyes start to burn, but I couldn't let my parents see me cry, so I pushed the handle of the screen door open and walked out onto the porch. I refused to let Dad see my tears. He hated seeing me cry. I feared my emotion would fuel his own.

At this point, tears pooled in my eyes and I could barely see, but I refused to let them fall. Instead, I refrained from blinking. Using my coat sleeve, I dabbed at my eyes and tried to focus on the cloud that appeared each time I exhaled. I counted the porch steps as I made my way to the sidewalk. Making myself take slow, deep breaths, I buried my emotions deep within the pit of my stomach. The pit was becoming quite full.

Mom finally came outside, led by Dribs.

"We're not walking today. I'll drive you." Mom opened the car door and Dribs jumped into the backseat. I climbed in beside her and fastened my seatbelt.

"Is Daddy really going to kill Dribs?" I looked up at Mom through the rearview mirror. Her hands held a firm grip on the steering wheel. Before responding, she glanced at the clock and pursed her lips tightly together.

"No, she's going to stay at Grammy Barb's house today. Don't you worry." Mom kept her eyes on the road. Her voice sounded firm and composed. She was protecting us the way she always did.

As the car pulled up to the parent drop-off line, I leaned up front to kiss Mom goodbye. She held Dribs' collar as I slid out of the backseat. Before I shut the door, I wrapped my arms around Dribs' neck and kissed the top of her head.

"I love you, Dribsy. Mommy will make sure you're okay," I assured her, as she tried to lick my face. That weekend, I decided to tell Dribs about salvation. I had accepted Jesus into my heart three years earlier. With my dad's threat still echoing in my mind, I wanted to make sure Dribs and I would go to Heaven together.

Dad was with his buddies at the firehouse and Mom was outside. It was the perfect opportunity to have a serious conversation with Dribs about where she'd be spending her eternity. I knew she'd only sit still long enough to listen if she was locked in her cage, so I led her inside with a treat and quickly shut the metal door. After gobbling up the Milkbone in one bite, she whined and pranced anxiously in her cage, eager to be left back out.

"You can't be out yet, Dribsy. We have something serious to discuss."

Reaching for the book, I read her a children's rendition of The Easter Story in my most dramatic voice. After reading the last page, I paused for a few seconds, allowing the story to sink in.

"Now Dribsy, Jesus died on that cross so our sins could be forgiven. We get to go to Heaven. We can be together with Jesus, forever. All you have to do is accept Him into your heart. Can you do that, Dribsy? Do you want Jesus to be in your heart?"

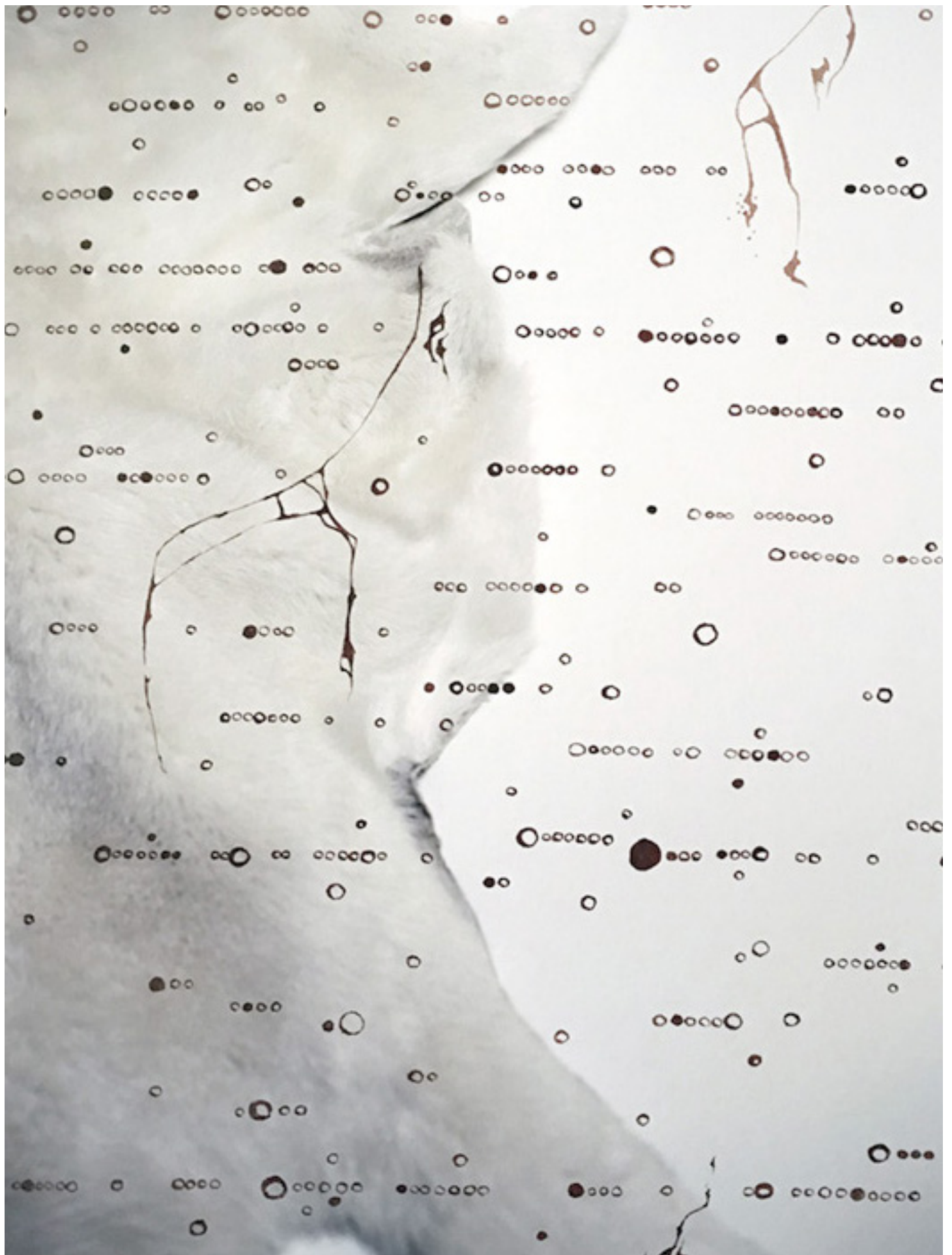
I slid my hand through the metal slats of the crate and held out my hand.

"If you want Jesus in your heart, all you have to do is shake." I paused. Dribbles looked at me, tongue hanging from the side of her mouth, feet firmly planted on the bottom of the cage.

"Shake!" I repeated.

Dribs lifted her paw. I shook it and then opened the crate door.

"Yay! Congratulations, Dribsy!" I began to clap and cheer. After having been freed from the cage, Dribs ran wildly around the house. I skipped along behind her, continuing my joyful chant.



BVSteven

Written By Matthew Caprioli

My move to New York had not been planned. Once I learned Jack had a new boyfriend, I cried for about an hour, then suddenly booked a one-way ticket to New York. After the move, my bank account had 800 dollars in it. My plan was to sleep on a friend's couch for a week, then find a room anywhere in the five boroughs that only asked for \$500 a month and no security deposit. Because no one had told me that this would be impossible, I didn't think my rapid departure from Anchorage was all that crazy. I was 22: I believed there wasn't a place on earth I couldn't hit running.

My phone buzzed with a text from BVSteven: I'm here. I turned to face Second Avenue. I texted back: I don't see you :(

The guy behind the counter stared at me. My cheeks burned with embarrassment. To appear normal, I perused what lay behind the deli window: a couple paninis on a platter toppled over like flayed fish, a yellow pool of shredded chicken, some mac and cheese scrapped to the upper right-hand corner and crusting over. My phone buzzed again: Well, I'm definitely here, in the way back. Do you have the correct address?

I looked at the deli's two patrons. Neither of them were on a cellphone. I looked up at the worker. I smiled, drawled out a Hey. He tossed me a curt little nod. His eyes asked, "What the fuck do you want?"

"Ahhh..." I looked down at the trough that ran below the glass counter. I spied a limpid red Vitamin Water. I yanked it out, heard the ice clunk down to fill the void. I hoisted it up to the guy, still staring at me.

"Just this. Please."

As the register drawer popped open, I felt shaken and defeated. I couldn't find Steven. I just spent money I desperately needed to save face in front of someone I'd never see again. Legal, illegal, it didn't matter. I was a failure.

I stepped off of the deli's ledge, rebounding on the trampled sidewalk. Steven had texted: Is it cool if I call you?

I replied, Yeah that's cool. Or I can call you too?

I twisted the lid off of my fake water and heard my throat make four gulping noises. I hoped the liquid might obscure my nerves. My ringtone, Ride of the Valkyries, sounded.

"Hi, is this Steven?" I hoped to sound friendly and professional — but also fuckable.

His voice was a calm baritone. "Indeed, it is."

"Nice to finally speak with you."

I prided myself on saying "with" instead of "to." Language was a two-way street after all. These slight modified words still mean the world to me. It's why prostitute rings so differently than escort, why I say "complete" suicide rather than "commit."

My eyes roved around the street; no other man with a cellphone to his ear. BVSteven told me that there weren't any dogs at Bar Veloce and it definitely wasn't a sandwich shop. He told me to head south. I turned to look at the wide expanse of polished tables, a wine rack traversing the rear wall, people dressed in clothes I couldn't afford. I jerked my head up to see "Bar Veloce" in red halogen lights, then his voice, "I think I see you."

I locked eyes with a middle-aged white man in the way back, smiling at me with a very full set of very white teeth.

"Ah!" I cried in mock joy. I saw him hanging up his phone when I said, "I see you too."

I walked toward him. Not through the front door, but through the withdrawn patio window. Only after my faux pas was complete did I turn around to see my error. I looked at Steven and shrugged my shoul-

ders oops. He appeared to laugh.

I swerved through a minefield of empty tables placed unreasonably close. I was woefully under-dressed: running shoes and tight jeans that were fraying at the bottom hem. My black shirt was a thick cotton one purchased at Old Navy for 10 bucks. The edges curled up like cow licks. I looked out of place with my apricot backpack. I thought of all the people seeing my and thinking how out of place I looked, how the contents of my backpack—a journal and three books—would only prove them correct.

Steven wore a mahogany button down and dark jeans that tapered perfectly at the bottom to display two black shoes impeccably polished. “Hello Matt.” He stood up and extended a hand. He was 6’2, a good five inches taller than me. I shifted my Vitamin Water from the right hand to the left.

“Hi Steve!” I said a little too loud. My body pressed in close for a hug. He laughed, surprised at the affection, and patted my backpack.

“Nice to see you,” he said.

“You too,” I replied, counting on my blazing smile to distract him from my shaky hands.

I slid the straps off my shoulders and dropped my backpack on the steel polished floor.

“Hmm.” I moved the Vitamin Water back to my right hand. “Where should I put this?” I said to myself as much as to Steven.

“Wherever you want to,” Steven said, halting and gracious, like a teacher to a slow student.

“Okay.” I looked down at my backpack. “I guess I’ll put it in my backpack.”

Steven nodded. “Sounds like a plan.”

He waited for me to lug the backpack to my chair, ensure the bottle’s cap was shut, unzip the backpack and shuffle some books around, wedge the bottle in the side, zip it all up again, and place it on the floor.

I wiggled my way onto the stool. “Sorry about that.”

“Hey no worries,” Steven said. “I was just finishing a glass and going to order a bottle. I hope you like Cabernet.”

“Yeah that sounds great.” I shifted on the stool, waiting for a comfortable spot. “To be honest I usually drink white wine, but anything with booze in it” –I gave a thumbs up. “Yep.”

By the second bottle of wine, I told myself I was comfortable with Steven. If I weren’t new to the city, I would have found our conversation boring, but at the time, I was fascinated by his job, “VP of Marketing” for a huge media outlet. He had the whitest teeth I’d ever seen. They looked like the exposed bone you’d see for a second in a slasher flick. His skin had an orange tint to it that added years. His voluminous black hair was combed to the left. Sometimes it didn’t move when his face stretched to more emphatic expressions, like the mouths of actors staying silent while a dubbed voice spoke.

I told him about the English lit degree I finished in May, leaving out the part where I technically didn’t graduate because of an outstanding math requirement. I told him I moved to get away from an ex and because I was done with the cultural backwater of Alaska. He nodded, took another drink. I told him most of my time was spent working bad temp jobs and looking for more bad temp jobs, that I was also looking for a cheap room to rent for the rest of October. He nodded once more. I told him I’d love to work for the Times or Out Magazine. He gave a dented smile, intended to convey interest and goodwill. Good luck with that, I heard him think.

I had the foggy sense that BVSteven wasn’t taken with me as a person. I wished he was, but if all he wanted was my body and he was willing to pay for it then (I willed myself to believe this) cool.

“What do you think about heading back to my place?” Steven asked. We were halfway through the second bottle of wine. “It’s just a couple blocks away. We can order in. Anything you want.”

“But we haven’t finished the wine?” I said, toasting him and taking a swig.

He grinned. “I have plenty at home.”

“Yes but why waste this stuff? It’s delicious.”

He glanced at the bottle’s label.

“It is rather good.” He smiled at me, his big mouth full of bigger teeth. I tried not thinking of Chucky. “I have even better wine at my place.”

I grabbed the bottle and poured my glass to the brim.

“Waste not want not,” I said. I chugged my glass. Steven emitted a wiry laugh. He glanced around at anyone who could be looking. The place was still more empty than full. I had a quarter left to drink when he tapped the glasses’ stem.

“Matt, it’s quite all right if we don’t finish everything right here. We want to enjoy ourselves—there’s no rush on the wine consumption.”

The warmth sloshed through me. Little archers had crept into my brain. They shot arrows behind my forehead.

“Oh.” I smiled. “Okay.”

Through the sultry night, I tried to hide my careening giddiness. I had escaped Alaska for good. I was in the famed East Village; I just consumed \$120 worth of wine; I would probably have sex. We passed a bookstore.

“Oh look a bookstore!” I said. “It’s huge.”

“Yeah, it’s a good one.”

I looked at their hours.

“They’re open so late,” I proclaimed.

“Yes,” Steven glanced at the time on his phone. “I suppose they are.”

“I love New York.”

He smiled at me, close-lipped.

He hadn’t lied about his “cool” apartment. It was huge. Parquet floors, a quasi-chandelier in the living room. The bathroom had two sinks and a jet tub. The kitchen accommodated a dining table five feet long. A great mix of modern art hung around alabaster walls.

“Make yourself comfortable,” Steven said.

My heels peeled off my running shoes. Steven sat on a wood bench to untie his black shoes. I ventured onto the red rug that blanketed the living room. My toes curled to pick up its softness. I had to be dreaming.

“Cool place.”

“Thanks. It’s all right. Please, have a seat.”

Steven swung by the kitchen before joining me on the couch. He had a bottle of white and red in each hand. We watched a movie and waited for Thai food. He placed a hand on my thigh. By the end of the movie I had a hand on his thigh.

“You’re welcome to stay over tonight,” he said. I was drunk and tired; his place was so comfortable. Three days in New York and I already hated the MTA. I said yes. The credits were rolling when he powered the TV off.

“Well, I like to take a shower before bed. There’s an extra set of towels near the sink you can use if you want to take a shower after me.” Then his bodyweight leaned over to kiss my lips. Instinctively, I reciprocated. His tongue broke my lips and entered my mouth.

He pulled away, then smiled. “I’ll be right back.”

Steven came out of the bathroom in a bright blue robe. My eyes widened. “Hey Elton,” I stopped myself from saying.

It was my turn to shower, and I moved faster than my thoughts could.

I came out of the bathroom to find all the lights off except a soft glow from his bedroom.

Clutching the towel around my waist, I walked toward his room. He was lying under black covers.

“Hey,” I said in the door frame.

He grinned. “Don’t you feel hot under that towel?” He flipped the edge of the comforter to expose rose colored sheets. He patted the space next to him.

I smiled with my lips sealed and moved toward the empty side of the bed. His bow window looked out at the lights racing down 2nd Avenue. I dropped the towel and slid in.

He scooted over to kiss me again. I turned my body to him, wrapped a leg around. His body was tougher and hairier than I imagined, not necessarily bad. I stuck out my tongue to be sucked by his.

We were like this for a while. Too long in my book. Why doggy paddle, I thought, when you could swim.

Rather abruptly, I removed my leg from his body. I flipped away the comforter hiding his torso and moved my head toward his groin. But then the hand that had been caressing the back of my head fell away. His whole body turned rigid. I sensed that what I was about to do was not something he wanted. But that was impossible. I thought, who doesn’t want a blowjob?

I covered his penis with my mouth. The heat flew out. The tower crumbled. I kept at it, swirling my tongue and making my body squirm to make Steven know I too was enjoying this. But his hands lay inert at his sides. With his atrophying dick in my mouth, I glanced up at his face. He was staring at the ceiling, expressionless, shoulders clenched.

Perhaps he was frightened by how easy this was. Perhaps he told himself that he was generous in a different way. He would pay for dinner, but not for sex. He was not someone to hire a common whore; I, in my eagerness to please him, was acting like a common whore. I was blighting his self-image when I was supposed to be its buttress. Or maybe it was something deeper I was too insensitive to feel, some past reason I wasn’t privy to.

I reached down to fondle his testicles, massage his penis. He grew a semi.

“You want to jack off?”

“Sure.”

Does a more depressing means of cumming exist?: the side-by-side jerk off below the sheets and in the dark. When he started to climax, I sped up.

He reached into a nightstand and pulled out a folded hand cloth. He patted down the semen droppings then mutely passed me the soiled cloth.

“That was nice,” Steven said. “I really should get to bed now.”

I mopped myself up and tossed the hand cloth on the floor.

“Yeah. Good idea.”

The next morning, neither of us moved in for a kiss.

“Regretfully,” he said, he had to get to work. He gave me a couple 20s and told me to visit the nearby bodega. “It’s right across the street. I’ll take a number 4. Order whatever you like.” I didn’t know what a bodega was, but back in Alaska I had excelled in improv classes.

I ordered the most expensive thing on the menu: a salmon deluxe everything bagel. When I returned, BVSteven was sitting up pertly at his minimalistic desk, talking on a headset to a MacBook Pro. He looked up at me with his sinister doll face. Then he remembered to smile.

I gave him his sandwich and mouthed table, pointing to the kitchen where I would leisurely eat my food for the next two hours.

I glanced at his screen to see The Huffington Post in the top-right corner. It was the front-end. He was typing an article for them. I couldn’t help myself from saying “Whoa.”

He smirked at me, his eyebrows saying “Shoo.”

I scurried to the table.

His job, so it seemed, was to issue commands over Skype. Two hours later, he stopped talking. He swiveled his chair to take me in.

“So kiddo, what else do you have planned?”

“Eh, just walking around, giving people my resume.”

He looked at me with sympathy. In that moment I knew he wouldn't be contacting me again. I hated him for the pity, and I loathed him for the rejection.

“Do you mind if I use your printer?” I asked. “Just to print out a few resumes.”

“Ah, sure. Sure! Of course. It's wireless.” He gave me the password.

He was back on his computer when I adjusted the number from 1 to 25 and hit “print.” The blue and black ink rolled onto crème colored paper. Around the 10th copy he looked back at me. I beamed at him.

He must have seen me like some Pollyanna figure, stumbling gaily through New York with no clue of how difficult it was to find a job, a house, and a lover. He must have thought it was so pathetic of me to suck a dick with no clear agreement of ever seeing money. How damaged and stupid do you have to be to move through the world so blindly? I hated him for being spot on.

I asked for a bowl of cereal to supplement my deluxe bagel. He didn't say no. I chomped loudly with my back to him, reading his magazines, trying to make it obvious that I didn't care what he thought of me. (Though I did care, of course; I cared too much).

A little past noon, he announced that some friends were waiting for him uptown. The following silence was thick. I gazed at him like a cow. I wasn't going to make this easy.

“So yeaaaaah, you should head out with me in a bit.”

Ten minutes later, we were outside. His cab had pulled up to the curb. “Great meeting you Matt.”

He was still as a pole. I considered kissing him smack on the lips just for the shock, but was too disgusted with myself. I had spent the night with a generous man, and all I had to show for it was a mild hangover and insecurity over my blowjob prowess. I tipped my head, “Likewise,” and spun in the opposite direction.

I wanted to ask for some money, but knew I wouldn't. He knew I wouldn't too, that I was still a coward in this regard and thus controllable. Our departure was incontestable proof of what his body language had told me the entire time: all of the power was his. He had nothing to be ashamed of. He wasn't the one who deliberately debased himself for material wealth, he had nothing to ask of the world. He wasn't the groveling whore. He instinctively knew, I told myself, that I didn't belong in New York.

Tified by my failure with Steven, I sublimated all my energy into finding a job.

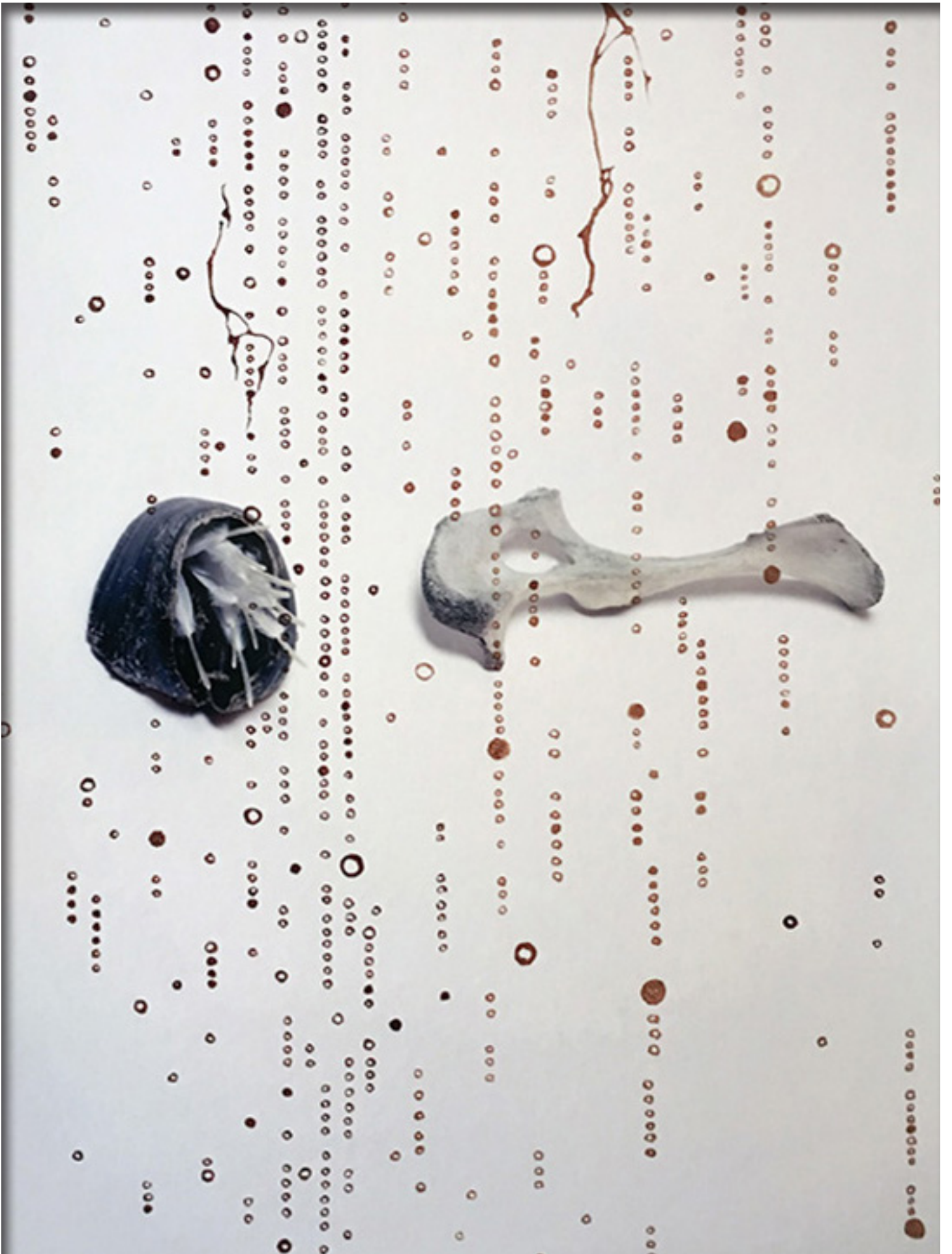
I walked by Village East Cinema, handed my resume beneath the ticket counter window to a pale punk girl. I gave one to Insomnia Cookies. I gave one to a pop-up Halloween store. Some of them took it with remorse, some with enthusiasm. I prefer to believe that everyone just threw it in the trash, as I didn't hear back from a single soul. About halfway through the pile I realized I had typed my name incorrectly. In 36-point font, on all 25 copies, I was “Matthw Caprioli”.

BVSteven's rejection turned me into a frizzle. As with Jack, I had assumed if someone knew me well enough they would find a way to love me. I remembered what a therapist, Philip Hicks, said to Allen Ginsberg when the poet was deciding whether to continue a relationship with Peter Orlovsky. He thought if he didn't take the leap with Orlovsky, the chance would never present itself again. “Oh, you're a nice person,” Hicks told him. “There's always people who will like you.” I thought something similar would apply toward me. But as Ginsberg already discovered, like had nothing to do with love.

It's hard to say just what I was hoping to get out of this situation with BVSteven. It was probably the same stuff I vaguely thought I could get through escorting: a boyfriend, knowledge of the city, funds for rent and student loans, a conduit to more amazing people. I read a lot of queer and sexual theorists—Michel Foucault, Gayle Rubin, Judith Butler, Michael Warner—I wanted to enact their theories of the socially made

body through prostitution. To do so would be liberating, I thought, to do something illegal that should be legal. It'd be a sure-fit way to boost my self-esteem, a way to forget Jack, to show him I was worth something. At the end of the day, I suppose I wanted someone to repair me and pay for it.

Money and adulation are common beckons in the choice to be a prostitute. They were tertiary concerns to me. What I wanted was connection: to the strangers of New York, to queer literature, to the prostitutes from time immemorial. And above all I wanted to find someone who understood me and loved me as much as Jack did. Someone who saw my pros and, unlike Jack, would accept my cons.



The Bird Watcher

Written By Sunset Combs

When he was not playing video games or collecting marbles and Pokemon cards, he was watching birds. Young, in a field of green in New York, beside a trailer, white with blue shutters, zebra rocks and a small garden, a crab apple tree. Just through the door, a covered porch filled with objects that couldn't fit inside: fishing poles with hooks exposed, a tackle box full of rubber worms that smelled funny—yellow, swirling tails, glitter infused. In that field of green beside the trailer, while the boy's older brother was playing football with the kids down the street and his twin sister was playing alone in her room, the young boy had a chair and binoculars, a paper and pencils. He would peek through the binoculars, small enough for his eyes, and watch the birds perch and fly. His father, the fisherman, the landscaper, the good guy, was an artist. His son, the bird-watcher, the quiet observer, wanted to be like him, to put a pencil to paper and in his hands have the birds that floated in the glass before his eyes.

When I ask him Why birds? he tells me it was because they can fly. No, wait, maybe it was how they looked, he thinks. Maybe it was because they were so small, and they always looked so soft. Maybe it was because of the way they sounded, their vibrato. Honestly, he says, he's guessing. His father took him and his siblings into the woods, back to rivers to fish, and his father would bring those fish home for dinner. Honestly, he just liked all nature and all animals. He liked the dense New York forests that seemed so wild when he was young, and the never-ending parade of cats and dogs his mother took in. But, he admits, there was something about birds. There was something that took him to that field, to set up his chair and his supplies, to sit in attentive quiet that most seven-year-olds cannot muster.

He could not draw. No matter his efforts, the birds before him did not match the ones on the paper in his lap, his lines too jagged in places, maybe their beaks drawn too large. At school, where the bird-watcher worked hard, he found a book in the library all about birds. With his paper and pencils, he traced one of the birds diligently, perhaps he colored it in. That night, he handed the picture to his father, presenting it as a creation completely his own because he could not draw, but his father, the landscaper, could. He handed it to his father and in his father's hands was a bird, captured and admired but not true. The fisherman's son was so fixated he began begging for a bird bath, for the birds to appear right there with the zebra rocks and the planted flowers. His parents got him one eventually, and he carried a bucket from the spicket to fill the stone bath. The birds came. He watched water droplets roll on their feathers and he watched them fly away. He tells me he does not remember ever having an intense desire to have a pet bird in a cage.

The bird-watcher moved from New York when he was eight. He left behind the blue shutters, the crab apples that lingered in the driveway, and his father. His mother, the woman who called him Scooby, the woman with cigarette sighs and without a tacklebox, took him and his siblings to Ohio. To a blocky apartment complex surrounded by woods you could see the highway through—not as thick as New York. They no longer went fishing, for the fisherman was a state away, and their mother did not fish. The bird-watcher still explored, found a tunnel down the way that the Olentangy river ran through and a waterfall, grand in scale. He would realize later that the waterfall was not so big after all, that small droplets gathered and fell lightly, that it was only about four feet high. But truly, he says, it was towering when he was young, and he would escape through the tunnel to get to it, kicking monkey brains along the way. In the evenings, he would return home, to his room to listen to music with his brother, or to bug his sister a little, just enough to make her huff.

Before they left for Ohio, in the back seat of a crowded car, the bird-watcher would watch his parents leak insults from their mouths, flooding the car with raised voices. His father would stop the car and force

his mother to walk the rest of the way home. The bird-watcher's brother would interject, but no one listened. At night, he tells me, when his mother had made her way home, his parents would yell behind closed doors and his father would emerge bloody and scratched, his hands of creation trembling. Once they left this behind, the bird-watcher became nervous in Ohio, in the apartment with the ghost of his father. He developed ticks, a high-pitched screech in the back of his throat and a thick anger that welled up rapidly and spilled over his edges in messy waves. And so, he escaped into the trees to try and find familiarity, while his siblings roamed, and his mother stayed locked up in a dark living room. His mother felt lied to, he thinks, like the world had promised a life for her and it didn't follow through. The bird-watcher also thinks that he and his siblings blamed their mother for the gap in the life that they too were promised; sometimes.

The bird-watcher found it hard to act like other kids. He hated, especially, being titled the new kid. But there were children living around him who he started to ride bikes with from time to time, who would share their toys with him from time to time. There was a girl in the apartment complex down the road, whose name he still remembers. She was friends with his sister and had a voice that he thought sounded like a baby, despite being his age—now nearing ten years old. He rode his bike to her house alongside his sister, for she had told him that the girl's family had a bird caged proudly in the living room. The bird was the only reason he would have hung out with one of his sister's friends. When they arrived, the three children sat on the floor, petting the bird carefully—it was the first time the bird-watcher had actually held one in his hands. He tells me it was so, so small. It was yellow, a canary, he thinks, or maybe that's just the stereotypical yellow bird everyone thinks of. No matter its kind, it was as soft as he had imagined.

The next part he does not remember completely. He tells me all of a sudden, though that cannot be true. He says, all of a sudden, he had a shoe that belonged to the bird-owner's father. He says, all of a sudden, the shoe, so large in his little hands, was falling and falling and crushing the yellow bird into the carpet. He tells me there was a silence, the girls beside him seated in hushed surprise, and that he looked at it laying there, this imagined canary, crumpled on the carpet. This is the word he uses, crumpled, like a sheet of paper. It was so small, he says again. He could not help but cry at the sight, the young bird-watcher, and flee immediately. He ran out of the apartment and peddled furiously down the blurry street. His sister told him later that the bird had died, that he had killed it. He saw the girl's father, the owner of the shoe, walking their dog some days and he would avoid his gaze. He and his sister no longer visited the girl with the empty cage, and then, his bird-watching ceased.

Years passed, and bird-watching and holding and crumpling became memories for him; the family moved from apartment to apartment, occupying space in every corner of the Ohio town. He started middle school, wore a lot of black, and listened to *Dark Side of the Moon*, although he did not understand it until high school. He had a girlfriend who liked music too, his first girlfriend, and his *Pokemon* collection was making its way to his closet, being marked as a pastime. He did not see his father, and talked to him only on special occasions, a voice on a phone, surrounded by plastic and on the other side of many miles neither had yet crossed to see the other. His mother, with the bad knees and the habit of interrupting you to tell you how to do something, had gone from job to job, always needing more money. She had gotten more tired and more closed off, laying a brick every month until her face was a wall of mortar.

With the coming of an eviction notice and no room at the neighbors' place or her brother's, the bird-watcher's mother was forced to take the family to the only place that was left. And so, the bird-watcher occupied the bunks of a homeless shelter, perhaps thinking of those birds in New York flying from tree to tree. Perhaps thinking of the one withering at his feet. Perhaps not thinking of them at all, for he tells me these are memories he started to bury as time passed, a shovel of dirt every so often. Sleeping in that bunk, however, he did think about his mother who needed him. His anger that he had kept like a shadow bubbled and forced its way to his surface, only to evaporate along with the high-pitched screech. He tells me, suddenly, he saw no reason to be a child anymore, let alone a child enraged. He had no choice but to grow up. I believe he knew too much distress to stay a child.

His mother, the bad guy, found a job and a place to live—eventually. He wrote her a letter for a school

assignment—write to someone you appreciate. Dear mother, from her quiet observer, nicknamed and drowning in anger and confusion, and swallowing mouthfuls to be a grown up. Sincerely, the boy who did not know if his father still had the traced drawing of a bird, if it was framed or folded or lost. He wrote his mother a letter thanking her for getting them out, for finding them a home. A home without zebra rocks, but a home all the same. He thinks, how hard she must have had to work to get them out. On her own. He never gave his mother the letter, though he thinks he still has it, somewhere, and that someday he could hand it to her, yellowed from years and not yet creased from reading and rereading. That he could let her know that she has someone who is grateful for her, and someone to talk to, if she ever wished to part her lips and leak sorrow before it had evolved into anger.

Once they had a place to live, they did not have a bird bath, but a lawn to mow. The bird-watcher was the one to mow it. His father did not know that his son mowed the lawn diligently, that his son liked the smell of fresh cut grass, that he listened to his brother's old blue iPod while he mowed, loving the way it helped pass the time. He was in high school now, aged. He had long hair he refused to cut and still listened to sophisticated rock, Pink Floyd and Jimi Hendrix. He was still dating the girl from eighth grade; he had told her, I love you, and she had returned it. One of these warm days, while moving the lawn furniture back to its place, after the blades of grass were staining the sidewalks, the bird-watcher found a dead bird in the lawn. He tells me the bird he found was tattered, blood on its chest, and when he looked closer, it wasn't really dead—not yet. The first thing he did was call his mother. He asked her, Isn't there anything I can do? And his mother was the one to tell him, No, the bird is going to die. He got a paper towel and picked up the bird, holding it in his hands gently. He watched it take troubled breaths, he tells me. Those are the words exactly, troubled breaths. His voice gets soft as he remembers aloud for me. He takes long pauses. Eventually, this bird stopped breathing in his hands, and he was responsible for digging its shallow grave and covering it with small stones; or, at least, he felt responsible.

He took a picture of the grave once the dirt was in place. He sent a picture to his friends with a eulogy attached. What did it say? He tells me he can no longer remember, but he knows it was something about a bird in the night and flying, but not being able to fly anymore. He takes a long pause again, and I wish I could see the image as he sees it in his mind, the closest to the real thing. I wish I could crawl into the brain beside me, through the dirt, scraping at the stones, and emerge. Ask him, Does this feel like laying to rest the bird that died at your hands? Is your childhood resting in the dirt with the memory of a father making fresh-caught fish in the kitchen and sleeping down the hall? I wish I could read that eulogy and bow my head and help him move the rest of the lawn furniture back to their impressions in the grass. Before crawling back into the present. The present, where I have nothing but my own images of the history he has, where I will unfold symbolism in his life and try to explain that it means something—something. Try to understand.

The bird stayed unperturbed in the backyard, shedding its skin for bones and its breath for earth, while the bird-watcher graduated high school. The bird-watcher became a carpenter, learning to build with his own hands and earning scars from nails sticking out at wrong angles. He worked to earn money for college, but also smaller desires, an Xbox and a flat screen—all things he had to earn on his own. He watched as the rest of his classmates moved on without him, as his girlfriend moved in to a college out of town. During that long year after high school, he walked forty-five minutes to work every week day, on a bike path with trickling streams running on both sides of it. He tells me that for a time, the path was watched over by straggling crows and that there was a tree, at eye level, brimming with vultures. Each day, after waking, his body stiff, he would walk down the path, a reflection in the eyeballs of crows, and stop at the tree to count the black birds. Seventeen vultures one day, thirty-two another. He tells me the crows sounded like they were laughing, that he liked them the least. The vultures, on the other hand, were silent. He does not think he heard them make a single noise. They sat there for days, disturbingly still, until one day in the summer before he finally left for college, they vanished.

The bird-watcher left his job, the tools, the silent boss who listened to The Talking Heads with him, his siblings who were finding their own ways to leave home, and his mother who did not want them to leave

her alone. He left for college, though a different one from his girlfriend and headed to brand new friends and experiences. During the winter break of the bird-watcher's first year at college, his father visited him for the first time. His father was called to Ohio on a court case about child support dues. Just before he got on the Greyhound, his lawyer called to tell him there was no need to come all the way to Ohio, that he could deal with it without him there. The father was already at the bus stop, the doors opening, everything was already planned. So, he decided to go anyway.

The bird-watcher's father was balding, no longer a landscaper, and very good at pool. The bird-watcher lost at pool and learned that his father now worked in construction and had a girlfriend living with him. His mother, on the other hand, had never been with anyone else. The bird-watcher's father did not enter the bird-watcher's house, and he only saw his ex-wife once for not time at all. He tells me his father had a look in his eyes that he cannot completely explain, like there were things the father could not express to his son that had grown feet, not inches. Who had become an adult over the phone. There had probably always been something his father could not express, and probably something that the bird-watcher could not express in return. And these inexpressible thoughts or feelings will most likely remain in that unpresentable form, sitting unsaid but not untouched. His father left after five days going to eat and seeing movies, and the bird-watcher returned to college. I wonder how much these new memories of his father contrasted with the old memories, if they were fighting for head space at this time in his life. And if they still are.

In college the bird-watcher studied philosophy. He asked a lot of questions and played a lot of video games and made a lot of friends. He fell in love with someone else, who was not the girl from middle school and high school, not the girl he had grown up beside. He fell in love with the girl who lived down the hall from him that first year and he told her he loved her in a booth at IHOP they frequented in the middle of the night. When he left for college, it was the first time he thought he would love someone else. That he admitted that he had changed, that she had changed, that their relationship was faltering and lagging. They parted on a rainy day, after hours of talking and admitting and crying, surrounded by a fog of confusion and heart-ache. The girl drove away, to her own college, windshield wipers at full speed. By this time, he was drenched but he didn't care. He tells me that when he went to college, it was the first time he realized how exhausted he was, how hard it was becoming for him to just breathe. But that the girl who lived down the hall made it seem so simple.

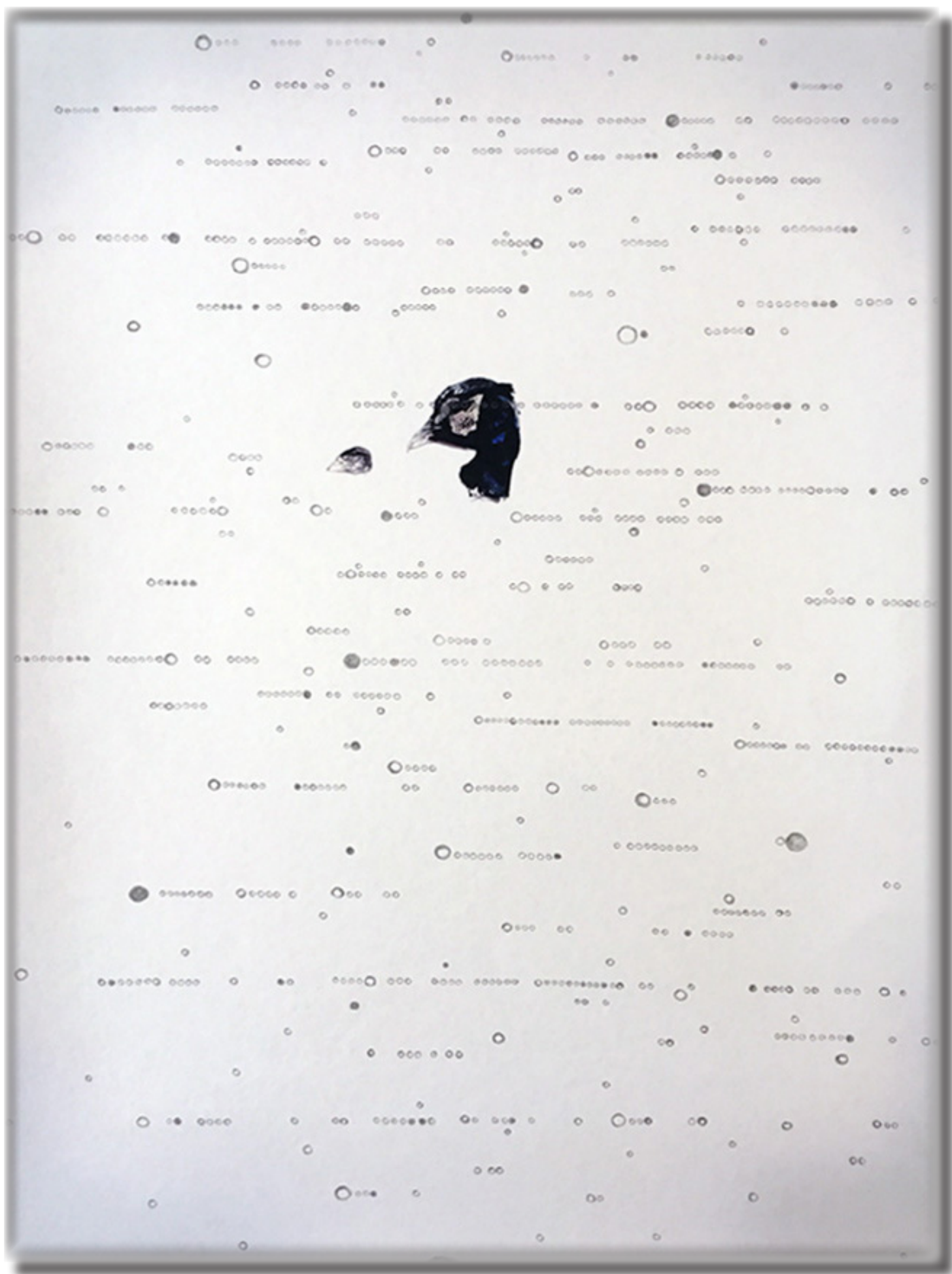
He tells me that this girl he fell in love with has a bird for a soul. A spirit that flies. He told the girl what he saw in her, in a dorm room bed, too tiny for them both, a moon shedding light, and a window bearing their reflections and treetops. He likened her to a bird in words he admits he can no longer remember exactly, but that the girl surely can. During the days attached to these nights, spent with this girl, in the midst of unruly change, he was working on a paper for class—one about harmony and souls; Socrates and The Pythagoreans. The thought had started to occupy a lot more of his mind in college. A belief in souls had become somehow less attached to a god he did not believe in, who he had never known, and more attached to people; each other.

When I ask him to talk to me about souls, about his own and this girl's and about what he really believes in, he laughs. He says Umm . . . He says he does not know what he believes in, not really, and he quotes Socrates. But if they do exist, he tells me, if a soul dwells on the inside of him and of her, her soul is most definitely a bird. He sees it in the way she lives, in her mind constructed of clouds. He says he sees it, especially, in the way this girl laughs. She is carefree, while caring so strongly at the same time. And perhaps that is why he had been so fixated on birds all along. Perhaps it was the freedom, for they were flying, and he was not. He was the quiet observer. And even though he didn't always know what to believe in, no matter how many projects he worked on, he believed in the freedom this girl had made him feel.

When I ask him why it is important to him that the girl he met in college is free, he tells me that it was because he felt so weighed down by his cares, by his life so far—that he still does. If this girl is a bird, he is roots or grass or earth. It matters because, he says, he is hard on himself, critical, and she gives him that freedom he longed for then buried. She helps him find the freedom to relax, to breathe those precious, unrestricted

breaths; to express himself, his emotions, his soul that he does not know whether or not to believe in. It matters because he has not seen glimpses of that freedom so close up, not since the bird bath in the trailer park and his tracing paper. Or the time he had held a bird, briefly, only to lose it, all of a sudden.

I look up at the slanted ceiling, my voice recorder alerting me that we are silent. I am thinking how strange it is that he does not see freedom within himself, that he needs help to breathe easy, but how much I understand it, too, partially. How odd that I cannot fully understand his burdens, not like I want to, no matter how many questions I ask with a voice recorder going and my fingers poised over my keyboard, ready to catch everything. How strange it is to not know the girl he loved before, who he really loved, but for different reasons from the girl he would love after. How strange that I do not know his father, or if it is his father's nose or eyes or sense of humor that I am sitting beside. How incredible that he cannot even really fill all these details in for me. There are things in his past that even he finds it hard to bring to mind. He is unsure. How unbelievable that this is not all of him, or all of his life, only moments riding on the backs of feathered bodies, telling me one string in his life, that I have pulled and stretched away from the overflowing mass of strings tangled in each other. Once my voice recorder is off and my document titled and saved, he rests his head on the couch, letting out a gust of breath he must have needed to get out. He tells me he is tired from so much remembering, that he is sad from what he has had to remember. And I think how strange it is that the girl with the spirit of the bird would never claim to be able to fly; that she would say that she was the one buried in the dirt, while the bird-watcher, laying his head on a couch, overflowing with history that is so hard to remember, was breathing all the fresh air, and pumping it into her own dry lungs.



Worker's Hands

Written By Leigh Canuel

Bruised knuckles, broken joints, cuts to the skin, always tattered and bruised. I tell myself that I have worker's hands. I imagine putting my hands next to a dock worker and shamefully pulling them away. Not quite worker's hands.

Each scar is a story. Two inches below my thumb on my left hand there's a deep, ugly scar that thumps with my heartbeat, having a life of its own. I remember the accident that drove me over a highway on a dirt bike and through a tree. I walked away with the minor scar, no bumps, bruises, or broken bones.

Similarly, on my right hand I have an indentation beneath my index finger it's a soft cavity with ugly lines. The dog bite that caused the scar was the first time in my life I realized that I was truly alone. I sobbed with blood running down my forearms and a newly adopted dog sitting hesitantly next to me, unsure of my tears.

After graduating from a private Christian university, I set my sights on the job market. I watched as all my friends took jobs left and right – marketers and accountants, professions that showed their families that their pricy education didn't go to waste. It took over a year to find a job in data entry. During all this time, I lived with my grandmother. I told my friends that I did it to help her or keep her company, but the truth was that I needed her.

I was embarrassed that I went to an expensive private university and graduated with a job that paid \$10/hour. I hustled on the weekends and worked retail. I always thought it was beneath me, cleaning up children's clothes and scrubbing toilets didn't seem to have a silver lining – I knew that I was smarter than this. I wouldn't have had those years to grow without her by my side – silently coaching me in the ways of the world – and the workforce. She was my rock on so many bad days and angry tears. I was angry at myself at why I couldn't do better, earn more, support myself. She would just smile.

When I held my grandmother's hand in the hospital bed, I felt her small bones through her soft, spotted skin. One of the side effects of chemo is dry skin. Dry flakes fall from her hands as I touch her while she sleeps. I gently press her hand back into the white sheets of the hospital bed.

Although her hands give away her diagnosis, I can see the scars that prove she was a worker. I know that she has scars on the tips of her fingers from cooking for her five children as a single mother. That the pale halo around her left ring finger was where her wedding ring sat permanently, long after her husband passed away. I imagine broken knuckles, not from boxing like mine, but from slammed car doors and impatient children that would whine until they were picked up, flailing their arms furiously like baby bird's in a nest.

As a professional years later, I know that I follow in my grandmother's footsteps. I am in an industry that's dominated by men. At work my hands often get swollen and my joints flare up from sitting at the computer too long. It embarrasses me when I think about my family history and what they accomplished; that my biggest problem is an ache in my hands.

When I hear my mother and grandmother talk, they love to tell people that I'm taking a man's job somewhere. I always laugh at the ridiculousness of their tones. Both giddy and excited – I assume they imagine me breaking through some sort of glass ceiling. I smile, knowing both did this well before I was a twinkle in my mother's eye. I know exactly what type of woman I come from.

The callouses on the inside of my grandmother's palms are from moving boxes. The story of her whisking four small children away in the middle of the night from her husband is strange. I feel like it's out of a black and white film that I never watched.

If my grandmother hadn't taken that job out of high school at the camp in New York, she may have never met my biological grandfather. He was running this property for his family and fell in love with her.

When I look back at pictures of her bouncy light brown hair, tiny waist, and rounded polish nose on such an oval face, I smile. She was beautiful. I can see why they fell in love – it was the 50's after all. It was the time of do-wops and fast cars. Love was a rebellion of its own sort.

Fast forward to a few years later and my grandparents had four children under the age of six. My grandfather, now a heavy drinker and a domestic abuser, had stopped working. My mother, a very small child, would remember sitting on her grandfather's lap and digging for quarters in the sides of his recliner. The man had very bad rheumatoid arthritis and stayed put in his chair. My mother remembers bending back his fingers and waiting for a reaction that would never come. Such an odd memory to cling to.

My grandmother would manage until she had enough of the abuse. My aunt, a toddler at the time, fell down a flight of stairs at the hands of my grandfather. He was drunk. He was mean. That was the moment she decided to leave.

She packed her four children and left while my grandfather was away on a drinking binge. My aunts and uncles tell the story of being stowed away on a train in the middle of the night. Another uncle, the oldest at the time, would tell me that he could still hear the high-pitched scream of the whistle, when they left the train depot. A reminder that they were headed towards Wisconsin.

There are many parts of my life that I'm incredibly proud of: my college degrees, my career, my house, my car. I've earned them all, mostly, on my own. In March 2017 that changed for me. I had something that I didn't earn. Something that I didn't have to work for.

I was diagnosed with BRCA2 gene mutation. The potential harm in this specific mutation is that if you have cancer cells, your body may not be able to tell those cells to stop multiplying. The risk of cancer is 40 – 80% higher for men and women with the gene mutation.

I am one of them.

While I was waiting for my test results, I remember sitting in the doctor's office popping my knuckles – a nervous habit. I always think about my great grandfather and how my mother described his swollen knuckles from rheumatoid arthritis. My mind races forward thirty years as I see my hands, maltreated and damaged from my own abuse. Ugly knuckles that no longer allow rings on my fingers, aches that only the elderly feel. I immediately stop only to continue the irreverent popping a few minutes later.

My doctor doesn't sugar coat it. I tighten my hands to the blue folder that holds my future. I locked eyes with her, my own brimmed with tears as I made jokes.

It's genetic.

I take a beat.

It's genetic

Another beat.

It's been passed down in my family for years – silently causing a diagnosis of cancer since before I was born. Months of calling the office, harassing them to do the test. I needed to know. I had to understand who I was on a cellular level. What were my chances for cancer?

My chances were good.

My grandmother was in her second round of chemo for Ovarian Cancer – one of the rarest cancers to be diagnosed with – now we know because of BRCA. Typically, many people have only a 1-2% chance of ovarian cancer diagnosis. It was almost poetic how I was diagnosed while my grandmother battled the same thing that I feared.

Later in life, after earning a degree from University of Wisconsin, my grandmother became a chemist for Amoco. During her time there, she was an asset to the organization, especially as one of the only women as a scientist at the company. I wouldn't be surprised if there were some faded chemical burns that never quite healed on her palms.

She was a trailblazer in her organization. She never told me about how she would work on different types of fuels – testing to see if there was a more sustainable version of fuel that would work for both com-

mercial and residential vehicles, boats, trucks. Something more manageable than the fossil fuels that we continue to burn to this day.

Those same hands that used to take measurements in the lab are now taking a feeding tube and provide sustenance to her organs that are fighting against her. She grabs a large, 60ml needle and pushes water, then a protein shake, then water into her G-tube. She smiles as she jokes about splashing herself with the purified water and splattering the white sink with the strawberry protein shake. I sit in the bathroom with her under the ornate light fixtures, thinking what kind of woman could joke about that? She's a superwoman.

As I watch her close the G-tube I know that she has worker's hands. When she gingerly stands to go back to her overstuffed leather sofa, I see her knuckles tense and then release. I look to my own hands. They're small, delicate even. My knuckles are almost always slightly swollen from carpal tunnel and too much technology. I have my own callouses, even a faded place on my own ring finger where an engagement ring once sat.

I think about my own diagnosis – how I broke down after her second surgery, telling her about how I was afraid that this was my future too. And how I was scared. And how I couldn't be strong anymore.

But maybe it's not about that. Maybe it's about how we leave this world – is it a better place? What did we contribute? My grandmother left her legacy in the scientific community. In her personal life she fought hard against situations that wouldn't benefit her and her children. She raised my mother – also a strong woman – who then raised me to be a strong woman. We work hard. Exhausted but fearless. It's because of those worker's hands that I've made it this far.

Family Exits: A Tryptic

Written By Allison Chestnut

I. 1985

"When it comes to death, we know that laughter and tears are pretty much the same thing.
-Sherman Alexie, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

Dying on Thanksgiving night, my paternal grandmother set family precedent for disastrous funeral services. Finding someone to officiate was our first problem. Her church membership was strictly postal, evidenced by envelopes from Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, founders of the notorious yet now-defunct PTL Club and Heritage USA water theme park, and from Oral Roberts, who begged for money to finish his Oklahoma-based university or else God would call him prematurely home to Jesus. These envelopes held vials containing "genuine splinters from Christ's cross" (at least that's what the enclosed cards assured) or prayed-over squares of flannel cloth offered in gratitude for her monetary partnership in their work.

We settled on Lynn Toney to usher my grandmother's soul straight to the bosom of God. He had started his career in show business, first as the TV spokesperson for the Pensacola Piggly Wiggly, then as host of a local TV show in the same vein as "Romper Room" or "Captain Kangaroo." Captain Hank, now ordained, guaranteed soothing tunes pre-recorded from a drawbar Wurlitzer organ, if we would declare the decedent's favorite hymn. We settled on the quiet dignity of "Whispering Hope," signed the papers, wrote the check, and got on with the last rites.

The day of the funeral, the family gathered at Eastern Gate Funeral Home. We sat in the front pews as visitation in the Room of Repose preceded the actual service. One of my grandmother's nieces –Pauline, I think--clutched a stalk of homegrown floribunda roses "for her sweet Aunt Alma" and wailed her way to the front to pay her respects. We stared as she tried unsuccessfully to thrust the roses between my grandmother's hands, which were super-glued across her now permanently perky bosom.

What began as a subtle act grew into a test of determination as petals flew from their stems. One attendant silently made his way to her side and escorted her to a seat as another attendant, ready with a hand-held vacuum, sucked up the floral confetti from both the floor and the inside of the casket. As the service began, the Reverend Captain conducted us solemnly into the chapel, offered prayer, and then introduced the previously recorded music meditation. This cassette tape, for a small additional fee, could also be ours should we need later consolation.

Click. Hiss. Silence.

A few nervous coughs punctuated the silence, while Captain Hank offered assurances that all was well. With eyes demurely downcast, he hit the play button one more time. Booming through the silence we heard the Happy Goodman Family singing the gospel hit, "If God Be for Us, Who Can Be Against Us?" – a peppy little tune complete with vigorous tambourine accompaniment.

Head's jerked. Someone giggled. Mortified, my mother shot a narrow-eyed glance at my father as he tapped his shoes against the tile floor, wagged his shoulders back and forth in time to the souped-up bass, and smiled. My mother did not return his look. The Reverend Hank, apologizing as he sprang from his seat of authority, found the right track. "Soft as the voice of an angel" scratched through the ceiling-mounted speakers, and the funeral home attendants motioned us to follow the now closed rose-covered casket.

The funeral home occupied the same grounds as the cemetery, which meant we needed no hearse. Instead, the casket lay atop a rolling metal cart. As the pall bearers pushed my grandmother across the parking lot to the plot of eternal rest, a gust of wind transformed the floral funeral saddle into an airborne surf

board, heading Kahuna-like due south in the opposite direction from our entourage. Captain Hank's hair-piece-- now equally airborne -- strained against his scalp like an angry flying squirrel. He chased the truant flowers, finally wrangling them and his hair back to their perspective mounts

When we went back to the cemetery later that day to see the closed grave, we realized that my grandmother was buried between two single plots, both for men. "That ought to make her happy," my father said. At last, something had gone right.

II. 1995

"Believe me, when you die, it's everybody else's but your problem"

-Cecelia Ahern, *The Gift*

After the ordeal of his mother's service, my father made sure we knew that a simple wooden box would nicely suit his remains when that time came. Ten years and a cancer-riddled liver later, he died at my house in Hattiesburg, Mississippi nine months after his cancer diagnosis. Mother and I honored his choice of coffin. We debated the financial merits of "regal mahogany," "stately oak," "hand-burnished walnut" and pine. Just pine. Each cost more than its metal counterpart, but plain pine seemed economically aesthetic. We made our selection, and then I drove mother back to Pensacola. Dad would arrive later.

At noon on the day before my father's services, the local funeral home called. Beverly Thompson, the mortician daughter-in-law of my childhood friend, asked if the casket would be open or closed.

"Mom hasn't made a decision," I said.

"Well," she said, "You need to make one now. Your dad just got here." She paused. "You know he was really jaundiced. The embalming fluid..." she stopped. "It, well, he's green. Kind of chartreuse, actually." In most circumstances, green was mother's favorite color, but in this case I made an executive decision.

"Can you fix it? Okay, fix it."

No sooner had I replaced the receiver than Beverly called back. "Umm. How set are you on using that casket from Hattiesburg?" she asked.

"Mother had really like the simple lines," I said "Is there a problem?"

"Are you sure you don't want another one?" Beverly asked again.

"Pretty sure. Why?" I knew I wouldn't like her answer.

"Well, you know how hard it's been raining. We were unloading your dad and halfway into the building," she paused to clear her throat. "One of the guys slipped in the water. We dropped him."

"You dropped him?" I swallowed and took a deep breath. "What do you mean you 'dropped him'?"

"Yes. We dropped him. We didn't hurt him, but the wood split. Pine is sosoft...." Her voice trailed.

"Well, I can't tell my mother that her husband resembles a crash-landed Martian. Fix it. Get some nails, wood glue, and a couple of vise grips."

"That will take care of the break, but that gouged out place..." Beverly sounded less sure than I was.

"C'mon, Bev. Make a knothole. You have makeup for persons of color, right? Make a knothole. Dad was in the moving business. We used to do it all the time to cover nicks and gouges in furniture. Isn't a casket furniture? Put a plant in front just in case someone gets too close."

"Right," she said.

I had hoped that would be the last glitch.

The next day as we were preparing to leave for the visitation, the phone rang. Now what, I thought. My Aunt Evelyn, calling midflight from Dallas to Pensacola, sobbed that she had missed her earlier scheduled plane and now, thirty minutes before we were to gather at the funeral home, found herself midair between Texas and Florida. Mother had asked her to take an earlier flight to guard against a delay, but saying, "I told you so" would not get her to the service any faster. Sniffling, she agreed to get there when she could, but I reminded her that I couldn't leave mid-funeral to pick her up, so she was on her own once the plane landed. I assumed she would take a taxi, and sighed.

We hung up, and the phone rang again. Jhury, the nurse assistant from M. D. Anderson, was calling to check on Mr. Chestnut and wanted to know how he was feeling. I apologized for not calling him, citing my lack of experience with death and out-of-town doctors, but I could tell that being out of the loop had hurt his feelings.

Mortician Bev met us at the funeral home and took me aside. Mother had decided on a closed casket, I told her, but—she wanted the family to view the body before visitation.

“How do you feel about dead people?” Beverly asked as she walked me over the drying casket. “We repaired the casket pretty good. We toned down your dad’s green with a little makeup and we changed the light gels from blue to pink. But—” We gazed into the coffin. “We didn’t have time to secure your dad’s arms. The only way they will lie flat against his body is for you to push. If you let go, they may move.” She demonstrated. “Can you stand here long enough for your mother to pay her respects?”

I nodded. My mother never noticed.

The steady downpour stalled traffic in flood prone areas and delayed the pastor’s arrival to the funeral home. The weather relented some as we moved to our cars for the short procession to the family plot, but the pallbearers trekked through ankle-deep water to the hearse. Although the cemetery and funeral home shared premises, the distance proved too far to walk. We exited the family car, umbrellas jostling as we solemnly reassembled by the open grave and the pastor began his final remarks.

From the far edge of the parking lot, a speck in a red vinyl hoodie, pulling –was that a suitcase?—and free arm waving back and forth made its way through the puddles.

“Yoo-hoo! Oh, Yoo-hoo!” the speck hollered while heading the hundred yards or so to join us. “Sorry I’m late, but the plane was late and I didn’t have any cash for a taxi and this nice couple I met on the plane offered me a ride so they brought me from the airport and let me out and here I am.” My Aunt Evelyn surveyed the group and smiled.

By this time, the pastor had stopped mid-scripture as my aunt settled her suitcase, then, like a wet puppy, wriggled to make a place for herself between two occupied chairs. Her arrival guaranteed that no one paid attention to the casket’s position heading west, to its freshly made knothole, or to the single potted plant placed eye level beneath the canopy.

III. 2000

“If you die in an elevator, be sure to push the up button.”

-Sam Levenson

After my father died, my mother lived alone until the fall of 1998. Mom had spent most of her life in and out of medical facilities. She had lupus, polycystic kidney disease with nephrectomy, a hysterectomy, cardiomegaly, tachycardia, and connective-collagen tissue disease of unknown etiology. When she added adenocarcinoma of the lung, she moved in with me. Her only treatment option was palliative radiation, which kept her comfortable until February 2000. On my birthday, while I put her things in the car, she held her dog, Lily, one last time. Then, telling Lily good-bye, we went to hospital’s step down unit and checked in.

As a cancer patient in the unit, my mother was unremarkable. In a few periods of dementia, she swore roaming Chihuahuas hid under her bed, only coming out at night to tickle her feet or lick her face. Sometimes she would call out to the hall, “Here doggy, doggy, doggy!” Sometimes she heard choirs singing Spanish love songs. Sometimes she thought I was trying to kill her or have her committed to an asylum. Only after speaking with my friend Beverly Thames would she calm down and let me back into her room. Bev was like the patient whisperer: she could persuade my mother to compliance when no one else could. I was both grateful for and jealous of their relationship.

Sometimes I stayed overnight with my mother. On that last night in April, the room seemed crowded, even though only the two of us were there. When the night nurse came in to get mother’s 2 a.m. vitals, I walked the halls. By this time, I knew most of the nursing staff, and they would ask me how I was doing, but

that night was different.

“What are you doing up so late?” mom’s nurse asked as we met at the door.

I told her about feeling like there were several other people in the room. I expected her to attribute it to caregiver fatigue, but she nodded. “That’s the way it is, sometimes,” she said. “You won’t be getting much sleep.”

By 6 a.m., I could no longer handle being alone-yet-not-alone and called the patient whisperer. Once Beverly arrived, my mother relaxed. I removed the oxygen cannula from her nose, and as we gave my mother permission to go, she quietly stopped breathing. The nursing staff had just changed and were setting up for their shift. “I need someone to pronounce,” I told the floor supervisor. She looked puzzled, frowned, sharply inhaled, then called the doctor. I went back into my mother’s room with Beverly and waited.

That’s when things became iffy.

The step down unit was part of a hospital that had no morgue. This meant that each deceased patient stayed in the room. The doctor came, signed the death certificate and approved an autopsy. Having nowhere else to go, Bev and I sat in the room waiting until someone “received” my mother. An elderly candy striper knocked on the door and, not waiting for an invitation to enter, pushed her hospitality cart into the room.

She asked if my mother would like a magazine or a complimentary cup of water.

My mother, of course, did not reply, so the woman, louder, repeated her offer.

I stage whispered that mother didn’t need anything right now.

“Oh. Well, she is a sound sleeper, isn’t she,” said the woman imitating my whisper.

“You have no idea,” I said. “My mom sleeps like the dead.”

“Okay, I’ll come back,” she said brightly, pushing the cart back into the hall.

After that close encounter, the staff put a note on the door and directed visitors to see me. I had moved to the public alcove waiting room while the nurses dressed my mother in the yellow disposable death kit attire. Beverly made some phone calls while I sat with a gentleman whose wife had been in the unit about as long as my mother had. The man, radiating excitement and happiness, told me that the doctor released his wife to go home. He was waiting for the orderly to arrive.

“Say,” he said. “How is your mother? When will the doctor release her?”

“Oh,” I said, “She’ll be released soon. We’re just waiting on transportation to take her downstairs.”

“She’s better?” he asked.

“Well, for now she’s.... stable,” I nodded. That seemed to satisfy him as the orderly wheeled his wife to the elevator.

The elevator opened, and two wet ambulance attendants wheeling a gurney exited, making their way to my mother’s room. I was expecting someone from the funeral home, but since an autopsy was scheduled, EMTs would transport mother to the morgue at the sister hospital across town. I followed them in and watched as they transferred mother from the hospital bed to the gurney, then covered her with several sheets and folded blankets.

“What’s all that for?” I asked as we left her room.

The attendant pushed the elevator button and looked at me. “We have to take the deceased down the public elevator.”

I raised my eyebrows. “There is no utility or patient elevator?” I asked.

“Nope,” he shook his head. “Just this.” The elevator door opened revealing a car full of wet people huddled with wet umbrellas, droplets pooling on the floor.

“We’ll wait,” he said. “We’ll catch it on the way down.” He looked at me begrudgingly. “It’ll be easier.”

An empty car, headed to the ground floor, opened and we piled in. Only six floors remained between us and the exit, but at each floor a waiting group pushed its way in, packing us to the wall like proverbial sardines. A woman with her little boy slipped in as the door closed. She gave us an accusatory look, like why are you imposing on our space, then picked up her boy and plunked him on the gurney.

By my calculations, his bottom landed firmly on my mother’s face. Horrified, I started to pull him off.

I realized that I didn't need to be freaking out the passengers by telling them they were traveling with a dead woman, or to be traumatizing the kid who was oblivious to what lay beneath his cushions. As a friend later pointed out, my mother had always wanted a grandchild, and that anonymous little boy was, at that point, as close as she was ever going to get.

As the elevator opened on the ground floor, we encountered a human parking lot. Every time the building's automatic doors opened, the escalating rain and wind drenched both those who were entering and those who were trying to leave. Bev, the ambulance attendants with my mother in tow, and I tried to weave through the crowd. We had made a little progress when the lead attendant froze.

"What's the matter?" I asked, as the person behind me pushed something into my kidney.

"Where's the ambulance?" the second attendant asked.

"You don't know where you parked the ambulance?" I asked, as someone banged the gurney against the wall.

Ignored, I asked a little louder, "You've lost the ambulance?" A sleepless night was catching up with a very stressed-out day. "How do you lose an ambulance?"

There was no ambulance at the front entrance. "Now, what?" asked the second attendant.

"We go to the back entrance, I guess. You got any better ideas?" None of us was happy.

The attendants changed positions at the gurney as Beverly and I made an about face and headed back through the swarm, who had no qualms about pushing and shoving through the hallway. Finally, we reached our destination, where the ambulance waited under the portico. The attendants opened the back, secured the gurney in place, and closed the door.

"Bye, Mom," I said. Then I turned to the ambulance driver. "Try to keep up with her better than y'all did the ambulance." It was a feeble attempt at humor.

"Bitch," he said under his breath. Then he addressed his ambulance mates. "Hey, guys, it's almost noon. Whataya say we grab lunch on our way to Forrest General?"

"Sure thing," said one of them. "It's not like this is a matter of life or death! Shoney's is on the way." They started the ambulance and headed out into the rain.

Contributor Notes

Leigh Canuel is a recent graduate from Etowah Valley's Master's of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at Reinhardt University. She has previously had writing published in Sanctuary and The Blue Mountain Review. She currently resides in Atlanta always in search of the best coffee with her beagle Mackenzie. Follow her on Twitter @leigh-canuel

Sunset Combs is a senior at Earlham College, majoring in English and minoring in Creative Writing. Their work has not been published outside of Earlham's small, but beloved, print literary magazine.

Vanessa Smaletz graduated with her BA from Ithaca College and her MA from the University of Akron. She currently resides outside of Philadelphia and enjoys reading, hiking, and creating new recipes when she realizes she doesn't have the ingredients for her intended recipe.

Micaeli Rourke is an American freelance journalist, writer and digital media consultant. She holds a BA from Emerson College and is an MA Candidate in Journalism at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. She holds quite strong opinions about the importance of newspapers, strong handshakes, American political trivia, and her first love-- musical theater. Read more of her travels and tribulations at www.kindeyesandstrangeplaces.com

Allison Chestnut has been published in Foliate Oak, Caveat Lector, The Southern Mule, Windhover, Wordpeace and Minerva Rising. Her poem "County Road 518 at County Road 24" received a 2016 honorable mention in the 2016 AWP Intro Journals Project competition. She received the MFA from Mississippi University for Women where she studied with Kendall Dunkelberg, Mary Miller, Shayla Lawson, and TK Lee. She has read her work at SAMLA, SCMLA, Mississippi Philological Association and the Conference on Christianity and Literature. She holds the PhD from Louisiana State University and is currently professor of English at William Carey University.

Jessica Fisher obtained her B.A. in English writing from Lock Haven University. She completed her M.A. in creative writing from Wilkes University, and is currently enrolled in Wilkes' M.F.A program. She has written works of fiction and non-fiction, many of which focus on the challenges of establishing female empowerment in traditional small-town settings. "The Born-Again Dog" is her first published essay. Jessica and her canine son, Onslow, currently reside in Mifflintown, Pennsylvania.

Matt Caprioli is a NYC writer by way of Alaska. He was a journalist for The Anchorage Press and continues to write for local papers in Manhattan. He has contributed to The Paris Review Daily, Huffpost, Alaska Dispatch, and Worn in NY. His essays have appeared in Best Gay Stories, Cirque, Opossum, and Chicken Soup for the Soul. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Hunter College.

Gabrielle Rivard is a freelance copy editor and copywriter. She's worked as an editor and content manager at tech companies in Silicon Valley, as well as wire editor and copy editor at The San Francisco Examiner, and has a (mostly unused) master's degree in library and information science. She lives in Portland, Ore., with her software-developer husband and children Harry and Frances.

Echo

Third Issue

November. Two Thousand and Eighteen