



THE HONORS PROGRAM

Work In Progress
My life at twenty-one

*An Honors Capstone Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
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To Allison Polk
You taught me to value my own stories

Abstract

Moving beyond the author's identity once forged in the family and social expectations of his childhood, a twenty-one year old author weaves a memoir with creative twists that revolves around the theme of coming of age, particularly acceptance of self. Using the second person point of view, the memoir beguiles readers to make the story theirs as well. The preface narrates reasons for composing a memoir, elaborating on how simple, everyday stories become important in creating cohesiveness among different stages of change and growth. The afterword analyzes literary influences that contributed to the author's style of creative non-fiction and discusses themes, subtexts, symbolism, and foils that express perspective changes. Ultimately, the purpose of the memoir is to portray an exciting work in progress.

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Preface

I am only twenty-one years old and my Gallaudet University Honors Capstone is a memoir.

A friend of mine, who did not realize that I was working on a memoir for my capstone, said that she was working on a book using her life as the main text.

“Oh, something like a memoir?” I asked.

“Oh, Derrick, please, I am not even thirty. Memoirs are for old people.” She waved me away with her hand.

Even myself, I once believed that memoirs are for old people. If not old, memoirs are for extraordinary people. Me? I think I have a fairly normal life. I am a deaf person, but I come from a line of families where being deaf is normal. Other than falling and getting a tiny, permanent scar on the top of my head when I was three-years old or eating fried tarantulas and a live snake in Southeast Asia last summer, my life is not so extraordinary. That’s that; there isn’t anything left to discuss.

There was something, however, that tugged at me to share my life stories—a desire for more cohesiveness that my journals did not satisfy. I needed to write, to make connections; to document my stories; and they were not the stories like how I got my scar or how I ate tarantulas.

I was told that people with the most normal lives write memoirs. A stay-home mother published a memoir, and there are millions of stay-home moms out there. Amy Krouse Rosenthal—a journalist who led a “normal” life—said about her memoir, *Encyclopedia of an Ordinary Life*, “I have not witnessed the extraordinary. This is my story” (Ryan 79). This simple line powerfully states that the extraordinary does not have to happen for a person to have a story. Through Rosenthal’s unique writing style and form, her ordinary life becomes fascinating. I realized that juxtaposing what I was with how I lived my life provides some profound and evolving perspectives. Learning something about myself and the world I live in, the experience—regardless of how many people come of age like I did—can be extraordinary, better even by having some relevance to others.

My memoir has stories about interacting with a tree in my backyard, getting reprimanded by a supervisor at my high school, weeding dandelions, going to a strip club in Bangkok, Thailand, and even about blacking out at a house party. These are the stuff that people do on a daily basis—typical experiences that I didn’t think were extraordinary but extraordinarily shaped my life in retrospect.

I started my memoir with no clear understanding of how I should finish it. I wanted to work on myself, to have a better understanding of my life. It was a struggle. My Capstone Chair asked me several times, “What is your memoir about?” My answers were different every time.

Several things I was sure of, though. I wanted my memoir to be in the second point of view and to be loaded with subtext. I wanted to put the readers in my shoes, but at the same time, I didn’t want to give my life away too easily. So at first the technical decision to use second person was a device to keep me writing. Many of my experiences I felt were sacred, and I was afraid to unveil many of them. They seemed stupid, silly, or sometimes so ordinary. Boring, even. What’s the point?

They are a part of me. My Capstone Chair told me for once, stop freaking worrying about my readers. Who cares about them? They are my story.

I wrote many pages about my experiences with one person. Then, I wrote a lot while I was traveling in Southeast Asia—to a point where my Capstone Chair asked me if my memoir was about my backpacking experience in Southeast Asia. I was still “traveling” with my own experiences without bringing them “home.” When I handed in my first, complete draft six months overdue, I blurted, “This memoir is just a morass of story vomit.”

My memoir is in better shape now, thankfully. Though, I still recognize that there are holes in my life story that are yet to be filled. It is a work in progress.

My memoir focuses on the important part of my life where I come to accept myself, using a series of memories that contrast or reflect on parts of myself. It is work because it takes effort to put my life experiences on the table and decide what they mean and do to me. Who I am may continue to change, and I will have to keep working to understand my ongoing changes. This memoir captures a part of my life where my changes are perhaps most profound, focusing on acceptance of myself.

Using “you” kept me writing. But it evolved into a tool for me to understand and accept myself. I needed to view myself as “other.” Using “you,” I distance myself from myself, and use the story to speak to myself. Using the second-person point of view for a memoir detaches the author from the story, but “alienation from the self is the primal drive of authors who use the second- or third-person in their memoirs” (Ryan 76). This change in perception by “alienation” allows me to shed new light on my life and to draw different conclusions from those I attached to raw memory. My memoir is a narrative reflection of my life, focusing on self-alienation as a way of recognizing personal changes and growth, recognizing the paradigm shift of my thinking and beliefs. The understanding and recognition allows me to cherish but also to let go of my past and to embrace what my life will offer me. My memoir is an artifact of this process. In other words, I take apart pieces of me and put it back together for me to understand.

My stories also welcome readers to come up with their own connections and meanings. Hence, written in the second person “you,” my memoir invites a kind of intimacy with the reader by inferring that “you” is, in fact, more universal. Ultimately, the memoir creates alienation for the purpose of becoming more intimate with the world and myself.

When I began putting all of my stories from hundreds of files from my computer into one document, I came across a story about my conversation with my mother. It seemed somewhat immature and irrelevant. It was a stupid argument about me not talking enough.

“Wow, some of my stories are pointless.” I told my old chemistry lab partner, now a very close friend. She was sitting next to me editing her film for her major course. “I was so different back then. Out this story goes.”

“Why?” She asked before I could press the delete key.

“Well, honestly, no one would really want to read this. There is not much that this story does.”

She shook her head. “No. I remember that this was one of the three short stories that you were willing to share with me. Since you rarely let people read your work, why did you share this one with me at the time?”

I shrugged. “I was frustrated at the time.”

“Keep it.” She ordered. “If it was important to you before, it will still be important.”

I put it somewhere along page 30. Then, after editing and a new draft, it became my introduction.

Composing is art. It takes skill and it takes polishing. A lot of polishing.

Since this memoir is really a book about the acceptance of myself through my memories, writing about memories comes with a few tricks. If you get too caught up in memories, and if you are a tired college student, these memories become increasingly jumbled and turn into strange dreams. Also, when you see characters in memories, you do not always see names—names are history or documentary; I see them as a gestalt of feeling-laden memories—that’s who they are. And that’s how I describe them—which maintains the originality, the freshness, of my memories. For example, I remember a girl who I once taught sign language at a youth group at my old church as “bubbly,” not as someone named so-and-so—because most of my memories of her are where she was bubbly. Characters in

my memoir do not have names, because in my memories, what they are and what they do is more important than their names—and the focus is not always who they are but what they are to me. The challenge of this memoir was to organize these memories where they make sense without confusing characters and the timeframe that they exist in. I wrote associatively, but bent them to a roughly chronological timeline to benefit the cohesive sense of my life's progress.

My memoir is a work in progress because as I let my life unfold in its own unique, surprising ways, it still takes work for me understand how I change, my role, and my impact on this life. I am humbled by seeing how much I changed because if I did not see how I could change before, how could I know how much more I will change in the future? This again becomes another theme—a universal experience where everyone is a work in progress. In this memoir, I also present subtext because often it takes work to understand the meaning or the impact the subtext has on the story, and it leaves room for new interpretations.

As a creative writing Honors Capstone project, writing this memoir was as much academic as it was personal. First, I allow you, the reader, to become personal with me... for just a fraction, maybe.

~ You, the author

Memoir: A Work in Progress

- 1 -

Talk to me, your mother says to you in the kitchen. You are sitting on a stool at the island counter responding to your college emails on your laptop.

You are only home for a few days for the entire summer. You don't have much time with your parents—only ten days in the whole year—but you don't know what to say.

Okay, you close your laptop. What do you want to talk about?

What's going on with you? You are so secretive these days. She waves her hand in the air.

You look at your mom. But there's nothing exciting about me to share with you. I'm doing well in school, same old. The student organizations are just the same, nothing new since I last talked to you. I don't have much free time, so there's nothing much for me to say.

Do you still drink? she asks.

Alcohol? You pause, divided on whether to act as if alcohol isn't the first word you associate with her "drink" or to act as if she is asking the obvious.

I'm not going to lie. I still drink sometimes.

See, that's the point. It all starts with one drink. You are going astray and now I feel like I don't know you any more.

You sigh. Here you go again.

Mom, it is not like I'm letting myself get out of control. It is not like I've changed because of alcohol. I'm still the same person. I'm still getting all A's and I'm very involved with student organizations. I have four jobs. I'm not falling astray like you put it.

No. You are not... you are not the same person. You are letting alcohol change you. You don't talk any more. You are cold, silent, and that is not the point. I'm worried about your soul—what you are doing to yourself, your body, and your mind. You used to be so warm, and now you never talk any more. You talk with your friends on email all of the time and have nothing to say to me? She crunches up her lips, a telltale sign that she is ready to cry.

That's the point. I don't have much to say and I don't know what you want me to tell you. I've already told you about the things that are important! What else do you want to know? That I am responding to my work emails right now? You don't care about these things!

Don't say that! That's not true! I still do would like to know what you say.

Oh! Okay. So I'm emailing the dean about getting the keys to the office. I am deleting old emails. I want to focus on reorganizing the office for Student Body Government. I checked Facebook to see pictures of my friends, some who are at Ocean City. Big deal to you. What else do you want to know? These aren't enough to make great conversations with you.

She stares at you, her face scrunched and frozen. Her green eyes water.

Still, this is news. At least you can just talk.

You heave a heavy sigh. *You know I can, but I don't want to talk about these things because I know you are going to forget them another day. These aren't a big deal to me, so they shouldn't be a big deal to you too.*

Still! I feel like you are not warm any more. You are so secretive, hiding a lot of things from me, and I feel that I don't know you any more. You are drinking alcohol, damaging your body, mind, and soul. A tear trickles down.

When she cries, you usually hug her—but you don't hug her. You are sick of pleasing people all of the time. She is crying over ridiculous things. You claw your hands against your legs in frustration.

Maybe you've changed after all. Maybe those tears and your annoyance—your resentment—started with one drink.

Just one drink.

~

- 2 -

There in the woods at a tiny clearing is a little pine tree. It is just as tall as you are, around three and a half feet. It is the only little tree in the woods behind your home in Vermont.

You stroke the soft pine needles gently, and your two brothers trot in the clearing, seeing you stroke the tree.

Look, the tree is the same height as me.

Yeah. Your oldest brother says.

Let's build a fort! Your deaf brother says.

You all agree to build the fort around that clearing with the little tree in the center. You go off by yourself, collecting pinecones.

Your brothers find a spool of discarded wires and loop it up in a tree, trying to make a swing-vine. They also find a piece of old porch step with peeling red paint. You flip it upside down to make a miniature bench for you to sit on, facing the little tree.

It should face the tree so we all can watch the tree, like Indians watching a fire in the middle. You tell your brothers. You arrange the pinecones you dumped on the ground to form a perfect circle around the tree.

Okay, this tree is your tree. You will take care of it. They go off exploring some more.

One day, your brothers come back with a kid from a few houses down. He has a clipper with red handles in his hand. He pretends to clip your little tree.

No! You command your brothers.

We know.

You go back to your house. A few minutes later, your deaf brother comes running in. *He cut your tree!*

You run outside, across the back yard, into the woods and then into the little clearing. Your tree is still there, but green part of the top is gone. Three inches gone. Sap oozing into drops already.

You stare in horror.

Two years later, the tree grows a new top and catches up to your height. But, then, one weekend you go to Pennsylvania to visit your deaf grandparents and come back to a different back yard—all of the trees from around forty feet from your backyard clearing are chopped down, the tree trunks capsized and piled in disarray.

You can't see your little tree, right in the middle of the razed forest. You go out with your family to look at the mess.

What about my tree?

Two weeks later, the dying trees are cleared and a bulldozer takes out all of the stumps. Somehow, your little tree survives—scraggly and crooked, but rooted stubbornly in the mud. Pine trees have soft wood, especially young trees.

You plant tiny flowers around the tree and stroke the little pine needles that didn't fall off. You and your brothers pick a different clearing in what is left of the woods for your new fort.

You come in the house with your brothers, flushed.

What did you do? Mom asks you, curious.

We built a wall for our fort! Your oldest brother answers first.

Yeah, it is big and we can spy on the kids next door. They won't be able to see us! Your deaf brother chips in.

We used branches we found in the woods. We didn't destroy anything. Your oldest brother says.

There were some big branches! We used that to hold the smaller branches. Your deaf brother says.

So, now, we have a bench, two walls—one wall is the bed frame we found, remember? A little campfire like the Indians, but no real fire like you told us, and a little secret place where we store our things. Your oldest brother explains.

It is better than the neighbor's fort! He has his in his back yard. Ours is hidden in the forest! Your deaf brother adds.

Your two brothers ask for a drink. Your mother pours three cups of water.

I helped with the wall. You say.

Good! It was a lot of fun, wasn't it? She beams.

You take your cup of water and go back outside. You pour the water by roots of the little tree. You don't talk about the tree, but you visit it every day until you move away a few years later.

~

You take your mother's words and go up to your bedroom with your laptop.

Your mother is left downstairs without a hug. The bedroom you are in has your furniture, but it is not your bedroom. This is your parents' new house that they built while you were away in college eight hours away.

There is no little tree in your backyard.

You don't really know what to think. You are lost. You are not even sure who you are, and you are not sure of what you are doing, too. Yes, you love where you are at now—in college—but to explain yourself, you only have good words, not sentences.

You take out your box of colored pencils and try to draw something, but you are not in the mood. You draw because when you can, it feels good. While people see a rose on paper, you see how your eyes works with your hand—imperfect, beautiful, yourself.

Your doodles look like shit. You don't know what you are supposed to draw. You shove the pencils back in the cardboard box and put it back in the drawer.

You open some folders on your laptop. You come across several unfinished stories. *Stupid stories*. You think. They are evidence of your failures. Good or not, they are incomplete—like you, maybe.

~

You wonder what you will tell people if they ask you where you are from. You could say that you were born in Florida, spent your childhood in Vermont, grew up in New York, and then went to a deaf school in western New York, seven hours away from home.

But since everything changed in the past four years... you are not sure. Your deaf parents moved to where you go to college, but you transferred to DC before they finished building their house.

Since you are deaf, people often ask what school did you grow up going to. They almost always react in shock when you say *home schooled*. They ask about your social life. You justify with more details, saying that you were mainstreamed for the first few years in Vermont, and there was a deaf program where there were other deaf kids who signed. Then, you would add that you are able to talk—so sometimes if hearing people were cooperative, you would be friends with them, too. But, your best friends were your two older brothers, the oldest hearing and the second deaf—or some people from church. Then, you have to add that you went to a deaf school for your last two years of high school, where you got deaf friends.

Still, that doesn't tell *what* or *where* you are *from*. What are you?

People say that you seem rich with a nice, big home in an expensive neighborhood, especially with a deaf dad being the only breadwinner. You are rich. People say that you seem really smart since you skipped a grade in high school, graduating with high honors. Several people also used the fact that you once memorized the entire books of Romans and James in the Bible to justify that you are smart. You are smart. Oh, and a girl who was head-over-heels for your oldest brother once told you that you are a heartbreaker; being cute, smart, friendly, and especially charming with your blonde hair and green eyes. You are handsome.

Fuck them. None of these define you. But... who are you?

~

- 3 -

You are constantly haunted by them, but they are just ghosts in your eyes, real in others'.

They are alive and breathing. They love you so much, or not at all. Either way, they are distant.

You close your eyes and move your fingers across the laptop keyboard. *Type what your heart tells you.*

A vast white space comes into your head. Your late grandfather's face materializes, but as you search for something more, you are lost in the white space again. You don't know if it is cold or hot, if the light is coming from below or above, or if you can feel anything. Peace or fear.

Your fingers dance on the keyboard in pure memory; you don't know the individual letters you are typing, only the memories that had become your instinct. Your fingers cannot stretch to the delete key, or the backspace key.

Suddenly, your eyes jerk open. Your heart lurches as a person in gray dissipates at the foot of your bed. A figment of your memories lurking in your dimly lit dorm room.

Memories cling; memories you believe have made you.

~

- 4 -

First place is gold. Second place is silver. Third place is bronze. Gold is pure and the most precious metal.

But you like silver. It looks pure and light, almost mirror-like, icy. It goes really well with snow. It may place second. Maybe that's why it's so humble.

The silver colored pencil rests unsharpened next to dark grey, French grey, cool grey, warm grey, slate grey, white, and of course, gold and bronze. All of them are sharpened except for the silver colored pencil.

~

Do you see him? Your mother points at you, looking at your two older brothers. *He has so much patience.*

You are sitting cross-legged with your chin in your hands, waiting for your mom's full attention. She is resolving a fight between your two brothers in your oldest brother's bedroom. They are all on the carpet with toys cluttered around.

Your brother makes a face and says, *He's four years old and he's passive. That's why he's perfect.*

You sit cross-legged with your chin in your hands, waiting quietly for mom as she teaches your brothers a lesson.

~

The lapping of water in the pool is reflecting the hot sunlight, making you squint your eyes. You are looking across your floating belly—nice, round, and babyish. You are three years old.

You see your little toes, too, all ten of them are barely out, your last ones bobbing under and above the little waves.

You wave your hand to get your mother's attention, spraying water across your face. You wipe the water out of your eyes and bend your head as much as you can to see your mom sitting by the poolside—on one of those gaudy colored vinyl-strapped pool chairs.

She looks at you, squinting her eyes against the dancing lights.

Look at my toes, I'm floating good! You sign, knowing that floating with your toes showing is the most proper way to float.

Your mother nods. *That's right, good for you!* She smiles.

~

You stomp around the yard, marching in your new boots. You accidentally squish on your dog's poop.

Your throat knots up as you show the boots to your parents. They exclaim their disgust.

What did I tell you about watching out for dog poop?

The boots are on the top shelf in the garage. Being a little three-year old, you cannot reach them. They seem so far up.

You never ask for them back—or you don't remember seeing them again—and your terrifying guilt is justified. You deserve to lose the boots you didn't care for.

~

You put your long, white blanket over your head.

Girl! Your brothers yell at you, pointing an accusing finger to your head.

You shake your head. *Nope!*

Girl! They accuse again. But the blanket stays draped over your head, resting gently on your shoulders like your mom's hair did.

No.

You look like a girl! They persist.

Your mother comes toward the three of you as you stubbornly say, *No.*

Don't call him that. She says. *It is mean and not nice.*

Your two brothers look a bit ashamed, but your middle brother persists. *But he has his blanket on his head and looks like a girl!*

Still, Mom frowns. *He is a boy and you know that. Offending him like that might make him feel like a girl when he grows up, but he is a boy. Understand? So don't do that.*

They both nod. You still don't understand.

What? You ask your oldest brother.

The room becomes hazy with white fog, fading your memory. You don't see conversations, but only understand certain things: calling boys 'girls' is not nice, and boys can become girls when they grow up, and that is a sin.

You remember only one thing clearly: you are different.

~

The silver colored pencil is sharpened last. Seventy-two colored pencils are now sharpened. Some are already sharpened to half of their original size. You take the silver colored pencil and study it. *PC 949* is embedded on the side in gold.

The smell of graphite and wax is fresh in your nostrils. The fanned flakes of cedar lie on your desk, shaved off from the pencil.

~

- 5 -

Being second is the worst. You spend time thinking that you could've been first. Getting bronze is better. You spend time in joy that you made it to the top three. Getting the gold is best. You know that you are number one. See? It's always the gold and the bronze winners that smile the biggest.

The tip breaks.

~

It is there—recorded on the old home video.

You are in the football line-up with your brothers, cousins, and the dads. You are wearing your slate grey sweater with a teal turtleneck underneath. Your cheeks are flushed.

Ready, set, hut!

The cousins scurry on the golden, grassy field, trying to get the football. Your uncle tosses the football across the small space of land, and your cousin grabs it in front of you. He shoves you down easily, but you get up quickly and chase after him in fury—and it is too late.

Touchdown!

They give him high fives and pats on the shoulder.

Come on! Next time, just tackle him, okay? Better defense next time. Your dad tells you.

My son is younger than him, your uncle points at you laughing to your dad, *and he made the touchdown!*

Play smart. Be tough. Okay? Says Dad to you.

They begin forming new teams for another game. The uncle ignores you completely. You wander off into the field where grasses are long and not mowed. You pick wildflowers—white, purple, silvery blue, along with some yellow dandelion and red hawkweed. The flowers form a large bouquet in your little fists.

I'm gathering flowers for mom. You nod your little head to the camera, your tangled tufts of white-blonde hair bouncing in sync with the flowers. Then, you wander off in the opposite direction, exploring for different flowers, aiming for the rocks by the creek that look almost silver.

The camera remains focused on the football game.

~

It is there—in your brother's high-school girlfriend's bedroom.

A bouquet of pink, red, and white roses made of folded construction paper with dark green pipe cleaner stems rests in a glass vase. A little pink heart entwined with the bouquet declares that it is from you. You can see your name in little handwriting at the bottom.

I remember when you gave it to me during your junior year in high school... I thought it was odd and yet so sweet of you to make flowers for all of the girls in our class.

Yeah? That's when I had the time to make them.

Seriously, it must have been over a hundred folded roses, wasn't it? It meant a lot to some of us.

You smile. *Well, you obviously still take good care of it after all these years.*

I don't understand why your mom doesn't like flowers.

You look at your flowers on her nightstand, nothing close to being as real as natural flowers, but at least they last longer. Much longer.

The last time you saw her was during your fourth year of college, when she broke up with your brother. You would like to believe the flowers are still there in her bedroom.

~

It is right there—drawn on a piece of fax paper.

A beautiful wild rose poised in over twenty shades of pink and red—you pause and twirl the crimson red colored pencil with your finger in the air, studying the rose. It is complete. The thorns are colored with several shades of brown.

Do roses really have thorns?

Yes. Many stores trim the thorns off when they sell them. Mom replies.

Really? You say. Why?

Why? Well, people don't want to be pricked by roses.

These thorns are perfect, smooth and curling up to sharp points, their tips colored with a little red and green. For some reason, you feel fascinated and connected with the thorns.

People shouldn't clip the thorns off. One time when you snapped a thorn off, the blooming rose suddenly seemed incomplete. Beauty is to be embraced.

~

The cedar tip has a gaping hole in the middle with a ragged bottom of silver graphite. You grapple the pointy, broken piece of graphite between your fingernails and try to shade the paper. It is difficult. You make several lines instead.

Futile.

You toss the little piece in a tin waste bucket. You hear a metallic bounce.

You take the blue sharpener out and twist the pencil in it. The cedar shaves off, flaking out long pieces in the tin waste bucket.

The jarred edge of the fissure becomes the uneven tip. You sharpen some more, making the tip smooth, pointy and sharp, ready to color some more.

~

- 6 -

I want to bake cookies, you say to your mom one August afternoon.

Oh, okay. Sure! What kind of cookies would you like to bake?

Chocolate Chip, our favorite, and I want to give them to our neighbors.

Really? That's nice of you. Which neighbor?

All of them on this street.

All?

Yes.

That's a lot... and very nice of you. Why, though?

To show them love. God said to love your neighbors, right?

Oh. Yes, that's right.

She leans down to hug you, and she helps you with gathering the ingredients. You mix the batter and you are careful not to lick too much of it. Like your mom said before, the more batter you eat, the fewer cookies you will have.

You want a lot of cookies for your neighbors.

You are eight years old and responsible enough to use the kitchen oven, so you bake all six-dozen cookies by yourself. You count the cookies as they lie on the cooling rack.

Perfect. Just like grandma's recipe said, "yields six-dozen cookies."

It is the only time ever that you baked the exact amount. You eagerly place the cooled cookies on paper plates, making sure that every family on the street will get enough cookies to feed everyone fairly. The couple across the street has three kids, so they get ten cookies on their plate. The couple that lives next to the family has no kids, so they get six. After all of the organizing, you end up with ten Saran-wrapped paper plates full of cookies.

You go to your desk in the schoolroom and take out the drawing box full of markers and colored pencils. On little pieces of folded paper, you write down with the sienna-brown colored pencil:

Thank you for being a wonderful neighbor. Enjoy the cookies!

You decorate the edges of the little card with green and red, your favorite colors. You also add a smiley face to the cards.

By yourself, you go to each house and give them their plate of cookies. You can talk, but you are not yet confident with your speech, so you simply say:

I made this and it's for you.

The neighbors react differently. Some of them smile and say thanks. Some of them are surprised and say that you didn't have to make them cookies. Some of them say something, but you don't understand—either they didn't speak clearly enough or it is hard to read their lips.

After each house, you go back home and get the next plate of cookies to deliver.

For the next two years before you move away, they smile and wave to you every time they see you, but nothing more. You love them, and that makes you happy.

~

You clear up the dinner table, taking your guests' plates as well.

Oh, why, thank you! Your guests say.

In the photo of you clearing the table that night, you were probably around eleven years old. A shock of blonde hair combed to the right side of your head, eyes of innocence, a faint smile, and skin fair and smooth, contrasting with a favorite dark blue and green sweater. The sweater has a silver stripe dividing the blue and the green across the chest. The photo was taken by the lady guest, and at the end of the table, you see her husband, your dad, and your oldest brother sitting. Your mom is in the back—in the kitchen, and was also looking at the camera with an unexpected smile on her face. On the green kitchen countertop is a Carvel ice cream cake box.

Sit down, have some ice cream cake with us!

You smile. You take a large slice for yourself, and throughout dessert you focus on getting every little piece of the cookie crumble that fell out of the middle of the cake. Your guests and your family carry on conversations, and you just manage to keep up. You don't really have anything to say.

Your plate is empty. You help yourself to a second slice—a smaller slice this time.

After you finish your ice cream cake, you clear up the table once again.

You are such a good person, aren't you? You are so sweet. They tap you on your shoulder.

You look through the photos, flipping them to the back. You pause at the one where you are in the guests' house in Tennessee. You are sitting on the couch holding some cards in your hands. Again, the lady took the photo, so it is just you and her husband in the picture, your smile frozen.

You remember playing the card game called, "You Lie," which years later you found out is otherwise known as "Bullshit." You remember laughing uncontrollably when you could read the lying face on the woman, yelling, *You lie*, with narrowed eyes, and having her look at you in astonishment and trying to trick you once again.

You remember the 14-hour drive with a stop at Hershey Park, where the couple paid for everything. You remember staying at their home for a week, as if to make up for seven or eight years of not seeing you. They were family friends, and they had a daughter who babysat you before. You barely remember her, mostly knowing her as your mom described her—loving and so willing to learn sign language for you and your deaf brother. You remember packing your textbooks and doing school on the road and at their house, being home schooled gave you that flexibility. You remember surprising their daughter—the babysitter—by knocking on her door, pretending to sell some Hershey chocolates to fundraise for some made-up cause. You remember going out to play miniature golf, visiting an old village, and even helping out with the cooking. You remember tasting crepes for the very first time. These were great times that they gave you.

Oh, yes, you remember.

You, again! I promised I would listen to hear the dishes clink in the morning. I was going to run out in my pajamas and put them away for you! The lady flails her arms and shakes her head, but smiling adoringly. She looks at the empty dishwasher in defeat, everything put away.

I guess you are deaf when you sleep! You grin.

No, I think you were being extra quiet. She shakes her head again.

You knew that was true. You picked the plates from the dishwasher as carefully as you would pick the wishbone from the man in the *Operation* game. You shrug, pleased that you could do something in return for their hospitality.

Your mother was right. She points a finger at you. *You are an angel.*

You shuffle to the side then back, smiling as an automated response. You've never received praise this extreme.

Mom doesn't call me an angel.

Oh! The woman quickly puts her hands to her mouth, and then sighs. *Well, your mother said that to me, and I believe her.*

You smile awkwardly, studying her eyes to see if she was stretching the truth.

She says that when you came along, she never had to worry about you. You never caused problems. You were such an easy baby. You were always so good. After two children, you are a blessing. Like an angel.

Now you really don't know what to say.

~

You sharpen your colored pencils frequently. The silver colored pencil becomes smaller each time you shade a piece of paper. The shaved cedar continues to fall into the tin trashcan. The silver graphite gets broken again. Again.

You toss the pieces into the tin trashcan. Smaller, smaller it gets, but slowly. The pink colored pencil gets smaller rapidly, but the pastel colors are not used as much. The vibrant reds are used most often. The white colored pencil isn't white anymore, smeared with pink stains from shading the red hues.

~

Two weeks later, you finish a clock made out of wormwood maple. You cut all of the pieces yourself, including the fluting and sanding. It is varnished to perfection, capturing the beauty of the wood grain. You wrap the clock with bubble wrap and send it to them. You pop a bubble before wrapping the clock. You enclose a hand-made card thanking them for their hospitality.

They were the first family you lived with for a week by yourself—without your family.

They respond with a nice letter, saying that they put the clock in the guest bedroom—the bedroom where you slept for the week. Your presence is still in their house.

You feel them as you see the stained glass figurine of an angel on the window still, the grandfather clock chiming in the other room. Your mom and grandma are washing the dishes in the sink. Instead of helping, you stare back at your laptop thinking of what to type.

~

- 7 -

No. Don't kiss me on the lips. On my cheek is okay.

Why?

Because I am your father. I am a man. Kissing mom is okay, but not me.

Oh.

Yes. I love you. Good night. Sleep well.

I love you, too.

~

The tip of the silver colored pencil is blunt. You sharpen it again. You want bold lines.

~

Not much later, the uncle who bragged about his son beating you at football kissed his son—your cousin of the same age—right on the lips. You are seven years old.

~

You submit the rose drawing to a magazine to see if they will select yours among some others to be published in a magazine. Two months later, it is there, your picture along with your name and age. The picture is barely over an inch wide in the magazine, but the thorn is still visible.

You look at your mother in astonishment and show the magazine page to your dad when he gets home. They congratulate you warmly and tell your grandparents about it on the teletypewriter phone, the TTY.

The uncle comes up to Vermont for Christmas with his family. He takes out his video recorder and signs about some highlights of the year of the family. Soccer accomplishments, basketball accomplishments, job promotions, political highlights... and your drawing in the magazine.

Surprised, you blush.

~

You open your box of colored pencils and look at them. Simple sticks of cedar and graphite. You look at the drawing.

Beautiful. You say to yourself.

~

You and your deaf brother share the same bedroom. You both recently rearranged the room, your bed against the wall and his paralleled to the windows, leaving a big play space in the middle. Your foster sister lives with you, too, and she is terrified of sleeping alone in the bedroom that was once the guest bedroom.

Instead of the queen-sized bed, she sleeps on the cot propped up next to your bed, in the middle of the room. She is nine years old—a year older than you—and scared. She is scared of the shadows, birthday candles, dogs, crows, strange men, bikes, showers, kitchen ovens, PG movies.

And she is scared to sleep alone on the cot.

Can I sleep with you?

No. Your brother says. *Ask him.* He points to you.

Can I sleep with you?

You had often helped her with her homework. She learned how to spell “bird” today. It was a cute blue bird in the picture book. There was no silver in the book, though, only you. You had helped pick out her outfit for school. You had watched her brush her teeth as she watched you how you brushed your teeth. Now, can you help her sleep?

Ok.

She crawls into bed with you. You help her with the covers. Her frizzy red hair takes up most of the pillow, so you move a little closer to the wall to give her space.

She moves in a bit closer.

I'm still scared.

Her hand wraps around your little arm and snuggles closer to you.

No. Stay there. You manage a small gap in between.

Then, the lights are turned on.

Your mom comes into the room, shaking her head. She explains carefully to your sister that she needs to give you space. She needs to sleep on the cot, or else she has to be moved back to the guest bedroom.

No! She panics, but after your mom tells her that she can learn to sleep by herself, she goes back to her cot, only three feet away, and tries to get under the covers. Your mom smooths out the blankets over her.

Sleep well, and stay in your beds. Good night.

The lights are flicked off, but, after a bit, you can see her clearly in the dim glow of the night light in the hallway. She is watching you.

There is nothing you can do. You nod and, after a little while, fall asleep.

~

You draw silver hearts on a blank, white paper. You stare at it for a while. There is a big heart in the middle with many little hearts around it. Something is still missing, though. With your eyes, you measure the gaps of white spaces. Some of them are long, too far away from each other.

You look at the colored pencil box. You see seventy-one colored pencils, all still neatly lined up.

You take the blue colored pencil out of the box. It is already half the size of the silver colored pencil. You add blue swirls, almost like drifts of air. The hearts look like they are flying... all but the big heart.

Something still seems wrong. The big heart looks too heavy to fly. Maybe it is because it is shaded too darkly. Too much silver. You are not sure.

~

The foster sister moved the following year to a residential school. Many years later, your mom brings up your foster sister and talks about what it was like raising her for a year.

Mom, what was I like when I was a baby?

Oh, she replies quickly. You were so easy. You are always content. You didn't cry much. You were always smiling. You weren't demanding. Yeah, it was easy with you.

But that's the same as the other two, weren't they like me?

Well, remember one had a hernia, so he always cried when he was picked up. We didn't know what was wrong, and it was challenging at times. Your oldest brother was our first child, so naturally we were new to being parents.

She always believed in equal love. No favoritism. No one was particularly better than the other.

~

Looking at the white screen, you suddenly remember her giving chocolates to your oldest brother, holding out her hand, the chocolate smeared all over her hand. Melted.

He got angry. He didn't want melted chocolate chips. She shouldn't hold them so tightly in her hand.

You also remember her trying to learn how to ride the bicycle with two training wheels. While she was on her bike, you zipped past her on yours—with no training wheels. Somehow, she managed to fall off her bike... even with the extra wheels.

She was crying.

You gasp in disbelief. You remember what you felt. The feeling flashed only for a second.

Resentment.

~

You shade the paper lightly with the silver colored pencil. Next, you take the white colored pencil and color over the silver. The blanket of snow has some shadows. It stands out in the soft blue-grey sky.

Pure snow. Metallic hint, but more grey. It is not enough. It cannot look like real snow. It hurts that you can't draw a perfect picture.

~

- 8 -

The McDonald worker hands you an extra burger.

I didn't order this, you begin to say. But your oldest brother takes it from your hand.

They will just throw it out. Keep it.

But I won't eat it. Do you want it?

No. I'm full, but I don't want it thrown away.

Okay, so... what are we doing with this? Give it away? you ask.

Yes. Why not? Let's find someone to give this to.

You and your brother walk down a busy street in Denver, going back to the convention center where you are competing in Nationals for the high-school sign language performance group.

But, right now, you see a homeless person sitting by a newspaper stand, staring out at the street. She is wearing a tattered, blue windbreaker and a dirty, white ski hat. The little cart in front of her holds a few jackets and a sleeping bag.

Give it to her. you say.

Your brother offers her the burger, still wrapped in the fast-food paper. She takes it.

The stained brown smile on her face is priceless—the best feeling in the entire week.

Later that night, twenty-two thousand people would watch you and three other guys—two of them your brothers—perform the winning song. Everyone will always remember the win.

~

You find the paper crumpled from books inside your desk. The silver hearts gleam in the light as you straighten the paper. The big silver heart has a little crease, the silver rubbed off. Faded.

~

Dandelions. There are a million of them in your grassy yard. You take a break from your 7th grade home school science and set out with a dirty white bucket and your little weed puller tool.

You stick the weed puller tool into the ground and fork the dandelion's root. You push it down, and the roots are jerked out—its exposed, pale, hard roots speckled with earth. You dump the little plant into the bucket.

You repeat the process a hundred times, and your fingernails are blackened with dirt. The dirty white bucket is filled with dandelions, the yellow flowers limp in defeat.

Sweat drips down into the soil. You wonder if your sweat is too salty to nourish the grass.

Five hours and over seven buckets later, you finally decide that you've done enough for the day. Your dad never specifically asked you to pull the dandelions.

Your family convenes for dinner.

Your brothers talk about current events, the future, robots, inventions, possible businesses, lawn projects like building stone walls or ponds, tractors, snowmobiles, boats, friends, school... and more. You watch them talk.

None of you talk about the dandelions.

Five years later, during your first year of college, you and your family visit your old home. There are dandelions growing in the lawn.

Nobody says anything.

You start to wonder. *Is a dandelion a flower or a weed?*

~

While you can try to sharpen carefully, none of the colored pencils will be as perfect as in pictures. The tips are never evenly sharpened, jagged in their own way. Some particles of graphite of some colored pencil stick to the glossy surfaces of other colored pencils.

~

- 9 -

The teenagers are gathered outside after Youth Group on Friday. The gym was officially converted from worship and service into a basketball game. Music is blaring from one end, too, so outside is the escape for quiet and air for many.

In circles, they chatter, laugh, and do whatever hearing people do. Your brothers and their signing friends are all gone. They went to college or to a deaf school, leaving you on your own, a deaf home-school freshman.

You wander to the bathroom and drink water from the water fountain—something to look busy. You eat pizza even though you are not hungry and pretend to watch the basketball game. You sit down in a chair, observing the gym.

A bubbly girl you know who has a crush on you taps you on the shoulder. *Come outside and join us! Come!*

Sure, okay! You go back outside and join the group of girls chattering by the curb of the parking lot.

They are laughing at a joke. The bubbly girl tells a story. The only thing you understand is that her dad is also in the story. The girls exclaim in unison. You laugh along, wishing that they could speak slower or more clearly so you could understand.

I'll be right back, you tell them. You go to the bathroom and get a drink of water.

You take a while, reading what the church posted on the bulletin boards. The girl finds you.

Hey! Just wondering where you went.

Oh, I had to use the bathroom.

Okay, so what do you want to do?

You hesitate. *Practice on your sign language?*

Aw, I suck at sign language.

Well, with practice you will be wonderful!

Ahh. Okay... Outside?

The two of you go outside, and since it is dark to see, you pick a spot under the light by the door. The both of you sit down on the grass and you begin reviewing the ABC's and basic signs like *you* and *they*.

Ah! I can't! She exclaims as she tries to do a "k."

You can. It is the same as "p" just facing upwards instead of downwards.

She giggles. *PK! PK! KP! KP!* She signs over and over again, laughing.

You don't have much choice but to grin.

Two other girls walk past you and talk to the girl. They start a conversation, and you don't understand a thing. They laugh. Talk. Argue. Tease. There is no sign of the conversation's end. You watch them. Laugh. Talk. Tease.

Your mom picks you up from Youth Group about an hour later.

How was Youth Group, she asks.

Great. I talked with some friends and taught some sign.

That's wonderful. I am glad you have good Christian fellowship.

Yes. You nod.

~

That fall, you skip a grade and enroll at the deaf school where your deaf brother goes—a school seven hours drive from your home. You are a junior and fifteen years old.

The light flashes, signaling the end of the lunch period. You and your friends leave the cafeteria, walking the salt-stained pavement back to the main building. The wet snow coating the ground trickles into tiny streams of water onto the pavement.

A senior packs a ball of snow in his hand. He thrusts it into a girl's face.

Be careful. We're not supposed to throw snow, remember, you warn him as you walk past.

So what?

You ignore him.

SPLAT!

Cold, wet snow clings to your hair and ear, some of it trickling down your neck and under your shirt.

You freeze. *Okay... then!* You scoop down quickly, taking a handful of snow and flicking it at the guy, shaking your head good-naturedly.

I saw that! the supervisor flails, coming from nowhere. She grabs your shoulder. *You! Why would you violate the rules? I didn't expect a person like you to do this.*

He threw snow at me, so I just threw it back!

Well, I only saw you throw the snow. I will have to report this.

The guy walks past you. *OWNED*, he sneers, shoving his hand against your shoulder. He shakes his head and laughs, turning away to talk with his friends.

I didn't mean...

Another guy—a sophomore—makes a face at you. *Oh just suck it up. Just accept that you threw the snow, too.*

You go to speech therapy class right after. You sit in the chair, face frozen.

What's wrong? your speech teacher asks you.

Nothing.

It doesn't look like nothing. Are you sure?

Your throat burns and you break down crying.

Why can't people understand that I intended to be good? I just tried to be good-natured about it and tossed this little handful of snow. Now they think I am one of the bad guys. Why do they have to try to pull me down? They can be good, too... but they just don't get it. I feel like I am all by myself. They just don't care, and they have to give me a hard time. He told me to suck it up, and I try. It is so hard...

You don't want to be in speech therapy.

~

A snowflake may be unique, but no one cares. No one sees. You are one with the blanket of snow, melting into tiny streams of water, polluted with salt and dried up, just like your tears.

~

Your silver colored pencil is dirty with pieces of blackened rubber from the eraser. You brush the eraser particles away. The outside isn't as shiny as it once was, but the inside is still just as silver as ever. You press it against the white paper, but the tip breaks off. Maybe the cedar is too dry and the graphite too soft.

~

- 10 -

Mentoring became your first internship, established for you by your high school principal. You are all set for senior internship.

You are good with kids, aren't you? We need good mentors for kids in the early childhood program. There is this one student, and we can't identify yet why he is really quiet and really shy, and we are concerned that he might be getting behind his peers. I think you will be wonderful to mentor him, just to play and talk with him and to help him build skills to participate and to understand what is going on in class. He's really sweet. You will love him.

He is little. Shy. He has long, curly, brown hair and big brown eyes with long eyelashes. He could look like a girl, but his shirt is decorated with men and motorcycles.

That's him?

Yes, just give yourself time to get comfortable with him before playing games with him. Try playing the educational games and see how he picks it up.

What does he like to do, anyway?

Well, he doesn't seem to have a specific favorite, but he does play in the kitchen a lot and he loves to draw.

Really? That seems like me when I was little.

Really? Well, I suppose you are a fitting mentor already! She taps you on your elbow reassuringly. We hope you can help him catch up.

After a bit of observing, you finally ask the supervisor of the Early Childhood program, *Why is his hair long?*

That's his and his family's choice.

~

You count all of the colored pencils that you have and put them back in the box, sideways so that the tips are on the side. You put the little colored pencils, the ones that have been sharpened most often, on the top of the stack and some in the small space between the long colored pencil tips and the box.

The box is your cardboard box from childhood with pink, yellow, and purple geometrical patterns. It has stickers of little unicorns and roses all over. The scissors, sharpener, and some pens are in your brother's similar box, but with blue, red, and yellow space patterns, decorated with stamps with pictures of rescued seals. Now, both boxes are yours.

You wonder why you ever put the unicorns and roses on your box. It's a bit embarrassing.

~

Are you gay?

The middle school kid you barely know is standing right in front of you. Her carrot hair accentuates her large, blue eyes, which are staring right into you. You are standing right outside of the recreational room near the dorms, under the lamppost as snow falls softly. Here, no staff would see your conversation.

You laugh confusedly. *No. Why do you ask?*

I was just wondering. Curious.

What makes you think like this to ask?

Well, it is just that some kids said that you are and I wanted to know for sure.

Really? Well, that isn't true.

Well, one of my friends. He keeps saying that you are. She says his name.

Him? He is mainstreamed... He doesn't even come to school here. Besides, I am a senior and he is what, 8th grade? How would he even know to begin with?

I don't know, she says quickly. I just know that he is saying that you are gay.

Okay. Whatever, just don't listen to that kid. He has no right. It is really stupid of him.

This is the first rumor you learn about you being gay. You shake your head and go in the recreational room. Inside, feel really annoyed—really annoyed, and you keep wondering why you seem gay.

~

You put the box of colored pencils away in the desk. You are busy, but when you have the time you can easily take the box out again.

~

- 11 -

Peacock Blue PC 1072 goes well with silver. It is the only colored pencil you remember having and cannot find.

~

You whisper in your best friend's ear. *When I grow up, I'll marry you.*

You, both five years old, are sitting on the sofa in the family room, and you don't realize that your whisper is loud enough for a hearing person to hear in the adjoining kitchen.

I heard you. Your best friend's mom adoringly smiles at you.

Heard what? You grin. You look at your best friend, inches away from your grasp and clutching her teddy bear.

You told my daughter that you'll marry her! She pauses and tilts her head. *You are so cute.*

You cannot think of an excuse. You blush.

You're too young, but when you're older, you can. This is so cute.

You nod.

~

I want to see, the new girl asks.

You blink. *Ok.*

She takes your hand and pulls you to the floor of the van, in the back so your mother and brothers won't see from the front. It is easy to hide, being a small five year-old.

Ok, she signs.

You pull down your pants and white underwear. Your little thing sticks out. She touches it with her fingers. She giggles.

You pull up your pants just in time before your brother peers from the front and asks what you are doing.

Nothing, you say.

You realize that you prefer to be with the girl who you want to marry. She doesn't make you lie and feel horrible.

~

You are playing a game on the family room floor. Your nine year-old friend's pretty sister, who is 11 years old like you, is also playing with you.

Do you like me?

She bats her long eyelashes and gives a slow grin. *Yes*, she speaks.

Your friend and your deaf brother are playing a video game, their backs facing you. You glance to the kitchen and see the girl's father talking with your parents, their backs facing you.

You inch closer, but you both never kiss. Her dad calls out to his children that it is time to go.

~

You are sitting close to your best friend in church, her blue blouse barely touching your shirtsleeves—bringing back the familiar closeness that you've cherished since you were five years old. Only now, there is no teddy bear.

You haven't seen her in over a year, and, since you are sitting at the second pew from the front, facing the interpreter, you wonder if people behind are curious about your friend and her mother—visitors from your old hometown in Vermont seven hours away.

The girl you almost kissed bounds down the aisle of the church to the front. She is dressed differently today. Instead of the typical dress pants, a maroon skirt twirls. Instead of combed-down hair, her hair is beautifully twisted to the side. She even has mascara on. But, she sees your best friend, dressed in her simple blouse and jeans without any make-up, her face radiating happiness, and stops.

Hi! you say.

Oh, hi. She hesitates. *I guess I will sit with my family.* She eyes your best friend again.

This is my best friend from Vermont. You can sit with us. You smile at her and then look at the pew. It is quite full—but everyone could squeeze closer in a little more. There is room.

No, it's okay. I just wanted to say 'hi,' that's all. She smiles sweetly and walks briskly back to where her family usually sits.

~

You count the colored pencils; you only have 63 left. You sigh.

You look at the pictures you've drawn and then you go back to the last drawing when you had blue and silver on the same piece. You check the date you scribbled in the back. This must be around the time you lost the *Peacock Blue PC 1072* colored pencil.

~

You stare at the dancing lights on the edge of the woods outside of your house, the gentle wind rustling the massive trees. The sun is just rising and you can see birds fluttering across the sky. You stay beneath your thin covers, soaking in the morning peace.

It is Monday morning, the day after church with your best friend. She walks in and finds you awake in your room. She takes a seat on your bed, near the window, so you can see her enjoying the view with you.

It's so beautiful, she signs. Can you hear the birds, too?

You take your hearing aids from the nightstand and put them on, and you can hear a faint twitter of birds in the distance.

Yeah, a little, you smile.

It's really beautiful, she says. She stares outside and then looks at you right in the eyes. I don't want to go today, and I probably will never see you again.

Don't be silly. I must see you. You sit up on your bed so your eyes are level with her beautiful blue eyes.

Yeah, but since you moved, I've only seen you twice. And now I'm moving to Iowa. You're not going to see me.

Let's not let that happen, then. You gather her in your arms and hold her tight for a long time. *I'll miss you.*

You both talk about your childhood, and how much you've both changed. She says that life is always going to change, but memories never will. Tears moisten your eyes, and you realize that it is the first time you both cried together not over scrapes and bruises, but in pajamas and bed hair.

Her mother tells you that you are the greatest friend her daughter ever had. They both leave. It is your last time ever seeing her.

~

You open your Facebook account. The first name you type in is her name. She doesn't have Facebook. For the next two years, you keep looking for her. You even ask your mom to call her mom and tell her daughter to get Facebook.

You find out she has to become seventeen first before her parents let her get Facebook, but at least you finally get her text number.

~

You are in the high school computer lab with your girlfriend. Your sidekick vibrates, and you risk a peek. Your deaf school that you are going for your last two years of high school doesn't allow phones during the day. It is a text from your old best friend.

Wow, my old best friend living in Iowa... she's pregnant, you tell your girlfriend.

Seriously? And she's a bit younger than you, right?

You've told her a lot about your old best friend.

She's sixteen. I guess she will be seventeen when she has her baby.

Your girlfriend looks at you. You both, having the reputation as the smartest couple in the entire high school—both of you later valedictorians for your classes—are probably thinking of the same thing. What would happen if you both became a parent?

Who's the father, your girlfriend asks.

Some guy who dumped her after she found out that she's pregnant. That's why she texted me.

Shit.

You never swear, but you can't help but think that you have no better vocabulary to describe what you are feeling.

How do you feel?

I want to be there... she has no one except her family. And like my family, their family is very conservative. I can't imagine what she is going through right now. Gosh, I wish I were there.

And there's no way?

No. She's in Iowa and I've never been to Iowa. I can't ditch school.

So, what are you going to say? Her big, soft, brown eyes look up at you.

I'm going to be there for her through text, I guess, the best I can do.

~

You picture a beautiful drawing, but you don't have your art box with you. You remember a place you haven't looked for your other colored pencils.

~

You are in college. You are doing your homework with a girl you've fallen in love with. You distract yourself with Facebook after you finished homework, waiting for her to finish.

Wow. You get the girl's attention. She's engaged!

Your old best friend?

Can you imagine getting married at eighteen?

No, I can't imagine getting married to my boyfriend now. I'm only eighteen!

Yeah. You think about her email address—she has her boyfriend's last name as her name. Your gut twists, but at least she is spending time doing her homework with you.

Yeah.

You can't help but wonder what your old best friend will say about you hoping to steal her from her boyfriend... now that she seems to see you more than her boyfriend. You wonder if your old best friend would approve.

~

Two years later, you look through her Facebook and can't help but notice the resemblance of the two children with her. She just had another baby, with the man she married a few months before. The children have big beautiful blue eyes, dirty blonde hair, and similar smiles. You wonder what it would be like if you were their dad.

She still texts you if she has a bad day. Sometimes she brings up random memories... like you playing house with couch cushions, blankets, fake flowers that you always brought "home" for her, and the tiny plastic china set.

You are in the bedroom of the girl who loves you—at your second college—and she stops her homework and looks up at you. You show her the pictures of her baby.

Wow, blue eyes.

Yeah, beautiful, you add, looking into the girl's blue eyes.

Married with two children?

Yes, I've always wanted to surprise her by visiting. One day soon, I will.

What about her husband?

What about him?

How would he feel if you visited?

I'm her best friend, not her lover.

The girl who loves you becomes distracted with something else.

You close your laptop, a lingering thought comes to mind: *When I grow up, I'll marry you.*

~

At twenty-one and single, you are spending the summer in Southeast Asia. You are having quite a lousy day. Your old best friend Facebooks you:

Hey there!! I've been thinking about you a lot this last week... Don't know why, you've just been on my mind. I feel like we've lost touch and I never wanted to do that. I hope we can start to get back in touch... text me or email me. I don't want to get out of touch... For most of our lives we were best friends, I don't want to lose that just because we're getting older... I miss you... Hope to hear from you.

~

She's never left Iowa, and you've been all over the world. Yet you can never really be there for her. She can never really be there for you, too. Maybe marriage isn't your thing, too.

Your mind goes white again. Your fingers go limp on the keyboard. You reach for the opened *Chang* Thailand beer and take a swig.

~

- 12 -

The arousing smell billowing onto your face with the warm air from the open window awakens you.

Your eyes are still closed from sleeping, but your senses are suddenly and overwhelmingly keen. You feel the consistent soft hum of the SUV on the highway. The traces of the humidity rush away with the wind on your face, but a bead of sweat nestles on the concave of your chest and abdomen. You feel a cramped muscle behind your right knee. Behind your eyelids, you see and feel the warm glow of the sun, uninterrupted by shadows.

But the smell—the smell that woke you up. Your heart beats a little faster. You feel your heart thrusting itself against your chest, your ribs absorbing the vibration. The aphrodisiac molecules of the smell you know you will always love seeps within you.

You inhale the smell as long as you can. Either your nostrils became numbed to the smell or the molecules stopped flying with the wind, the smell fades. You try to keep remembering the smell, but after a while you pay more attention to the bead of sweat on your chest.

Your eyes open slowly. The driver's arm is hanging out of the window. The wind flaps his black t-shirt. You smell it again—and, damn it, it smells so good. Your head spins a little. The warm blood rushing in your body sends another bead of sweat to your abdomen.

Your throat knots up.

You force yourself to look away from his black t-shirt. The two other passengers, on your right and at the passenger's seat, are reading magazines. The more details you process, the more the memory of the smell stubbornly persists.

You want to escape. You want to leap out into the golden fields that you are passing. You want to stare at the pale blue sky. You want to breathe the clean air. You want to forget that you love the untouchable smell.

You want to forget the internal battle of whether the love you feel is an infatuation or not. You want to forget the nagging question if he loves or could ever love you back.

Everyone is still. Nobody knows you've opened your eyes. You suddenly feel invisible—again.

And that smell just makes you more lost.

You close your eyes, hoping that you will drift back to sleep. You don't want to talk, you want to focus on you being hung-over.

You wonder why you rely on sleep to be your escape.

The smell fades away, and you hope you won't wake up to it again. You tumble back into your dreams.

~

Your brother takes your stuffed bear from you.

Give it back! you whine.

He taunts you.

You pounce on him. Being the shortest and the youngest means you have to resort to biting his arms or grabbing/punching his private area. It works many times.

He punches you.

He *laughs*. At you. The worst thing anybody can do when you are angry.

You run crying to your mother upstairs. You tell her that you bit him and punched him, but you didn't get your bear back.

You know what that means; two wrongs don't make a right. You get a spanking, too.

You are still sobbing as you groan. The last time you lied, you got Tabasco sauce in your mouth. You didn't lie again.

Sorry, you know I love you, but what you did was wrong.

You sniffle. Then suddenly, you clutch your privates and say that you have to go to pee first.

You run into the bathroom, but you are too scared to go.

It has been a while. Your mother frowns.

I need to go but I can't!

You need to come out, soon. After another minute, she takes you out and spansks you with a little wooden rod.

Your pants are suddenly wet with urine.

~

But really, how do you know if the person is the one? You ask your brother's girlfriend from high school. You are sitting with her up on the gym bleachers at your second college.

Well... her hazel eyes sway off to the side.

She does this when she contemplates answers carefully. She is like that, wanting the best answer—an answer that always clarifies rather than confuses.

You know how at weddings you ask the couple how they know they are right for each other?

Yeah?

Well, they reply that you just know. She shrugs. It is true. You just know.

You look directly into her eyes, still wanting more.

But WHAT is that very moment when you know it? When do you realize it? How do you reach that point?

Her eyes gaze over to where your brother is playing on the gym court. Your glance catches him focused in the volleyball game—poised and ready for the serve. Agile.

She hesitates. *I ... it is when you know that person is the person you want to see everyday when you go home.*

Her eyes seems moist, but you can't be sure if it is the dry, heated air reacting with her contacts... or if it is her emotion cracking through. She says she has issues with your brothers, but she knows what she wants. She wants him.

You believe her.

But your brother called it off two days later. You never saw her again.

~

Your Mom tells you that you have to finish your tuna casserole before getting a scoop of ice cream.

Your taste buds tingle for ice cream.

But your Mom tells you that maybe you should try thinking that tuna casserole is like ice cream. It is all in your head.

Your taste buds long for ice cream.

But your Mom tells you that maybe you could hold your nose when eating tuna casserole and then douse the flavor with milk. Chew and swallow. It is really easy, really.

Fifteen years later, it is once again tuna casserole for dinner. You help yourself some to your plate. You fork it and fill your mouth with tuna. It is relatively easy, tastes good, and Mom is proud of you.

You still want ice cream.

~

You really love him. A jolt back to reality—something gray disappears from the side of your desk. You are suddenly staring at this blank, white screen.

~

- 13 -

The winter of your senior year in high school, you tell the girl that, while you like her, you are not sure about a relationship. You are sitting on the swings, your boots scratching through the snow to the brown earth under. It is dark out, and you can only see each other by the light of the park lamps.

You cannot push it, and she understands.

So, after a while, you take some snow in your hands and pack it together. She watches you make the snowball. You look up to her and then smile.

You flick the little ball of snow to her dark and curly hair. She shrieks, and then reacts with a quick grab and throw of snow. Soon, you are chasing each other around the playground in the lamplight, throwing powdered snow at each other. She runs across a stretch where snow covered a trail.

You run after her, your longer legs less hindered by the snow, and pounce at her from behind, tackling her into the snow and under a lamppost. She laughs as she is stuck under you.

You take a little ball of snow on your finger and slowly move it into her face, leaving the snow to melt on her nose. She blows the snow off her nose with her mouth.

You keep your arms over her. Her big, brown eyes meet yours and hold them. You lean in and give her a quick kiss on her lips.

~

You find yourself on top of a hotel balcony in Athens, Greece a few months after the kiss.

You've told her everything. You've told her about your family, about your beliefs, about your perspective on life. You've told her about the pain you've felt. You've told her about your best friend getting pregnant. You've told her how you sometimes you imagine different ways to kill yourself—something you've never told anyone. And, you've told her how much you see in her.

You asked her to be your girlfriend three weeks after your first kiss. She gave you a Hershey kiss, the little paper inside scrawled with YES between every KISSES.

You've kissed her on the airplane to Italy, at the very back in the dark when everyone was sleeping. Then you've kissed her on the overnight ferry from Italy to Greece, while the other students and teachers on the international program trip were sleeping inside. You remember how surprised you were when your tongues explored each other. You thought that people kissed with their lips parted and that the French kiss was just a bizarre thing that people do sometimes.

Now, after not even three months of being a boyfriend, you are on the balcony breaking up with her. Two-thirty in the morning, cars and mopeds below are still honking horns incessantly, louder than the girl's crying.

You feel bound. A part of you wants to hide. A part of you stopped caring so much, and you cannot explain why.

She says that it is her fault. She says that she can be bipolar with her needs. When you don't do the little things that boyfriends generally do, it gets to her, and she overreacts. Some days she doesn't care, but sometimes it really hurts. She shouldn't be bipolar.

No, no. It is not your fault. This is all mine. You cannot explain it, but you know that it is all yours.

You go back to the United States and stay best friends. The school is too small, and besides, she is your first *real* deaf friend.

Five years later, it will really hurt you to see that the two boyfriends after you said similar things when they broke up with her, that it is them who needs to grow and that it is not her fault.

If you could go back and do things differently, you would. Not just for her, but for yourself, too.

Only a month after breaking up, on your senior trip to Cedar Point, a guy you didn't know well shared a bed with you and kissed you in your sleep. He kissed you and kissed the wrong places. You felt like you were having a strange dream. Only after you come do you fully wake. You realize that you are a mess. You see him going to the bathroom in the dark to spit in the sink.

You feel sick. You ask him if he is okay.

He asks, *So, are you gay?*

~

You use several colored pencils every now and then, to draw some sketches. Green. Red. Brown. Blue. Black.

~

The night at Cedar Point doesn't leave your memory, especially at nights.

Then, during your first college Thanksgiving break in the same year, while tucked in your bed, you look out the open door of your bedroom into the hallway dimly lit by a nightlight. Your friend from college staying with you for the break is sleeping in another room. He labels himself bisexual.

You wonder why you let that guy from senior trip play with you like that. You wonder why you went with the flow and why on the second night, you let him touch you again. You didn't like him, anyway. He was a dumb guy. You would normally not think anyone was dumb, but you want to be honest.

Why?

You feel yourself grow under the covers. You take your sidekick and text your friend to see if he is still up.

He is.

He asks you why you are texting him.

You say that you are lonely. Some things are on your mind.

He asks if there is anything that he can do.

You hesitate only for a second and then say that he could come over. Your queen-sized bed seems empty.

A minute later, he comes in the room. He crawls in the bed, shirtless.

Your heart is pounding like crazy, your fingers shaking. You smell the breath mint in his mouth, and then your head goes dizzy.

~

That winter, a year after your first kiss with the girl in the park, one deaf girl from your college asks you:

Why do you always wear polos or nice clothes?

Most of them are hand-me-downs from my brothers, you know.

Still, you can wear t-shirts instead.

I don't have nice t-shirts, and most of them are for pajamas.

That's the point, your friend exclaims. You can just dress down sometimes. Dressing nice all of the time makes you look gay.

This is not the first time you're having this kind of discussion with someone else. You answer the same way:

I've always dressed nice. My entire church dresses nice on Sundays and on Fridays; what is wrong with that? You can call this Christian clothing. It's not gay, and besides, I am NOT gay.

She sighs, I didn't say you ARE gay. Besides, I understand.

~

- 14 -

Orange PC 918 is perfect to color a fire. The brown colored pencils color the wood. Above the fire, you color a little grey and black.

You step back and study the picture. At the last minute before you decide it is finished, you shade the areas under the burning logs solid silver.

Combustion to ashes, and that is when things become white or silvery. You remember your dad telling you that different kinds of wood burn differently, and depending on the dryness of the wood, the ashes and the smoke vary.

~

There are nights when your mom sits on your bed in the dark and soothes you to sleep by scratching your back. You fall into sleep, but you always know when she leaves—she always kisses you on the head before, leaving you paralyzed in your semi-sleep.

~

You put the test tubes on the black slate tables in your chemistry lab and look up to the other deaf group across the counter. Your lab assistant, a graduate student at the college, is pointing at the manual and showing them how to properly mix the two chemicals.

The girl with curly light brown hair from the group looks up at you, and then ignores you for the rest of the class.

The next week, her lab partner doesn't show up, and your lab partner had asked you to do the work so that he could go to a meeting. He had emphasized that he plans to miss a lot of labs.

You want to work with me? she asks.

~

My first impression of you is that you were very strange. You were wearing your high school soccer jersey and you had these glasses, braces, and this nerdy hairstyle. Who knew we would become this close?

You chuckle. You remember the day at the chemistry lab when she asked you to be her partner, but you don't remember what impression you gave her.

You became close friends during your Thanksgiving break at college. You and your bisexual friend went down to New York City to visit her and watch the opening night of *Twilight* with rear-view captions. She ended up coming to your home and sleeping over for three nights. You made short movies together, watched some movie marathons, played some video games, and spent a lot of time talking about life.

Within a couple weeks, she told you about her darkest moments when her parents divorced. You know about her history with her old boyfriend who cheated on her. She told you about her first time drinking and smoking, including smoking weed.

You never drink or smoke, but she is a smart person; witty, funny, and deep.

One time she texted you that she was going out to smoke weed.

Why?

Because I like to smoke sometimes? It's not much, anyway.

Still, why would you do something like that to your body?

There are health benefits to weed, you know. But, really, it can be fun.

It distorts your mental state. How is that fun? You can have fun without weed.

I have plenty of fun without weed, and right now I am going to smoke. You don't have to be so against it.

Fine. I am disappointed in you, anyway.

Are you serious? She sends you another text: You need to get a life.

It is you who needs to rethink what choices you are making in your life. You don't have to go that low, doing illegal things.

You can be disrespectful sometimes.

Disrespectful? How about respecting your body?

You think you are all that? People smoke, and deal with it. I'm going now. Bye.

Later, you find out that she only smoked because she was pissed at her ex-boyfriend—and yet he moved from California to move in with her in New York. There were more problems. She came to your room, crying. You offered your bed for the night while you slept on the floor. When she moved to a new place with her ex-boyfriend, you helped her move all of her stuff. You never accepted any gas money when you drove her to the movies, to the grocery store, to restaurants. For Christmas, Valentine's Day, and her birthday, you made her cards. You even paid for her skydiving trip with you and other friends. She would download movies and watch them with you, pointing out bloopers and how to predict the ending before it ends, and you were motivated to help her with her film projects, lugging lighting and camera sets across campus and filming and acting with her.

You also always forgave her for whatever she did. You don't dwell on the fact that sometimes she throws her frustration and struggles in life on you.

You turned out to be one of the smartest and the nicest people I know, though. I am glad you joined me for chemistry lab.

Home school. You grin.

Yes, a lot like the home school stereotype, but yet so different.

You are *not* the home school stereotype, but you've had this argument before. She will justify her points and that is how she sees things. Your old chemistry lab partner is almost always right, too.

~

Do you like sleeping with someone? Your old chemistry lab partner asks during your freshman year, before her ex-boyfriend ever came.

Well, no. I don't sleep with people in general. I move around a lot, I think.

It is not about moving around a lot, but, so, you don't like to just cuddle with someone and sleep?

No. Why?

Never mind, then. I just wanted to hold someone and sleep.

~

One time when you were nine or ten, you remember sharing a bed with your mom. Your mom said that you move around a lot when you sleep, and she is a light sleeper. She didn't get good sleep that night. There's something about you—sleepwalking frequently, not being able to sleep for hours, finally going to sleep when your mother goes to bed, around midnight or one in the morning, and always dreaming about running away from something.

Even the guy during Thanksgiving break didn't sleep on your queen-sized bed.

~

A girl you know from high school has a syndrome where she was born with locked arms, different jaw structure, a few fingers, and sloped eyes. Her ears seem different, too. She doesn't eat solid food, only liquids or ice cream that melts in her mouth.

She was in your Advanced Placement English course, and she got the Advanced Regents Diploma. She is smart, but she doesn't have any friends.

You have conversations with her. It was hard to understand her signs at first, but after a while, you are used to it. She is your friend, being the only friend who lived at your high school dorm while all of your other friends commuted.

People had shut off the lights when she was in the bathroom, scared her for fun, and thought of names to call her, instead of using her given name. They also had purposely brushed her clothes to the wet floor just to see what she looks like angry, only to retell the story to you and your classmates in gym class.

That's rude—an awful thing to do. Why would you do that?

So? She's a bitch. You want to be her bitch, too? Or do you have a thing for her? They would giggle.

Your lungs burned with fury.

Four years later, she is a second-year student—like you—at your college. She rings your doorbell at three in the morning. Your dorm room flashes with strobe lights.

You are sick, but you are a resident advisor and answer the door.

It is her, and she wants to talk about a serious problem.

Since she did not make many friends in college, she has been clinging onto you. She doesn't seem to care if you are busy or not, and she spends most of the time visiting you talking about herself. Most of her serious problems were long-lasting problems that were always serious but nothing urgent.

You get fed up with always being nice.

I'm sorry, I want to sleep. Come back another time. You try to close the door, but she puts her feet in the doorway.

No, I want to talk.

What about?

You never talk to me any more.

Oh, this is something we can discuss another time. I want to sleep now.

This guy has been talking to me and I think he likes me. But here is the thing, I asked him to come to the mall with me and he said that he will check his schedule, since he has a lot of school work to do... but he hasn't gotten back to me since yesterday. I texted him...

Can we please talk about this tomorrow. I want to sleep. Really.

She huffs. *No.*

She tilts her head and plants her foot by the doorway.

Don't make me close the door on you. I don't want to do that.

She pushes against the door.

Seriously, don't make me do this. I want to sleep.

FINE! she screams. She takes her lanyard with her keys out and strikes it across your face. She takes off running down the hallway.

You run after her in the hallway, and you almost yell her name before you think about waking up residents on your floor at three in the morning. You stop in the middle of the hallway—in just your boxers—and then turn back into your room and straight to your bed.

~

You take a colored pencil out and start doodling on a piece of paper. It is shapeless, irregular. You cannot make sense out of it, and it is not eye-catching. You shove the pencil back in the box, burying it in the bottom. You take another colored pencil and cross the picture with lines. It looks just more ugly. You put the colored pencil back in the box and put the box away. You rip the paper from the spiral metal and crunch it tightly. Finally, something feels right. You throw it away in the tin trashcan. You don't have any art completed. It doesn't matter.

~

Two or three nights after the girl stormed away, at two-thirty in the morning, your doorbell light flashes.

You open the door and let your co-resident advisor in. You close the door and then lock it. He leans in and puts his hands on your naked back. He moves them down your spine, slowly, his fingers prying under your boxers. His lips meet yours.

~

Your old chemistry lab partner emails you, not longer after she asks you if you want to cuddle with her:

You did things with him? To THIRD base? What the fuck is this?

And then when you confirm, she asks:

Why didn't you tell me?

And after you make an excuse:

Thanksgiving! So, you did this with him around the time when we became good friends. You know, you can be a fucking hypocrite.

And after you coldly ask her what she means:

We've been friends for how long? You don't swear because it's bullshit, you can find better and more decent words. Fine, I respect that. You don't drink or do drugs, and we've fought about weed before. Fine, I decide to respect that, too. You act all that and you are doing things with him? You go all against gay marriage. That's right, you say marriage is between one man and woman. Well, what is it that you are doing with HIM? Why? You contradict yourself, and that disgusts me.

You lay on your dorm bed, staring at your sidekick. You decide on a truth:

Well, however perverted I can be, I do it with men because there are less feelings involved. It is for fun. I'm too much of a coward to do it with women and to break their hearts.

~

You take the front cover of the old newspaper and put the corner in the flames. It is cold outside at the campground. Someone said that it might snow tomorrow.

The corner of the newspaper cover catches fire. The flames lick the paper quickly. You hold it for a few seconds before flicking it into the bonfire. You watch it crinkle, blackening in the fire, glowing, and then disappearing into the air.

You look into the dark at the pop-up camper nearby. You are here with your deaf brother, his high school girlfriend, and her mother—a weekend away from college. You see the first Halloween pumpkin that you carved, a simple Wal-Mart smiley face, near the steps of the camper. Your family never celebrates Halloween.

You stare at the smiley face, the little candle inside glowing. The orange glow inside the pumpkin doesn't flicker. You are so used to seeing a solid pumpkin for harvest festivals, a traditional celebration you have instead of Halloween. You think about how the flames inside combusts by the air flowing through the opened eyes of the pumpkin.

~

Your old chemistry lab partner's favorite holiday is Halloween.

~

- 15 -

You've fallen in love with a girl who has a boyfriend. Her long, smooth brown hair. Her smile. How she signs. How she is assertive with her parents. And what ultimately takes your breath away: when she finally turns her head back to you, for the first time, her eyes meeting yours—deep green-blue with the luster of an emerald, pure without judgment.

You are obsessed with her. You try to talk to her every day. You want to see her, too, but her boyfriend is in the way. Emails will do, instead, and you share long emails with her. She keeps on responding to your long emails and questions during your first college Thanksgiving break. You both agree to start going to a church together.

By the end of your freshman year, she ends up seeing you more often than her boyfriend.

She says that you are deep. It is how you understand life. You don't think you understand life at all, but you believe her.

She uses pet names with you. She asks more questions of you. She must be interested in you at least a little bit. Later, when she hugs you, you fall for how she will pull away, her eyes locking onto yours, as in wishing you would take her back into your arms.

~

Are you really sure about her? your old chemistry lab partner asks you.

Well, I've never felt this way with anyone else before. Why?

I don't know... she just doesn't seem your type.

How are you supposed to know my type, and what type is she?

Well, she is definitely nice, I can see that, but she seems like the type of a person who wouldn't challenge you.

What do you mean?

You have a much different way of living your life. What do you REALLY have with her? I'm sorry, but she seems a little like an airhead, and you go much deeper than that.

~

It takes her eight weeks to break up with her boyfriend. She doesn't seem to know how to cut him off, but you don't want to seem the reason for her leaving her boyfriend, so you are just there for her. Every night.

You decide to ask her to go with you to a summer family reunion in Michigan. While you two are there, your grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousin, step-cousin, parents, brothers, brothers' girlfriends, and even your grandparents' neighbor fall for her.

I like your girlfriend; she is sweet, friendly, outgoing, and beautiful. Your uncle who never talks to you tells you.

You grin awkwardly and say thanks, but, *She's not my girlfriend yet.*

At nights you both will go to the beach and watch stars shoot out of the sky. Your arms will search each other for warmth; your backs cool from the cold sand.

On the last night at the lake house, you watch the stars from the dock, your backs against the uneven wooden planks. You ask her how she can fall for you, a guy completely different and not even close to being athletic like her ex-boyfriend.

Exactly. It is YOU.

You could have kissed her right there, but you don't. As you watch the stars, you decide that you don't want a relationship, yet. Seeing her so ready to love you scares you.

The next day, when you have your ten-hour drive back to college, you ask her what she had learned from her previous relationships.

She stutters, and after fifteen minutes of thinking, she says, *Really, I'm so glad to be out and I've moved on. I'll think about this, though.*

It is time to tell her that you want her to have some time being single, and that it would be great if she could learn some things on her own. Sometimes being alone, to reflect, and to discover more about yourself, you say, means you can learn and grow in unexpected ways.

She nods. Later, your deaf brother, who kept her company when you were busy, tells you that she was disappointed, but she understood your point.

When college started again—your second year of college—you rarely saw her. You saw her with several different athletic guys. Once, you sit at a table with her, a freshman guy next to her reaches his arm around her slowly and carefully, eventually laying his hand on her shoulder. She doesn't say anything.

One of her friends told you that she has several fuck buddies. She only went to church with you once that year.

~

You feel repulsed. But then, you've done stuff with two different guys.

But she fucks with them... just like that, and more than just two.

Then you remember the pain you felt that night when someone told you the truth:

You know, you can be a fucking hypocrite.

~

For the hell of it, you begin sharpening some colored pencils on both sides. Instead of one, there are two points. If one end becomes dull, you simply flip the pencil over and color with its sharp point. Only when do both sides become dull do you need to sharpen once again.

You take the silver colored pencil and stare at it. The tip is dull, but you sharpen the flat bottom instead. The pencil has two tips now, and you leave the dull side unsharpened. Besides, you haven't been coloring as much lately.

~

You wonder what you would have learned by being with someone. Your only official relationship to this day is your high-school girlfriend.

You stare at the blank whiteness. A picture flashes in your head. It is the girl who loves you, the one with blue eyes, on the videophone.

Heartbreak sucks. She says, referring to dumping her asshole boyfriend for a lesbian girl who she loved and who loved her back... only to be dumped because the lesbian girl said yes to a relationship with man a few days before.

What a fucked-up relationship.

Another picture:

Her green eyes were radiating when you last saw her, the girl you loved. The girl your old chemistry lab partner once called an airhead. She was with her new boyfriend, a committed boyfriend of over a year.

She looked happy and mature.

The memory lingers as you form a single sentence:

A heartbreak isn't always like a porcelain shattering into pieces, but a plucked plant that still blooms brightly after its cut, its viscosity slowly giving away.

~

You wonder how much you would've learned if you got into a relationship with the girl with emerald eyes. You really knew so little about her.

You only know now that she was the last girl you really loved.

~

- 16 -

The spring of your second year of college, your parents live in an apartment at the University dorms before building a house. If you look out of your window of your dorm, you can see their apartment building.

Your deaf brother is the contact person. He tells you when there is a family dinner, and he tells you to stop by. You stop by, you say hello, you tell them about your grades and your projects. You tell them that you can pay for the gas for the car that you've been taking out lately. They smile and seem content, just as you are content.

You want to go to Europe. You have scholarship money leftover. You can use the money to pay for your trip in Europe. Your parents are surprised. They tell you to watch your money. They are not comfortable with you going to Europe, spending all that money. Wasn't the Bahamas for spring break enough?

No, I'm going to Europe.

You go with you ex-girlfriend from high school, still your good friend, your old chemistry lab partner, and another girl who lived on your floor while you are a resident advisor.

~

You come back from Europe. You stay at a friend's house for a couple weeks. You sleep with him every night. Then, you work at a camp with your old chemistry lab partner.

She asks you what's up with you and the friend whose house you are staying for weeks.

It is just a little something. I am not going to end up with him, or anything.

At camp, you become a morning calisthenics leader with a girl with blue eyes. Every night you meet with her.

My back is so knotted from stress. She says to you one night.

You want a massage?

She freezes, studying you. *I don't normally like people touching me.*

Oh, okay. Well, it is up to you. Let me know if you want me to massage you. I haven't met anyone who didn't like my massage. You grin.

She hesitates. *Okay, fine. Do I sit there?* She points at the spot on the floor in front of the couch you are sitting.

The next day she asks you if you have somebody. She already explained about some of her previous relationships.

No.

She nods, looks down, and then looks back up at you. *Mind me asking, but are you interested in women?*

Uh, yeah?

What about men?

You freeze for a moment, thinking why she asked.

Well, I've had some experience with men before.

Oh, so you are interested in men?

No. You hesitate. I won't end up with a man, I know that.

So, you are still exploring or what?

I guess you could say so?

Have you been with women before?

Well, nothing much but I've had flings with several women. My last girlfriend was in high school, though. It was only for a few months, but we are still very good friends. I went to Europe with her, too.

So, you're still interested in women... for relationship and everything?

Yeah.

It is not like you are gay?

No. You shake your head. I'm not.

Hm. She says. Then why did your friend say that you are gay? That you are interested in men?

Your old chemistry lab partner.

You stay quiet, wondering. *I don't know.*

~

The rest of camp is fun. All of the camp counselors and staff, beside you and your old chemistry lab partner, are from a different university in DC. You become close with the girl with blue eyes. She seems to like you, and you like her. It is how she thinks things through. It is how she takes charge and leadership at camp.

When you go back to your parents' apartment at your college, driving back on campus, your old chemistry lab partner smiles.

It's good to be back here. It is like going back home.

Really? You don't feel the same.

~

You don't want to stay with your guy friend. What you are having with him seems empty. You stay with your deaf brother who is staying at a family friend's house.

You tell your brother is that you don't want to go back to school. It doesn't feel right being on campus. You are not content any more.

Why don't you transfer?

Transfer? Where?

Where they have more liberal arts, like teachers, English, social work—something that fits you. You've tried three different majors and you still haven't found your fit. This is not for you. Why don't you go to the university where all of the camp counselors go?

You raise your eyebrow. *That university's reputation sucks!*

Your brother stares at you. *I'm just saying.*

You send an email to the admissions office. The next day, you walk into your parents' kitchen and tell them that you are transferring.

They are in shock. You have straight As. Why would you are leave a high-ranking university for some school whose accreditation was on probation a few years back? You will also leave your family... especially since they have just recently moved here. Why? Aren't there any other careers?

No. I want to transfer.

They couldn't do much, except worry about the time and how you will go down south eight hours away in time for school.

Don't worry, you say. It'll be spring semester since fall semester is in three weeks. I still have my England trip as a student ambassador, too.

The next day, you find out that you've been accepted to the university. Full Presidential Honors scholarship. Free tuition, room, and board. School starts in two weeks, the day after you return from England.

You stutter. *This soon?*

Your parents point out that you've been with them for less than five days the whole summer. You spent a whole month in Europe, another month working at the camp, several weeks with your friend, and your last week before school will be spent in England. Eight hours away, how often will they see you?

You wonder if there is subconsciously more to the transfer—if you are running away from the guys you've fooled around before.

No, you think. I am not running away, I just need something new. New challenges. New majors. A new shift in life.

~

A little plant is growing in the little pot. The little plant is green. It is full of life. You water it and put it on the windowsill where the plant can get the right light.

It grows. You transplant it into a bigger pot.

Why don't you just put it in a big pot? It's less work to move it into a bigger pot every time.

No. The plant will not grow. The sun will bake the soil. The water will trickle below the roots.

Leave it in the pot for a long time and the plant will suffer. You will have to fertilize it.

You move it to a bigger pot when it is ready.

You don't throw into big challenges. Steps are made one at a time.

~

London.

You walk to the Underground and you see men and women walking briskly through the crowded stations.

Men are wearing scarves.

Look. You tug at your old chemistry lab partner's orange t-shirt, gesturing toward a man with a bright green button up shirt with a dark red and pink frilly scarf.

Ok?

Look, you say again. He looks so gay but he just walked up to that beautiful woman and kissed her right on the lips. Now they're holding hands?

She looks at the couple, soon disappearing in the crowd. She shrugs. *Well, this is London.*

You take a few moments to look around some more, then you tell your friend, *I think if I had been born in Europe, things would have been so much different.*

Of course, she raises her eyebrow. This is a different country and honestly, you would probably have gotten a cochlear implant... or even have had a hard time not being brainwashed by some stupid ideology that all deaf people can talk.

You shake your head. *No, that's not what I meant. I mean I would be fine not playing sports here, and I would be able to get away with wearing scarves.*

Scarves?

Yeah, I like scarves but honestly, I couldn't really wear them back in the United States.

You know, you shouldn't give a flying fuck.

I know, but honestly. Someday I might move to Europe, the culture fits me better.

Maybe so.

~

Exactly two days later, you start your third year of college at the new university. Rumors have it that you transferred because of the girl you met over the summer working at the camp, the girl with the blue eyes. She gives you a tour of the campus and introduces you to her friends.

At night, curled up on her couch, she says that her friends like you.

Honestly, some of them asked me if you were gay and I told them "no."

You shift in the couch, finding a more comfortable position. A silver thread hangs from the grey couch.

Why do people constantly think that, anyway?

Well, the truth be told, when I first met you at camp I thought that you were GAY, but I was wrong.

Yeah. You are still uncomfortable. The silver thread is gone now.

~

Months went by, and your feelings for the girl with blue eyes didn't grow, and she became the girl who loves you. You can't be that man with the bright shirt and a red scarf kissing a woman like her.

Trust me, he's gay.

He's using you as a cover.

He just doesn't want to come out to his parents.

You are clinging to him, and you are making him scared to come out and hurt your feelings. They tell her.

She tells you everything. You resent the comments, and what you have inside solidifies.

~

The silver colored pencil is brittle. The pencil is getting smaller on both sides. You color wind strokes. You color empty candleholders. You use the silver colored pencil to make neat borders, the in-between border of black and white. Silver is only to accentuate pictures.

~

- 17 -

You like people with light colored eyes and olive skin. Blue, green, or even grey. You can't help but think that if you end up with a girl with brown eyes, and have children with her—well, your biology class taught you, using a pedigree chart, that brown eyes are dominant—there is a 25 percent that your child will have pretty eyes. Only twenty-five.

Then, one time while talking with your chemistry lab partner, she asks you if you want children.

Having children is selfish, you say. What's the point of making children when there are many children out there without families?

She stares at you for a bit, then looks out the windshield to the road ahead. She looks back at you. *But still, the experience of having children is amazing. I think I would at least want to experience being pregnant and having a child.*

Then, it hits you. *And is it that, in having children, you see the symbol of two people joined together—a living evidence of two people's love?*

Yes, exactly. She says.

Do brown eyes really matter?

~

One time, you ask your ex-girlfriend with brown eyes if she could picture herself in the future with her current boyfriend.

Why do you ask me that?

I don't know. I mean, could you picture having dinner everyday with him, having children with him, and all that?

I could try to picture that, but I want to picture me loving him, first. I'll let things happen if they are meant to happen.

Her boyfriend has blue eyes.

Why do you think about this, not love?

~

You stopped drawing when you transferred to DC. You took only a few colored pencils with you, but you can't do much with little colors. You didn't even bring your silver colored pencil.

~

You are busy—that's why you don't draw anymore. Sometimes you want to write, but you don't find the time to buy a new journal.

One morning you open your laptop and type.

sleepless nights,
 just another dreamless
 life.

~

- 18 -

Poop.

You drink a lot of vodka, wine, and beer.

You hate the rancid smell of poop the following morning. All of the good smells of the flavors or chasers are gone—leaving the pure smell of horrid alcohol... plus poop.

You think, *Wow. This is something I really enjoy, but 18 hours later I see and smell the shit I put in my body. It is nasty.* The pleasure is temporary.

You plan a party next week. You wonder why. But really, you forgot about the poop you flushed away.

~

The dark warehouse is twirling with lights. Techno music vibrates the concrete.

You wonder what time it is. You wonder about the fact that you went three semesters in a new college, but have acquired only a few friends.

You feel like you've thrown away time, wasting it. You've wasted it doing the wrong things with other people. You utter a prayer to God, asking him to give you new insight.

People are dancing all around you. Some are leaping, others moving their heads with the blaring electronic music. Some are giving light shows with lighted gloves, and others stand mesmerized in the light pouncing and pulsating in their faces. Some are shouting in each other's ears, and a person laughs at some joke. As they smile, the purple lights bring out their white teeth.

This is your first rave. And instead of doing something you really love, like dancing, you are lying alone on the dirty concrete floor by the edge of the warehouse. You feel a little different, a bittersweet serenity hugging your spine to the concrete.

Hey! You okay? a stranger asks you, teeth gleaming in the light.

You nod, smiling reassuringly.

You want some water? He pulls out an unopened water bottle, condensation forming on the bottle.

I'm good. You smile again.

You stare at the little skylight opening at the roof of the warehouse, which you are certain that nobody notices. It is so beautiful. Condensation formed there and moonlight—or perhaps the streetlight outside, you don't know—shatters the plastic opening like a million diamonds thrown together, gleaming but overpowered by the purple and the dancing neon lights.

You begin to feel overwhelmed with emotions. You pray.

Hey! A girl exclaims as she sees you lying down. What are you doing on the floor?

You make another reassuring smile. You never want to pull anyone down, and a few hours before somebody told you that it is possible to influence others with bad feelings while on ecstasy.

~

Especially the first time, you should take one pill at a time. This pill is new, I'm not sure if it is an upper or a downer.

Upper or downer? I thought they all were supposed to make you feel good.

Some pills fit some people better than others. X is not pure MDMA, which is why I would recommend Molly to first timers. You want Molly?

But Molly is more expensive, isn't it?

Yeah, X is really fine, just be sure that you're responsible.

You make it sound like it's dangerous.

He laughs, Trust me, it will be fine. The best part? You will remember everything.

~

You study the girl standing near you.

Just thinking, and the roof is a beauty that I think most of us don't notice.

She looks up and sees the glistening skylight. She looks back at you and cocks her head, You're right. It is beautiful. Hey, she gets your attention again, be sure you check on your buddy every now and then. It is always great to have a buddy, especially for a first-timer.

She means the girl who loves you.

All right. Another smile.

She is satisfied. She leaves.

You get up from the floor and feel a bit light-headed, but yet very conscious. You don't have words to describe what you are feeling.

You see the girl who loves you dancing near the DJ, her glowing body paint radiating in the purple light. You decide to leave her alone. Something inside you does not want you to be with her.

You suddenly feel the need to find the guy who massaged you and who gave you a light show, hours ago before you started to feel the effects of ecstasy. He is from your college, but you have never really talked to him. He is probably somewhere dancing with his girlfriend, lost in the crowded warehouse.

You are a little frustrated, and a little down.

You see another girl who told you to see her when you are “ready.” You are ready for something different.

You can’t feel down, and you walk through the crowd to her, watching her smile, laugh, and chat with several friends. All of them are sitting on the massive subwoofers, signing. You can’t help but smile. Deaf people always hang out where the music is the loudest. At parties, the DJ always gives a threatening look to the drunk deaf people who hold and tip their drinks dangerously close to the speakers. Here, the girl is sitting cross-legged, chatting as if they are in a restaurant.

As you approach, she notices you. *Ah, you, how are you feeling?*

Not something I expected.

Come here, she says. Hold out your hand.

You hold out your right hand. She reaches out her left hand, her fingertips touching yours. She makes a peace sign and gestures you to do the same.

Peace.

She bends her fingers to make a half of a heart. You bend yours to make a complete heart.

Love.

She flattens her hand, her palm touching yours.

Unity.

She grasps your hand between her fingers.

Respect.

Her eyes are locked onto yours. She finally closes them for a brief second and then says, *You came to college and you blew us all off of our feet. Not even a year, you became one of our most outstanding writers and then the Student Body Government Vice President. I underestimated you.*

Thank you, you start, but she holds up her other hand and urges you to listen.

None of us really knew you, but you managed to earn the respect you deserve. She looks at you. You listen.

Although I am leaving in a few weeks, I want you to know that I am glad that this happened. I am glad that at least I got to know you. Don't forget to continue what you are doing, taking us by storm.

You nod.

Thank you for all of your hard work. Your optimism. Your willingness to work with people who tried to pull you down. I was on the other campaign team and I spoke out against you and the president candidate, and yet after you were elected, you never changed a thing towards me. You treated me the same. That taught me something. She nods

Now you are not sure what to say.

She looks down to her hand, still clutching yours. She picks out a bracelet with blue-green glow-in-the dark beads. She pulls it over and adjusts it on your wrists—your very first kandi.

DANK, you read the four letters on individual beads in the bracelet.

Yes, to us this means thank you. Like the German word, danke. She lets go of your hand and gives you a hug. You are at the perfect level with her, since she is still dangling her legs in the air, sitting on the boombox.

Now do what you want to do, be free.

~

You try to dance a little, but you find that desire to look for the boy who massaged you unbearable. You look around. Instead, the girl who loves you finds you.

Oh there you are! Finally! She takes your hands and dances with you.

It is only a minute until you tell her that you need to find him. You don't know why, but you need to make sure that he is okay.

Why?

I don't know, it's just him and that gut feeling that knots with thinking of him.

Don't tell me that you—

No, no, you interrupt. It's not that I like him or anything, I just need to confirm that he is okay. It's like I really care for him.

She looks at you for a second. Her pupils are dilated. *Okay.*

You break away, wandering among the mass. You notice that in the huge crowd, only two people are holding beer in their hands. Nobody is really drinking, and nobody is doing the insane grinding dance that you often feel repulsed by at clubs.

The crowd swallows you, and you can't find him.

You go to the back of the warehouse, where a mattress is propped under some scaffolding. Inside, you find a few friends, lying down on the mattress, talking, sucking on Jolly Ranchers. A few of them are smoking marijuana. You lie down right in the middle and pull the sheet over the scaffolding, so only the top is exposed. You are in your little world with a few friends and strangers.

You think about what she said. *Thank you for treating me the same.*

Now do what you want to do, be free.

You keep thinking.

The girl who loves you. What are you doing? Why are you two acting like a couple when you aren't? Is she holding you back?

Why do you treat people the same, even if they hurt you?

Is that your strength or your flaw?

Then the girl who gave you the kandi pulls back the sheet. *There you are. I was wondering where you went.*

Here I am, you smile the same smile you've been giving everyone lately, the one that masks how you really feel.

She looks at you for a second before asking, *Have space next to you?*

Help yourself.

She slides in, resting herself on the mattress. She wraps her leg around yours. Her arm drapes over your torso.

She has a boyfriend. Rumor has it she is going to get engaged soon. But this doesn't feel wrong. It feels right.

If only we could understand that there is more to life than the little things, she says.

What do you mean?

Life is about making connections, not barriers.

Like how we fail to see the goodness in people and bring that out?

Yes, we let ourselves be restricted by what we know. We become stuck with the same group of people, with the same rumors, with the same parties, with the same blackouts, with the same fights. She taps you on your chest. Four-and-a-half years of college, I've realized that people thrust themselves in the same cycle of judgment. They build walls around themselves.

Is that why you really like to rave?

Raving is about the energy that everyone comes together and shares. There's no judgment as you let yourself go, but the application part is also important.

To be yourself in reality?

Yes, to find the goodness and the joy in people. You won't be friends with all of them, but at least you know that there are other people out there who understand the importance that you can glow when you are entirely yourself. It is the fear of how people think of us that holds us down. Instead, we should celebrate what we have to offer.

You nod, and you think. This is something you once believed in when you were naïve. This is something that you learned in your Sunday school class, when the teacher said that each one of you has a gift that God has given. This is something that you've lost.

You remember the chocolate chip cookies. You remember the time you had to make homemade cards for friends and families. You remember making paper roses. You remember drawing pictures and framing them for relatives. You remember enjoying working in the kitchen. You remember wanting to kiss dad. You remember wanting to wear a scarf. You remember how you feel for him. You briefly remember when you felt content.

Gay. Odd. Different. Passive. Patient. Compassionate. Needs to man-up.

It is like coming in second. You realize that there is nothing wrong with liking silver.

You.

You are about to say something, but the girl who loves you throws back the sheet. *Oh gosh, finally! I was looking all over for you. I need you.*

She falls on the bed, her leg wrapping your free leg. She adjusts her face so she can look at the other girl's face, both of them resting on your sides.

You want to break free as you relapse into despair.

She shakes you. The girl who loves you, she tells you that you have to try this mediating kind of exercise with this other girl. You are slightly surprised since the girl who loves you hates the girl. But she seems connected to her now. She says that she is at peace with her.

As she guides you through the dancing crowd, the girl who gave you the kandi follows you, holding your hand. She gets your attention. *One thing I love about raves is about truly understanding the unity that can be achieved. Your gut feeling always becomes clearer.*

You really want to find that guy more than ever.

~

Hours pass by. You are dancing softly to the blaring techno music, just moving your shoulders with your eyes closed.

Something urges you to open your eyes. You find him standing. Alone. Dancing to the music.

You gravitate towards him, and you touch him on the shoulder. He looks up to you.

For some reason, I needed to find you. You want a massage?

He gives you a faint smile. *Sure, that's just what I need.* He is rolling hard.

His girlfriend comes to you. *I'll help*, she says.

She takes his face and arms and you take his back. You massage away the stiffness in his back. She soothes his jaws.

Wow, this is perfect, he says after a bit. *Do some more and I'll be out of this world. I'm good.* He nods. He looks at you and gives you a hug, then he reaches out and gathers his girlfriend to make it a three-way hug.

You feel so content.

A few weeks later, you find out that he is moving into your dorm suite. You don't realize that it is him who is moving in and he doesn't realize that it is you who is living in the suite. You both are united.

~

A few days after the rave you talk with the girl who loves you.

What did the rave do to you?

She shakes her head. *I need to let go of the things I hold on selfishly. There are many things in life that I don't understand, but we live in the present and should embrace what we are at the moment.*

Yeah, everyone was open to how every person is unique. No judgment. Love and respect for all. Everyone accepts everyone.

She looks at you. *Yes. You shouldn't give a damn about what society tells you who you are. You can be connected with anyone while still being yourself.*

~

His deep brown eyes look right into your eyes, grinning. His arm around you after making a joke. It is a few days after your first rave.

It is not just this time that he makes your heart beat faster. It is also when he stares blankly into space and you feel the strong urge to just... hug him. Yes, you are confused. He can be

socially awkward at times, and he can be very charismatic. You've seen his genuine heart through what he does, and you've seen the mistakes he's made. And of course, that smell, too.

One thing you understand: you love him.

You thought it would fade when you first felt it around a year ago, but it only rooted. Then, as suddenly as his arm drops from your back, you realize:

I have to accept that I like men.

Gay.

Gay.

Gay.

But it doesn't feel right to say that you are gay. You know you are not gay.

He smiles at you with one last look. His deep, but quick, laugh is still echoing in your head, still making you grin foolishly.

He does stupid things. He juggles several affairs with women. He is a liar. People call him an abuser, and he probably is. How could he lead on so many women at the same time? He is vain. You are sure that he is scared, now. You can see him avoiding people after his girlfriend found about his affairs and dumped him. He is selfish, caring only about what he is going through.

There is something in him, though. He is smart. He is capable of great things, capable of loving, capable of caring. He is capable of being a human. You believe that he can learn. You still love him.

Didn't Jesus love everyone? Didn't he love them all equally? Didn't Jesus forgive the man on the cross next to him? Did Jesus care if a sinner was a liar or a prostitute?

Gay.

Who are people to judge and condemn? Shouldn't everyone care, love, and embrace others? You will always show people love, especially him. That's why you hold him responsible for the things he does—you care too much—and that's why it doesn't matter if he is perfect or not, he seems perfect in his own flaws. Perfect for you.

Gay.

No. No, it is just his soul. That's all.

~

How do you draw a soul? You draw two fluid lines searching for each other, twirling around and trying to grasp each other on paper. Tildes on paper, but that's not it.

You sharpen the silver colored pencil on both ends. It becomes only as long as the width of three thumbnails. Then, you draw another elaborate tilde. A big ~ off to the bottom left of a bleached paper.

~

- 19 -

It is Christmas time and your family is celebrating in Rhode Island with your oldest brother's wife's family. You are reading on the couch. The others are either watching TV or putting puzzle pieces together. You and your deaf brother do not partake in the incessant small chatter. They talk about their boss, their co-workers, their co-workers' parents' property, their co-workers' friend's life somewhere else.

You think about the first rave you went to and how liberated you felt. You think about President-Candidate Santorum and how sexist he is, and how enraged you were by him especially since you've always identified yourself as a Republican growing up. You think about alternate futures. You think about how identity is shaped and societal influences. You think about how people perceive religion or how people create religion for their own benefit.

This thought about religion would especially flip your family—you remember the time when you told your mother that religion is shaped by culture and it is just made to control other people... something you think God never really intended. She said that she was disappointed why you would think such things. You told your mom that King Solomon, one of the most respected and glorified kings of all times, blessed and loved by God, granted with wisdom and power, had a bunch of wives and a thousand concubines—as if his wives weren't enough. Society allowed it, and so it was accepted. Why the shock when gay people call themselves Christians and go to gay-friendly churches? Maybe it is a sin, but doesn't God look at all sins, whether murder or lying, the same? Of course, your mom brought up repentance... marrying another man is just confirming the sin and taking God lightly. Same-sex marriage is the opposite of repentance. Your mom decided to conclude by stating that the relationship with God is more important than religion. You agree on that part. Maybe the both of you didn't get anywhere, but you still prefer this kind of conversation—something thought-provoking that challenges the norm.

Your sister-in-law's family's dog pounces up on you. You are in awe with his little tail that never stops wagging. The only time it does not wag is when he is ready to sleep or is already sleeping. You tousle his ears and shake his jowls. His tail wags more fiercely.

The women are now talking about their mothers in-law and their friends and what they do for fun... or something like that. But you are now all sitting around in the living room where the Christmas tree shines with a thousand white lights. You can't help but think that Jesus never asked for a blue spruce chopped just for the sake of his birthday, much less adorned with ornaments from Hallmark. You wonder what Jesus would say to the Frosty Friend ornament with the cute little Eskimo and polar bear ice-skating. You don't think Jesus ever saw snow while he was on earth.

When everyone gets older, everyone gets money as presents. You don't let the big boxes under the tree fool you; they have money in them, too. You get distracted with your sister-in-law's family pictures on the table. You take in what your sister-in-law's mother is wearing.

Just then, the old family dog walks in and nuzzles your sister-in-law's mother. She bends over from the couch and scratches behind his ear. The hyper dog bounds over. The mother continues to pet the old dog, ignoring the hyper one.

Just then the hyper dog noses the old dog and licks his nose, seeking his attention. The hyper dog begins licking the old dog's nose as if it was water. The old dog licks back, and the two dogs are licking each other's muzzles. Both of them are wagging their tails, especially the hyper dog.

The mother yells in surprise and hits their noses. "No!" she reprimands firmly. "You both are boys!" She shakes her head.

She looks like your hearing grandmother shaking her head when you made annoying loud noises, especially with the toy whistle in her tiny cottage.

The old dog walks off. The hyper dog's tail is upright and motionless.

Your sister-in-law's mother tells your mother what had just happened. Your mom shakes her head. Speaking of dogs, your sister-in-law's mother points to the Christmas trees and talks about the little dog ornaments on the tree.

Shit. If only your mother knew you had made out with a random guy naked in your bed last Halloween. You don't say anything... you prefer your family know only the fact that you made out with a girl, the girl who loves you, a few weeks before.

However, with your additional two hundred and something dollars in your wallet, beautiful lights on the dying spruce, happy faces and somewhat happy dogs, and no arguments, Christmas was not bad, after all.

~

A week later you fly to Central America for a backpacking trip—just you and the guy you love.

At first, you were surprised that he would want to go on a backpacking trip. All of his friends said he was too "high-class" to be willing to sleep in hostels and endure cold showers.

He had said that the life he was living was obviously not working out for him. Why not join you backpacking?

He goes swimming, snorkeling, sightseeing, and partying with you. He also tells you a lot of things; from what his deepest thoughts were when he cheated, how wrong he treated his ex-girlfriend, the support he has from his sister to be a better person, his goals in life. Secrets that you wouldn't share.

You have two full weeks with him. From looking for air conditioned rooms on the first night to settling with a rickety room with one full sized bed, a fan, and a public bathroom for three dollars a night, he seems to become comfortable with the concept of backpacking. You also try to get him to dive in the water with you to swim with nurse sharks. He thinks you are whack... but he puts on the tacky flippers and snorkel gear and jumps in the water.

You love him even more.

One evening before going to a party on an island, towards the end of the trip, you are sitting on a porch writing in your journal, with headphones listening to music. Your mind keeps going back to the feeling you have growing inside you. For him. Damn it, since you express yourself better in writing, you ought to write a note telling him about your feelings.

You tear out a page from your journal and begin to write. He is straight, what are you doing?

Just give it to him.

You look at the piece of torn paper with your words on it. You stare at it a bit without seeing the words, but feeling everything that you've written. It is all about you admiring him, for who he is—his flaws and all. You are attracted to him, but not just physically. You get up from the chair, turn around, and walk down the hallway of rooms to the last one on the left—the small rickety room where you share the bed with him.

He is lying on the bed gazing at the ceiling, his hands behind his head and listening to his iPod. He looks over to you.

Hey, well... you know me. I say things better when I write. This is something I wrote for you; you don't have to say anything. It is up to you what you want to do with this.

You hand him the note and go outside, listening to music through headphones, staring at the beach.

After twenty minutes, you go back to your room. He is still on the bed. He still has his headphones on. His eyes are focused on you without saying anything.

Okay. You ready to go and party? You say, taking your wallet from your backpack and putting it in your back pocket. You don't want to be awkward.

Yeah, sure. He gets off the bed and takes his wallet, too.

You party with a bunch of backpackers. He doesn't drink as much as he normally does. You think he looks a little more aloof. He always spaces out into his own world, but you notice it happening more tonight.

You go back to the hostel. You go to bed.

You stare at his back on the bed, a foot away from you. Nothing happens.

Ever after, he doesn't change how he treats or talks to you.

Stupid. Why did you give him the note?

~

- 20 -

You return from winter break and on the first weekend of school, you go to a house party off campus. The admission is five dollars to fundraise for a resident's surgery. She has cancer in her leg that needs to be removed.

The girl who loves you comes along, too, with your other friend, who once lived on your floor when you were a resident advisor—the same girl who went with you to Europe. The old college friend is just visiting.

As soon as you arrive, you go straight to the back and buy jell-o shots in orange wedges. You gulp them down with your old college friend.

A resident of the house—a coordinator for a show for which you will be the masters of ceremonies—comes up to you and congratulates you for being selected to be the MC. You thank her warmly and ask her who will be the mistress of ceremonies. She gives you a name that you don't know.

A girl sitting on the kitchen counter, watching your conversation, jumps in. *That black lesbian, dyke, a little dumb and fat?*

The coordinator seems startled, but she simply says to her roommate, *She is well known for her involvement and leadership in the deaf abused women of color community.*

You look at the roommate as you all fall silent. You count how many stigmatic labels she used. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Coming from a thin, pretty, blue-eyed white college girl who traveled all over the world—who said she *enjoyed* the *diversity* of the rich cultural experience, you realize that she is so full of bullshit.

Bullshit. You feel sick in the stomach.

Nice impression you gave me, you say sardonically.

She stutters and tries to come up with an excuse.

You wave your hand and feel guilty for being scornful. You are not drunk enough.

You join in a game of flip the cup with your old college friend and a few others. Finally, your head gets a little light. The last time you got really drunk fast was three months ago, at the Halloween party where you woke up with another guy in bed—not too long before you decided to go to a rave.

You finish the game and you turn to the bathroom, which is right behind you. Four girls go inside, but they all exclaim, *There is no more toilet paper!*

There is another bathroom upstairs. More toilet paper. You've visited the house more often than most of the people at the party. You can go upstairs and get some more. Not a problem.

You see a piece of fabric roped to block the stairs. You know that upstairs is off limits during a party. You take off your shoes, duck under the rope, and bolt upstairs.

Somebody is in the bathroom. You feel dizzy.

You sigh and turn around.

Excuse me... what are you doing? Another resident of the house asks you, standing at the bottom of the stairs and looking up directly at you. She knows your deaf brother well.

Oh, I'm sorry. I am just getting some toilet paper for downstairs. Some girls need them.

But what does this mean? She points to the makeshift barrier, tied to the banisters on both sides.

Yeah. I'm not using the bathroom, I'm just getting more toilet paper.

She shrugs. *So? I've put two rolls, and if it is out, its out.*

Okay, but the girls need them.

No. Too bad for them.

There're four of them in the bathroom. They need to go and I would be concerned about their hygiene needs. It is just one roll.

No. Come on, just go downstairs. They will be okay.

It is just toilet paper!

And it costs money. I'm not going to give a third roll.

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I'm sorry, but it is just freaking 75 cents for a roll. We paid to get in, and I care about the girls' hygiene.

The bathroom door opens. Someone, a friend of the house's residents, comes out. You can't remember exactly who. The next thing you know, you are downstairs with a toilet paper roll, the one already half-used from upstairs.

Oh perfect! Thank you so much! You're a lifesaver—

The girl taps you on the shoulder. *Excuse me, what did I just say? That was rude.*

It is just fucking toilet paper! Okay, I am sorry that I am not listening to you, and I am sorry that I went upstairs without permission, but I can't believe you are being so selfish over what? Toilet paper.

Still, you don't realize how much toilet paper does add up, she says.

You are so hypocritical! You charge everyone five dollars to get in and charge them some more for your pretty jell-o shots—all in hopes to help her with her leg surgery. It is a charitable event for a good cause. This is all bullshit! You can't even fucking provide toilet paper! Your mind is actually a bit clearer now.

She looks a bit flustered. You both are in the middle of the crowded, brightly lit party. Some people are watching, maybe.

You don't make decisions for us, especially if relates to our expenses.

You're right, I'm sorry. You want more money? You fumble out your wallet and take out a 20-dollar bill and thrust it into her hand. Here. Here is your toilet paper money.

Are you serious? She looks at the 20-dollar bill and back to you. *This is too much.*

Exactly my point. But hey, you're looking to make money, right? A fundraising party for her leg surgery. Just take advantage of this. You should be glad that you are getting more money!

What happens next, you don't know. That is the last thing you remember.

Next morning you wake up. She is sleeping next to you, the girl from your old college. *I made out with her, didn't I?*

You okay, she asks when she wakes up.

Yes, just a bit hungover. You rub your eyes. *I blacked out, didn't I?*

You both go and get breakfast. She asks you if you remember the girl who loves you.

Oh yeah, we separated the moment we got to the party. Was she all right?

You don't remember anything?

No. Why? What happened?

She forks her food. *I think you should talk to her.*

What do you mean?

I really don't know, so I can't assume anything. So I guess it is best for me to suggest you to talk to her, to work out whatever happened between you two last night.

You heave a long sigh. She was there when you first started drinking. She knows that when you are drunk, you hug everyone and say nice things about everyone. Maybe not last night.

You understood the power of sharing. Of giving. Of connecting with people. Of not worrying over the littlest things. You cared for people, truly cared for people. You learned that at a rave, didn't you? You remembered everything then, but don't remember last night. Is that why you are frustrated? At parties before, people made racial slurs and it didn't bother you. At parties before, people's hygiene was never your concern. Why now?

The girl who loves you tells you that you lashed out at her last night. She was talking for hours with the guy who you woke up next to at Halloween, and you asked her how her conversation with him went, and she told you that it is just between them. You persisted, but she said that it is not for you to know.

It was about me, what else? And you said that if she continues to be manipulative and always talking about you, you were not going to be her friend.

She grabbed your wrists; you flung her angrily and then walked away. She got pissed off and flirted with other guys. After a bit, you came up from behind her and caressed her butt, obviously not remembering the fight you just had.

~

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She blows the dart with her vagina. The dart whizzes across the room and POP! The latex of your red, phallic-shaped balloon falls on your head. The dart tumbles to the floor.

The strip club stage is perfectly round, and you are seated at a table at the end of the circle—being the last person holding a balloon.

The stripper wipes her vagina and gets down from the stage. The bluish glow that eats up the room sinks on her brown skin eerily, casting black lines to where her fat rolls into creases. Her silver bra illuminates in the blue glow. She sways her hips towards you, which brings out the even darker section of her pubic hair.

She comes close enough to you, lowering her chin and raising her eyes. The whites around the pitch-black circles of her eyes glow. She asks you for a drink.

You hesitate, but you offer her your tequila shot—the entry drink you have to buy before getting in, 100 baht for a shot, or \$3.33 in your American dollars.

She puts her hand over herself—as a makeshift panty—and shakes her head.

No.

You point to the tequila, again, and gesture that she can have the entire shot.

She pouts. She points in between her breasts, then she points somewhere into the dark, out of the bluish glow, and mouths, *Boss say no.*

You nod sympathetically, shrugging and glancing away to your backpacking buddies sitting with you.

Drink, she persists, tilting her head to her side to let her hair ripple. She bats her long, fake eyelashes.

It doesn't even work on you, and your friend signs, *No, just keep ignoring her.*

She keeps looking at you.

You sigh. You point at the other people, both men and women, whose balloons she also destroyed with her vagina. You imply with your arms that maybe she should ask them for drinks—not you.

She points to them and nods. She gestures that she's had a few drinks. She points at you again, looking at you plaintively.

Bullshit! Your friend who is sitting next to you signs. She reminds you that this is what your friends warned you about before—about how the strip clubs in Patong, Thailand will strip you of money.

You wag your finger with a confident, *No.*

The stripper looks annoyed, but at least she walks away. She walks straight out into the dark as if she had just taken out the trash, instead of appearing lost, thirsty, or desperate.

~

You know how people make babies? your older brother asks you.

Your oldest brother punches him in the shoulder and shakes his head disapprovingly.

You are five years old and the youngest sibling, your brothers are nine and seven, and you wonder for the first time where babies are from.

Mom, your oldest brother gets your mother's attention in the computer room, where all of you are doing your schoolwork. *He asked him the making babies question.*

Your mother looks at you and then gathers all of you around in a circle in the middle of the room. She asks you, *How do you think babies are made?*

Your brothers stare at you as you ponder. You begin to say hesitantly, *When mom and dad love each other and kiss hard enough and want a baby, they get a baby.*

Your mom smiles, *Dad and I kiss every day, but we don't have hundreds of children, right?*

The question confuses you. She is right. You don't know what to think.

No, it is much more complicated than that. She gives a hard look to your two brothers so that they would behave—not to giggle or anything. *You know how men and women are different?*

You vaguely remember seeing your baby cousin's vagina before when your aunt changed her diapers... maybe a year ago. So you nod.

So when you put your penis in a woman, you can make a baby, your mom says carefully, watching you intently.

You scruple your nose in shock and a bit of disgust. *Really? Not kiss?*

Nope.

Your two brothers squirm a little in their seats nearby.

Ew, you finally say.

Your mother shakes her head. *It is not ew, it is a special thing called "sex" that God created for a man and a woman to enjoy only with each other. That's why you save it for the person you love and kiss. It is something you will understand better when you grow up.*

You decide that maybe your mother is right. The thought of sex sticks with you for a couple days afterwards. You look at your penis with new wonder.

It can make babies. It is special. God created it. You'll understand later.

~

The ugly strippers are playing ping-pong with their vaginas. They shoot the balls from their vagina, their wetness dripping as the ball shoots across the room. The backpack friend sitting next to you yelps and grips your hand, grimacing that she felt the wetness across her face and on her clothes. You feel a drop of wetness on your cheek, and you hope to your last breath it is condensation that dripped from the ceiling.

I feel it splattered on my face, the girl says again, flapping her hand rapidly.

The other three people with you burst out laughing—but suddenly, all three girls and the guy begin shrieking. The stripper takes another orange ping-pong ball from the bucket, and the neon glow of the ball disappears in her crotch. She aims the ball at the guy. He flails his arms to cover his head, cowering low behind the table. She peers over her body, calculating her shot.

The ball shoots across the room, and you feel more wetness on your face.

Oh my gosh. She is wet! You exclaim. Your friends look just as grossed out as you are.

I'm done, the girl next to you says. The other two girls nod. One of them says, *This is too much. Go.*

The guy next to you looks at you. *You want to go, too?*

You say yes.

You need some air, even though the Thai weather outside—not to mention the clogged streets of Patong—would be humid and stuffy compared to the air-conditioned room. At least outside, the bluish glow won't alter how you see things.

~

Your muscles tense and tingle as your clammy hands propped open the *Almost 12, The Story of Sex* textbook. Three weeks into sex education, reading this textbook, butterflies still fluttered in your stomach. It was almost the same feeling as hiding with your brother to see pictures of naked tribal people in the *National Geographic* when you were younger, except this time you were prompted to read.

The warm winter sun glows on your back as you turn the pages. This chapter is about the value of sex. It supported the idea of abstinence. You sigh and tousle your hair. This chapter seems to have less of the “stuff” that makes you all clammy, giving you strange feelings—nothing talking about penis growth, puberty, sex drives, and more sexual topics. This is a relief in some way.

Your mom, sitting on her swivel computer chair, wheels over to where you are reading. *All good?*

You nod and turn back to reading. Your mom still sits in her chair beside you. You can feel her gentle gaze on you. Normally, you think that she would return to her business so you ignore her. Mom.

But she doesn't leave. She touches your shoulder and looks at you with such sincerity.

Sex is something you value. I want you to value it.

Okay.

You save it for the right person. You respect sex.

You nod. You already know.

Sexual sins drag you down, she says.

~

The five of you stand up and go to the front, where you should pay 100 baht for your one shot of tequila.

4000 baht, says the Thai woman in the pinstripe business suit, her white makeup-coated face is frozen in the bluish light.

Four thousand baht? all of you exclaim.

She nods briskly. She turns her eyes down her papers and picks up her cell phone.

Why?

I knew it!

Impossible!

I told you, they would rip us off somehow!

What the fuck?

Why? What do we do?

You wave that finger you know the Thais detest—the “no-no” finger gesture. *Why?*

The woman rapidly points at you and back to the stage, and back and forth. She points at her watch.

You feel the alcohol surge in your head, the burning anger consuming you. You gesture that the people grabbed your wrist and dragged you in.

The woman waves her finger without emotion, *no*. Even her ugly light-brown dyed hair is so coated with hairspray that it doesn't budge.

You shake your head stubbornly. You gesture that people dragged you in, and you muster betrayal, anger, and exasperation on your face.

The woman opens a little drawer in her desk and takes out a little laminated green paper, thrusting it roughly into your hand. It reads that you have to pay 350 baht per viewing show, table service fee, and the drinks.

Where the fuck was this paper before?

You point at the walls and then to your eyes. You don't see that piece of paper on the walls or in the menu... The price list is nowhere to be found except on that little laminated paper.

No!

She shrieks something into your face. She gives you the middle finger. She points at her palms. *PAY UP!*

You give her a nice middle finger right in her face, inches away from her eyes. Your thumb sticks out, too, to make the middle finger extend straight as an arrow. You know that you have this look of arrogance written all over on your face. *No freaking way you will make me pay*, you think.

She screams out profanities. She jerks her knee towards your crotch threateningly, looking at you with beady black eyes, her mouth scrunched up hauntingly.

You don't flinch. You extend your arms as to say, *Oh, what, are you seriously threatening me like this?*

She hits you in the head. You know from studying that in Thai culture, this is extremely offensive—the worst degrading thing anybody can do. But you merely look at her like she's an idiot.

You can't see if her face is red as she turns to your other friends to make them pay. There's too much white makeup. In an instant, you take the green laminated paper and make toward the nearest table, where a bunch of young, white girls gathered uncertainly next to your table before.

You point at the paper and speak, *They are making you pay for the shows!* You are finally using your voice and you don't care.

What? The girls believe you in an instant. They were watching you all from the start.

But before you can say anything else, the owner comes out of the dark and hits you in the hand. Another servant is blocking your way to the other tables. The woman with the pinstripe suit is screeching, grabbing the paper away from you. You hang on to the paper tightly and point at it, *Show them!* you yell.

The owner would have punched you if it weren't for the mass of people who suddenly got up from their tables, scurrying towards the exit. The room was in turmoil.

The strippers are staring at you with piercing hatred, the whites glowing from their eyes and the silver illuminating from their bras. You don't give a damn. At least they are not faking any emotions.

Your friend pays 100 baht for you. You give that nice, long middle finger to the woman once again and storm out, people following your lead.

Adrenaline is pumping your heart as you tumble out into the bright streetlights of Patong Market.

If they fuck with me, I will SCREW them right over. Don't fuck with me. Just be fucking honest and I'll be fine with it...

~

Your mother looks at you right into your eyes; tears well up in her own green eyes.

She'd had sex while she was in college and accidentally got pregnant. She had an abortion. The memory of her dead baby haunts her. Everyday. She felt alone. There was so much pain. It was the power of sex which you've not experienced.

You are not ever going to let sexual sins drag you down. You are never going to cause that pain to another girl, and you are not going to have sex with a girl until you marry her.

You can see her 25 years of pain. The warm sun on your back keeps you calm as you stare back at your mother, your throat dry and your hand resting on the *Almost 12, The Story of Sex* textbook.

~

Not much later, you find that it is so hard not to hurt yourself, too. You feel guilty after masturbating. It is almost like you are cheating with sex, but you don't want to tell anyone this. This sensation isn't something you could only experience once.

You slide down to the bottom of your shower, praying to God that if He wants to punish you for masturbating, you are never going to marry. You will be forever stuck with your hand. At least nobody would be hurt.

You don't know if there are tears dripping as the shower continues to rain on your little naked body, making you gulp for air.

By the time you are a senior in high school, you don't give masturbating a second thought. The guilt washes away down the drain with everything else. Instead, you actually feel refreshed.

Sometimes you wonder what it would be like to have sex. Nearly everyone at your high school scorns at you for being a virgin. You don't care, but you can't help but wonder. Your girlfriend doesn't mind your abstinence. She thinks it is honorable.

~

You and your friends wander around Patong. You flip the finger in front of every scraggly man holding out a laminated piece of paper listing all of the shows. They are all the same:

Pussy and ribbons

Pussy blow dart

Pussy ping-pong

Pussy blow candle

Chopstick Pussy

Man lick Pussy

Man sex girl

Woman sex woman

Pussy this

Pussy that

Pussy whatever... you've lost interest a while ago so you don't remember.

All they deserve is your finger. The finger makes you feel powerful and in control. People leave you alone afterwards, and that's what you've been wanting all night. You feel so in control now that nothing is going to drag you down.

I want to see a gay strip club, one of your three girl friends says.

The other guy friend rolls his eyes and sustains an awkward grin. Another girl adds, *I've had enough of pussy*.

I'm done knowing what my pussy can do, the other adds, shaking her head and waving her hand to dismiss another man with a laminated list of shows.

The man persists, so you flip your finger at him.

So, you all are really up for that?

The guy wavers, but he doesn't say anything. The girls look at you, searching.

You quickly look away, trying to find a club—some different club. *Okay, let's go find one!* you announce, lengthening your strides.

You find a little, dark alley decorated with some neon lights. A nicely-dressed man studies you for a bit, and then he comes up to you—poised. He doesn't even touch you; instead, he points down to the alley and says something.

You gesture out a cock and point at the girls, throwing in an emphasis of a smiling face—indicating that the girls want to see some male action.

The man grins and nods politely, pointing again at the alley.

It is easy to find: a half naked, muscular Asian man wearing a cowboy hat and jeans stands outside of the club. His head is bent low, using his hat to shield his face and to bring out his defined jaw line. Another dressed in a neat suit stands outside, talking with a few customers. You slow down.

With their quiet but seducing look, the girls finally muster some courage. They go up to the front and copy your gesture, *cock dangling?*

The man in the suit smiles and looks at each of them. He nods, opening his arms in a welcoming gesture, inviting you all in.

Pay? Two girls ask at the same time.

The man nods. *250 baht for entry and drink.*

Pay watch? You all want to know.

No. Pay, drink, watch. 250.

Your guy friend doesn't give up once he is inside; he asks three times if there are any additional charges. He even asks if you have to pay if you stay longer than one hour... gesturing that by pointing to an imaginary watch on his wrist. The lady at the counter obviously understands and shakes her head no.

He writes down his question, and again, she politely nods her head no.

He writes down 250 and then makes an 'X' with his arms, indicating that's all we're paying tonight.

Yes. The three ladies and the man in the suit say, smiling politely.

So, all of you grab a beer—even though it is 250 baht for one when you can get one for 30. You sit down to watch.

~

You won't be a virgin by the time you graduate from college, a girl in your class laughs. It is senior week and you all have plenty of free time, lounging around in your high school's library.

Nope, I'm gonna stay a virgin, you reply firmly, smiling.

Are you really waiting until after you marry or after you find the right one?

After marriage.

But you just turned seventeen. College is in three months. And you won't get married until you're like what? Twenty-four, twenty-five? She rolls out her fingers one by one. *That is like EIGHT years of wasted youth!*

I'm still going to wait.

She searches your eyes in wonder.

Pft! She finally snaps her fingers. *See me after you graduate from college.* She snaps her booty and saunters away.

You smirk as she turns her head back to you for one last time.

~

The strippers are all dressed in only denim pants on the brightly lit stage. They are not even dancing, just swaying with the music. Some of them are even looking at their phones. After each minute, a stripper steps away from the front to let the one from the back stand in front.

The girls complain to the man in the suit, who is now obviously the stage manager. There is no real male action. The man cackles and tells the girls to be patient, patting them gently. *Soon*, he points at the watch, waiting for it to point at midnight.

One of the girls goes to the bathroom; two strippers on the stage check her out, eyeing her as she walks across the length of the club. There are a few people in the room, so they have an open view of her.

Another stripper's gaze lingers on you.

~

In ethics class at your second college, he gives you a look that lasts longer than it should. His black hair is styled perfectly, and even has the perfect luster to it. He gives you a grin.

The college professor assigns you all numbers, so you have a group to work with for the rest of the semester.

You see that he got number two. You got number three, but you are sitting behind a girl who got number two. You lean over to the girl.

Excuse me, was I assigned number two?

She shrugs her shoulder. *I don't even know what number I got.* She waves her hand to the class. *We have a horrible class, and unfortunately we obviously aren't in the same group because we're sitting together.*

You smile. *All right. I'm two and you're three.*

~

The stage is clear of strippers. The pounding music begins, beating rhythmically as a few colored lights twirl across the brightly lit stage.

The man in the suit grins, waving at the three girls and pointing to the stage. The girls stop talking, and you stop observing them. You watch the stage, too.

The curtain opens and a man comes out. The clear condom on his erection bounces in the stage light.

Oh geez. Your guy friend turns his head away, grinning drunkenly. The girls' jaws drop. You crack a smile.

This is the real thing, you say in your head.

A second one comes out, a bit of a chubbier man. You see the condom on his erection, too. You look back at the girls. They are still spellbound. Your guy friend finally looks up, watching with a stricken face.

The two guys dance on stage for a bit. Their hands continue to squeeze their erections, keeping it up and snug in the condom. Then a third stripper comes out wearing a light blue thong. His long hair is pulled up into a bun. He dances to the front, and you notice as he extends his arms above his head that he has a really small bulge, swaying his hips to techno music—music like the rave, which you have come to love.

~

Sex is something God created for a man and a woman to enjoy. Mom said.

You don't let anyone into your bubble, your second-grade teacher tells your class. *Now, show me your bubble.*

You are what you fill your mind with. Those people who are trapped in the sexual addiction of watching pornography are enslaving themselves to sin. It is important to keep your mind pure, your mom tells you and your brothers.

Sex is fun, it is even better when you save it for the right person. Mom said.

~

You are pleased to find that the guy with the perfect hair asks good questions in the ethics and social media class. He seems smart after all. That makes the three of you stand out in the entire class.

In your group projects, you would sometimes pause and look at each other, grinning at your progress while the other classmates are amazed at how quickly you build off each other's ideas.

Several weeks and a party later, you both are standing on a rooftop of a building, with a breathtaking view of the United States Capitol and the rest of the skyline. He asks if you are a Christian, which, of course, you are.

He says that he struggles with some temptations. He even went to a rehab once for drugs and alcohol. But he struggles with the concept of religion and how it is so systemized and confining.

You feel light-headed in agreement. *God is love, but that's the last thing most Christians are when they judge others!*

Yeah, they use their faith just to make themselves seem better.

It is like a crutch for them; it isn't about their relationship with God.

They are so hypocritical, carried away with the traditions and flaws that they forget to be themselves with God.

Traditions, yes. The alcohol surges in your head. Do you realize that the Bible is culturally controlled, too? People fail to understand the true message and try to live our lives today as if it was three thousand years ago.

Like burnt sacrifices-traditions or wearing skirts kind of thing?

Like gay marriages. Like how God wonderfully blessed King Solomon because of his devotion to God, regardless of the fact that he had a thousand concubines. The culture at the time allowed it. They allowed polygamy and now it is banned. Maybe we are meant to allow gay marriages one day, instead of painting signs saying 'God abhors sinners like you gays' or 'Marry into eternal abomination.'

That is so true! He nods in agreement. *My sister is a lesbian and I will always love her to death, but her friends and even my family had a hard time accepting that. She lost a lot of people who she loved.*

You sit down next to him, your legs dangling across the edge of the building. You both stare at the lights magnifying the white marble of the Capitol. Even though you've seen the view many times, it is his first time seeing the skyline from the roof.

You bend over and kiss him on the cheek, in content happiness.

He stops you with his hand. *I'm not gay.*

Oh, okay, you move away immediately. I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that.

~

The chubby man stalks the guy with the blue thong. He sways closer from behind, waving his erection, his eyes fixed on the other's ass.

You realize suddenly why you don't like people grabbing your wrists.

~

You are drunk. It is Halloween night. Your vision is a bit hazy. You don't remember what you said exactly to the two girls sitting on your bed. The girl who loves you brought a friend with her to your bedroom to wait for you, and they are talking to you now.

Okay, let's party some more! One of them lifts her empty cup.

You grin and cheer in agreement. The girls rush out of your dorm room, but the guy who walked in with you grabs your wrist.

What are you doing, he asks. He pushes back his perfect black hair from his forehead, showing a look of betrayal sketched on his face.

Partying!

No! He shuts the door and locks it. He grabs your wrists. *I thought we were going to be together.*

You stay quiet. Confused.

I want you. I've wanted you since you showed me the secret way to get to the roof of the building. I feel that you understand me so well. We have so much in common. We have similar backgrounds, similar beliefs, and you are amazing.

He pulls you to his face and kisses you right on your lips.

~

He grabs him. He pushes his back down and moves the blue thong to the left. He goes inside... in front of everyone in the room, in front of the bright light.

Shit. Fuck. Oh, fuck. The guy next to you immediately looks down. You look over to the girls sitting with the guy with the suit. The guy's grin is cracked wide-open, face radiating in delight. The girls are gaping in pure shock.

You look back. You see him thrusting, but that is not what you see. You see the man with the blue thong's face—concentrating on the position of his body, balancing with only one leg, with such emptiness... nearly soulless. The chubby man keeps thrusting smoothly, holding the other man's leg effortlessly.

He twirls his legs open in a different position, nearly laying the man down, and keeps thrusting, in rhythm with the techno music.

Your mind goes blank. Your eyes lose focus as you are somewhere else.

~

When you color something black, it is almost impossible to color over it with any other color.

~

That was my first time, he says.

Huh. Quite unexpected, too, you say. You have just woken up and the sun is shining into your dorm bedroom. His hair is all tousled, but it still looks good. He looks different without his glasses, though. He is suddenly less attractive.

How am I going to tell my girl? He says to himself.

Your girl?

Yeah, I'm having this thing with a girl, he says.

What do you mean? You get a little nauseous. I didn't know you had a girl.

Oh, you didn't know? I've been seeing her for several months now. Now she is going to wonder where I've been.

I wish I knew, you say, taken aback. You should go see her then.

He can't find his underwear, so he takes one of yours from the drawer. He takes off. You are completely naked on the bed.

You suddenly realize that you can't remember if you either of you came.

~

They are pounding. Hard. The chubby man is sweating, his mouth parted to grunt with each thrust. You can't hear it, but you know that he is making noises by how he moves his Adam's apple. Several strands of hair fall from the head of the man with the blue thong. He is working harder to keep his face smooth.

The third man has gone flaccid. He hits himself and tries to get himself up, but he is struggling. He leaves the stage. You look at the girls.

Two of them have their hands up to their faces, peering over them. One of them keeps looking away, nearly gagging. The guy next to you has his eyes fixed on his beer.

Finally, the chubby man yells. His two hands grab the waist of the other man and shoves him to the ground, heaving. All you can see is how his body slams against the floor, how his arms flew out to steady himself. It takes a second for him to collect himself. He pulls himself up, his eyes a bit downcast, shielded away from the light. He walks away behind the curtains, his stretched blue thong loose.

The chubby man stretches his arms upwards as he gets smaller and smaller. Suddenly, he grabs the condom before it can slide off. He bows and walks off the stage. A new song is blaring, and a procession of men wearing denim jeans line up on stage again.

~

You need to tell her. I can't keep on covering your ass, he says, urgently.

What do you mean? I told her that we hooked up. I was open and honest about it.

No, he looks at you exasperatedly. I slipped while we were talking outside at the party fundraising for the girl's leg. I said that we fucked and then fucked each other over, not really talking to each other since.

I never fucked you over. I just wanted to give you space to work things out with your girl. I would have never put myself between you two if I knew what we were doing.

Okay, he sighs. Maybe you never fucked me over, but you do need to tell her that we fucked. I can't stop lying. What we have is strictly between us. What I have with the girl who loves you is strictly between us two, and you don't interfere. But you do interfere by making me lie to her for you, and that is coming in between her and me.

What lie?

We fucked. I don't want to say that we just hooked up.

We fucked? your mind goes blank.

He stammers. You don't remember? We fucked. You were the bottom?

Oh. You feel strangely calm. We fucked?

Yes.

I didn't know that.

He looks at you deplorably. Well, you have work in two minutes. I guess it is better if I leave now.

Okay.

He touches you gently on your shoulder and then walks out.

You stare at a wall in your dorm suite. The girl who loves you found out at the party that you were fucked before you even understood that you were fucked.

~

You feel strangely empty and unsatisfied at the club. Nobody ripped you off this time, but you feel ripped open and drained out.

I can't believe they were fucking like that on stage, the girl who was gagging said to you as you leave the club.

Yeah. They made it seem like it was nothing, you add, dazed.

~

You sit in the sunlight, looking at a beautiful green garden inside the Grand Palace a few days after the strip clubs. You feel the emptiness creep inside you. You remember your mother's green eyes welling up with tears.

~

- 22 -

You have been up for 23 hours straight.

You started the day at five in the morning, watching the sunrise from a little gazebo on top of a cliff, overlooking the beach and the resort below. It is your 21st birthday, and you have a bucket list.

Watch the sunrise
Kiss a stranger who you feel has a beautiful soul
Run on the beach
Go sailing
Sign your name on the restaurant shack on top of the cliff
Play bocce ball or volleyball
Kiss every person on the senior trip!
Take a shot with all March birthdays!
Go skinny-dipping
Walk along the shore until it becomes a cliff
Kayak in the ocean
Take molly
Give at least one person a massage
Dance to good music
Take a shot with the bartender
Power hour at the gazebo!
Get 21 spanks and another for good luck!
Play Truth or Dare.
Body shot!
See a rainbow (yeah, a coincidence?)
Do water aerobics with the hotel's class!
Line dance on the beach
Crawl through the line dance getting spanks and a shot in the end!
Make a sand castle
Do a somersault in the ocean, like a cheerleading set
Rest in a boat, floating in the ocean
Take pictures of your bucket list activities!
Have a wonderful birthday

So, this is where you are— on your senior trip in Antigua, an island somewhere in the Caribbean.

Now, 3:30 in the morning, three hours and thirty minutes after your birthday, you are still at the club by the docks, dancing to the electronic music. Shirtless, a bit sweaty, and having the best birthday you could ever ask for. The fun part? You remember all of it.

Your drug dealer is outside, trying to find the second taxi driver—the drug dealer's brother—who drove all of the seniors from the resort to the club by the docks. The first taxi van already left with half of the group.

He gave you free coke, too. And on your second and last line—in the bathroom at the club—he stops you before you can leave the stall, separating you from your other friend. It is just the two of you in the stall.

He leans over to your ear. *Happy birthday, man!*

You take your head back to look at his bloodshot eyes and grin, *Thanks!*

His face follows your ear. *I will suck your cock and you can suck my cock.*

You tilt back, but his arm holds your shoulder. *We can go on the beach. Nobody can find us there.*

This is the same guy who hit on the senior girls all week, who kept checking out their breasts.

He is desperate.

Ah, no, you shake your head. It's all right.

You sure? I will suck your cock, he tries one last time.

You wave your hand. *No.* Just go back and party.

All right, man. He thrusts his hands into yours and gives you a quick hug.

You both leave the stall as if nothing happened. And now you are dancing—on the table—with the few seniors who are still alive.

The taxi is finally here! Someone says.

You don't exactly want to leave, but you go outside. The seniors usher you to the middle of the front row, next to the driver's seat and right in front of the speakers so you can still listen to music—as if to make up for being the last person in the entire club to leave and still wanting to dance.

You sit in the front and crank up the music, looking outside at your taxi driver and his brother the drug dealer. You rock your head with the techno music.

The brothers are talking to each other angrily. The drug dealer is giving his brother a fuss about being out for so long. He is nearly crying. He grabs his brother on the shoulder.

The taxi driver, the taller brother with more grays in his curly black hair, pushes him back violently. He screams something.

The drug dealer shoves back. The taxi driver lands a punch in his face. There is a blur of arms flailing.

You continue to nod your head to the techno music. A small smile still etched on your face. *Nothing I can do, so just enjoy the music.*

A metallic reflection shines in the streetlight. A gun. Several other men rush to the center. The gun points to the sky, and then to the drug dealer.

Shit.

Beyond my power and control.

So, just dance.

Someone knocks off the gun. People out of the darkness are holding the two brothers apart. The drug dealer is the first to break free, but he sulks to the taxi van, where you are sitting, and sits right next to you, shutting the door beside him.

The taxi driver speaks angrily to some people outside, and then sulks to the taxi van—the gun nowhere in sight.

He opens the door and sits right next to you. So, you are seated between the two brothers. You are still nodding your head to the music, but also keenly aware of everything in the van. Seat belts clicking. The widened eyes of some seniors sitting in the back, two of them grasping each others' hands. The narrowed slits of the taxi driver's eyes. The dirt smear on the drug dealer's white reggae hat.

You realize that you feel strangely calm. Euphoria. The ecstasy wore off as you don't feel the roll, but the calmness—or the happiness—takes longer to wear off.

The taxi driver turns down the volume of the music to five. You barely hear anything, if you are not replaying the music in your head, but you still sway your head faintly.

The taxi driver drives aggressively into the blackness of the island, swerving at the last foot, braking at the last inch.

Then, the drug dealer touches your knee with his hand. He caresses it. He moves his hand closer to you, up and down your leg. Softly. Gently.

His brother—or the driver—doesn't seem to notice his dark hands against your white shorts.

He gives your thigh a squeeze. You put your hand out to stop him. Instead, he folds around your hand and rubs it. His fingers trace your fingernails. You let him rub your knuckles before you take your hand back, taking his hand and putting it on his leg.

He reaches back to your leg, rubbing slowly and softly.

And then you are back at your resort. All of you scramble out of the van. You say thanks to the taxi driver and to the drug dealer and head straight to bed.

You walk peacefully back to your room, taking your flip-flops off to let your toes sink in the cool sand.

It was your first time turning down some sort of sexual offering.

~

You don't mind the fact that some of your color pencils are broken or missing. You are not even sure where you put your sharpener, but you use a blade of scissors instead.

The pencils aren't even stacked neatly in the cardboard box, either. The white insides of the box are speckled with a rainbow of colors. Nothing is perfect, and sometimes with things like these, there is nothing you can do. That's okay.

~

Kiss every person on the senior trip!

The guy you love is also with you at the senior trip. When a girl pointed out that you had to kiss him, too, in front of him, he looked at you. *Save the best for last? If everyone is done, then I will.*

By the time you all arrived at the yacht club with extensive docks, he was the last one. You walk out with him and another girl in the dark, staring with awe at the massive yachts, lit with hundreds of lights, as if they were halos. The water, teal with underwater lights, glowed smooth like glass around the boats.

You look up to the towering white masts. The stars were disappearing in the cool humidity, a mystic air surrounded the lights, giving it a deeper glow.

One of my favorite things in life is lights. Look at them, you point at the masts. They're like angels.

He smiles, looking at you. *One of my favorite things in life is boats... ships and yachts.*

It starts to drizzle, then rain. The three of you run onto a boat and huddle under the eaves of a three-floor yacht. You look around. It is raining, but the hundreds of yachts around you glow, tall and glorious with lighted masts.

You kiss him right there. His moist, warm lips—resisting and giving—and yours for a moment. His first time ever kissing a man. The girl flashes the camera.

~

What are you doing? The policeman yells at you, shining his flashlight into your eyes.

You are in the drivers' seat, dressed in a neon-paint splattered t-shirt, a black suit vest, a blaring red ski hat, and baby blue rayband sunglasses, fashioned with several shoelaces—orange, blue, grey, white—wrapped around your neck and tied into a ball, resembling a tie, and your arms are covered with bracelet beads—kandi. Your hands are on the steering wheel, leaving it only to shove down the blaring techno music to volume zero.

You roll down the window. You are in the middle of a three-lane street in downtown Baltimore with four other people in the car, almost to the rave. A van is parked in the middle lane with a police car right behind it. You are on the right side, trying to pass.

Another police car pulls in front of you, and a third one comes up from behind, trapping you.

Your cousin, also wearing a bright set of clothing—neon yellow and orange—bursts out in a fit of giggles in the back seat.

The policeman stares at you as if you are an idiot. He starts out again yelling and rambling, his face flushed—obvious in the streetlight.

Your deaf brother, also in the back seat, taps you on the shoulder, grinning, *Just back up. Leave. You know, obviously, that you're not supposed to pass on the right side of a police car with flashing lights.*

But this lane is wide open!

I know. Just move over to the last lane.

You look apologetically at the other girl who is sitting behind you. It is her car that you are driving—she didn't want to drive for an hour from your college.

You back up the car carefully and try to steer it behind the police car. You have little space to work with since you are trapped in between three police cars. Your cousin starts laughing as you nearly graze the police car.

I'll never forget this! Your cousin laughs.

The girl who loves you, sitting next to you in the passenger seat, stares ahead as the rush of other cars tries to get through the bottleneck that the police cars formed. You are trying to drive into the flow of traffic.

I bet it'll take us an hour before we get to the rave! Your cousin keeps giggling.

You shake your head in protest.

Watch. You grin. You pull out your hand and stop the next slow-enough car, lurching the car into the third lane.

You get lost driving around in Baltimore. When you finally find the warehouse, right by the train tracks, the gates suddenly light up with blinking red lights. The bars come down, and the long procession of train thunders past.

Your cousin is laughing again. *I guess my bet was right! It'll be an hour!*

It has only been 30 minutes so far!

She laughs again. You turn up the volume of the techno music to 40, almost to maximum. *As long as there is music, I'm happy!*

You two joke some more, your brother also pitching in. You, your brother, and your cousin shake your heads to the beat of the music, grinning, and waiting for the train to pass. None of you are on ecstasy yet.

You pull the car into the parking lot and turn off the engine.

She doesn't have a pill, you say to the girl who loves you, referring to the girl in the back—the girl who owns the car.

The girl who loves you stares at you.

Just give her my pill. You don't need ecstasy to have fun, anyway.

No. I want you to roll hard tonight.

Don't worry about it. Just give me that remaining half of x you have from the last rave, and I'll be good.

She frowns, but she gives the girl your ecstasy, anyway.

Inside the rave, you want to be away from the girl who loves you—again. Something inside you tells you that you don't want to be with her. You find yourself under a massive indoor tree, adorned with glowing jellyfish, like what you would find in Avatar. You don't feel the effects of the drug, but you don't care. You already know the feeling, so you just dance, observe, dance, and observe some more.

She looks for you. She finds you. She talks to you. She talks about a future where you two look like as if you both are married to each other.

But for the first time ever, you tell her that you want to be alone.

You dance off into the swirling lights. A girl who knows sign language finds you. You end up talking for hours.

You dance into the strobe lights. The room smells strongly of Vicks. You are rolling, even though you had just a little ecstasy.

Peace. Love. Unity. Respect.

You extend your hand upwards and bend your head down. You dance to the throbbing music.

You are you. You are at peace with yourself and others. By sharing love, there is nothing but happiness. You are united with yourself and others because you know what there is to offer.

You realize, for the first time, that you can respect yourself. You can break free.

You are free.

~

There is a big, tall sunflower. The heart of the flower is huge—dwarfing the bright yellow petals.

The sunflower follows the sun. Its stalk seems strong, steady, and full of life.

But then, the flower withers. The petals fall away. The seeds in the center are dry. Birds pick on the heart, scattering the seeds. Wind topples the stalk. Rain buries the dead flower.

In the following season, hundreds of little green plants sprout from the decaying hearts and stalks. They grow, big and tall.

A field of sunshine. Love is limitless.

~

- 23 -

Your friend draws a gold square first, and then a silver square, and then a copper square. He points to the third square and declares that it is bronze. He writes down "3." He writes down "2" next to silver and "1" next to gold. *Ready for Olympics.*

You can imagine your name next to the silver. It is your first response.

~

The deaf guy from England is sitting on the beach in Thailand with you, watching the sunrise after a long night of partying.

I'm curious; do you date deaf women or hearing women, you ask, wondering if his learning sign language later in life shaped his relationships.

Well, he shrugs. My last girlfriend was hearing. My boyfriend before that was deaf, and so was the girlfriend before him. My other girlfriend and boyfriend before her were hearing. So a bit of both deaf and hearing.

Your body freezes a bit. He is wearing tank tops and shorts, and he looks nothing like a gay person.

He pauses and looks at you. Then, he tilts his head back. *Oh, you okay with both women and men? I don't know deaf American's view? You all are different...*

You laugh. *No. No. It's perfectly fine. I am interested in both but I didn't know you were, too.*

And that's how you wanted to live. Open. Free.

~

When you see the girl who loves you in San Francisco after two months of being in Southeast Asia, you know that she will be your first.

You've had fun with men, why not women? What is stopping you? Your bullshit old self collides with your exploration.

She walks with you into an organic store to buy some shampoo. The guy at the counter has painted-black nails, dark, stylish hair, and a grey scarf. He smiles at you. He offers a facial cream, which you let him sample on your hand. You buy the facial cream, too.

You hold her hand and smile at the man. She smiles at him, too, when you walk out. She comments that he was a nice man, squeezing your hand teasingly.

You tell her about the guy in Southeast Asia who had hearing and deaf girlfriends and boyfriends.

He made it seem so normal.

She nods. *You shouldn't have to choose, too. If you are okay with it, other people will be as well.*

Later, that night, your old chemistry lab partner—who happened to be in town, too—joins you on Castro Street. You party at a gay club, but you only dance with your two friends.

You tell your old chemistry lab partner about the guy from Southeast Asia while dancing in the rainbow lights, music blaring.

You should be allowed to act on your connection with people without shame. He is apparently a living example of that. She says.

You dance with the girl who loves you for the rest of the night. You only have two drinks.

You take the metro back with the girl who loves you to her house. Your mind is as clear as it can be. The buzz was gone, and energy was kicking in—being used to 11-hour difference. You are supposed to fly out early in the morning.

You cuddle with her in her narrow bed. You tell her that you are opened in so many ways in the past few years. She agrees, and you've opened her up in many ways, too.

You kiss. She moves in closer, and you pull her in. The covers fall away from you.

You make love to her. You don't sleep at all that night.

~

Within four months, you go with the flow... and you have sex with two other women.

You are making people confused. Why are you doing women when you are interested in men?
A person asked you after hearing a rumor that you had sex with a woman.

Why does it matter if the person is a woman or a man?

The person still seems confused. You are not.

~

With her in your arms
Her being able to understand
That you love the man she hates
That she lets you love

With her in your arms
Naked and smooth
Head resting on your shoulder
After being explored inside out

With her in your arms
Small and fragile

A soul deeper than humankind
A heart limitless

With her in your arms
Her being new in your life
That unexpected shift
That surprising connection

Fluid.
Nothing is stone.

Holding her in your arms.

~

- 24 -

Several people are in your room, but you can't be there. You feel really annoyed for no apparent reason.

You are in a cage.

You tell your roommate that you'll be back.

You go to your office and use the videophone to call your mom. She answers the phone. Your dad isn't home. He is gone to a men's Bible retreat.

~

You are walking straight through one of the most dangerous places in Northeast Washington, DC. It is 11:30 Saturday night.

You might as well get yourself killed.

You don't care.

You feel alive, at least. Staring at the wall in your bedroom was hell. Your mind was blank, dead. When you tried to fill it with some thoughts, every possible suicidal thought surfaced. You couldn't sleep either, so what's the point of staying in your bed?

The lines in the sidewalk fly behind you as you maintain your pace. Line after line. You see a man who turned back from the other side of the street, following you. Maybe that's how you will die. Extreme but perfect. Your heart pounds.

Alive.

Somewhere in your absolute blank mind your body tells you to stay alive. Don't die.

You are so fucking depressed.

~

I love you, I just can't let this sin from hell take you away. We'll ask God for victory of your soul, master of your flesh, and purity of your mind. We will ask God to break you from this bondage and to battle against this temptation. Would you like to pray?

She looks at you over the videophone.

~

Your mind is empty. You can't even deny... and you can't even cry.

A gunshot into your head. A jump off from the 8-story dorm room.

Silly. You are too extreme, too morbid, too melodramatic.

Or a murder, now—that man behind you. It makes you feel alive, and it gives you hope. It gives you hope to open the door of your heart. Pulsating, warm, and full of life.

He is still following you. You imagine the sirens of the police cars and the ambulance wailing to your crumbled body on the old sidewalk, blood pooling under you. Your University ID fallen from your pocket, face up with you, your face frozen in the picture like your face in rigor mortis, staring blankly into the orange hue of the DC night sky. You imagine the neighbors peeking out of their windows, some of them sprawling out into their lawns to get a glimpse. A newspaper would cover your death, stating that you only had only your ID and phone on you, no wallet or money. A murder for no reason.

You.

No, you are still alive. Damn you for thinking of death. Isn't that a sin, to contemplate the end of life when its not meant to be?

What if it is meant to be?

No. It cannot be. You just cannot let that bind you down.

Okay. But your mind keeps looping. Blank. Death. Murder. Blank.

The sidewalk lines fly by.

~

Dear God, in His Almighty Name, we ask You to be with him now. Help him battle against this temptation, this bondage, and show him the light. Help him realize that he does not have to live this way, to be attracted to men...

Attracted to men.

~

You are afraid to look behind to check if he is still walking behind you. You keep your pace, acting as if he isn't there.

~

I knew. I suspected. I tried to protect you. You are influenced by society. The distorted ways of society has made you lukewarm. You think it is okay to be attracted to people of the same sex. You are constantly stimulated to the idea that love is for everyone, when it is designed for the opposite sex. You are going through this curiosity, this temptation, which has no place in this world. It begins with a thought and how you continue to promote this.

I tried, mom. You say. If I could, I would eradicate this thought in an instant. I never chose to be this way, but I am attracted to both men and women. I believe that this is who I am.

No! No. She tilts her head at you with such sadness. *No, it is not true. It is not you; it is not who you are. It is the thought. You have not sinned, yet. I hope you are still a virgin, still pure, am I right?*

You shake your head vaguely and tell her to continue.

She hesitates.

She isn't satisfied. Neither are you.

~

The brighter lights appear by the end of the street. You think you finally can see Safeway Groceries. The brand new Luxury Apartments also have bright lights, gates, and security.

Your heartbeat slows down a little. You don't see anyone. You feel your pockets to see if your phone and ID are still there. You are soon safe.

~

You say that you can't bear this any more. For so long you have worn a mask, and that mask is cracking.

I believe you need that Christian fellowship and support. You haven't gone to church. You need to put on the full armor of God and to keep battling your sins. Put on your shield of faith, take a stand against the devil's schemes. Put on the breastplate of righteousness...

You stare at the screen of the videophone with your mom. All you see is her figure moving her hands, saying something. Your mind cannot process a thing. A blanket of sadness engulfs you. A new mask has been placed on your face.

You "have" to go. *I love you.* You tell your mom.

~

The sidewalk lines are thinner, newer, and brighter. They are still flying by.

The man disappeared.

The apartment is locked. You sit right outside and stare at a tree that has a light shining at it from the ground. Not a single leaf stirs.

~

You hang up the videophone. You turn off the lights. You close the door behind you. You walk back to the dorm. It is mostly quiet.

A gay guy, somewhat intoxicated with booze, is waiting for the elevator at your dorm. He gives you a smile. His boyfriend points at the flyer, "National Coming Out Day," and grins.

The gay guy turns to you, *Hey, are you going?*

You've never told him that you're gay.

I don't know. You shrug.

He nods. He gets in the elevator. His boyfriend corners him, touching his ear. The gay guy looks indifferent, unresponsive. He looks at you for a second longer.

The boyfriend stops touching his ear and looks at you.

~

You wait. Your mind is blank. No tears. No thoughts. Your eyes become one with the still leaves, half exposed, half hidden by the halogen light.

~

They get off the elevator. You get out. You go straight to your room. It is empty; your roommates went out.

The bed of suicidal thoughts await.

~

Your older friend drives up in his little car. He looks at you, concerned.

~

You stare at the wall. You cannot sleep. Fuck it. You need to disappear.

~

The older friend takes you in. He gives you a glass of water. *What's wrong?* He asks.

I told mom that I was attracted to both women and men. She pretty much said that I am now bounded by sin when I feel just the opposite. I just need to be out.

That's all you say and want to say. He talks for the rest of the night. You are not alone. Listening to his fears, his frustration, his liberation... you know that if this is truly a sin, it is still worth living than living a sinful life filled with lies, failed relationships, betrayed trust, and ugly thoughts.

You stay there for two nights. You don't do anything but watch TV. You feel good that fictional TV shows make people's lives seem more fucked up than yours. You eat a little. You eat a lot of gelato—Belgian Chocolate and Salted Caramel.

~

You go back to school and your dorm two days later. Your roommates said that they were scared for you. *You okay?*

Yeah I'm fine. Sorry.

Okay. They nod.

~

- 25 -

It is not like they disowned you. The girl who loves you says. She found out from your deaf brother that you told your parents that you were also interested in men. Maybe they will end up liking your guy and change their opinion.

Mom says that I can't bring a guy home.

Really? When did she say that?

After I told them.

Oh.

~

Ahh.

Swallow, dear. Swallow.
It doesn't matter how nasty it is. Swallow.

You are still swallowing in America.
Bitter. Salty. Sweet. Sour. Bland.

Having it shoved down your throat.
Swallow.

They feel your throat. They make sure it's okay.
But they don't care how nasty it is. Swallow.

You are still swallowing in America.
You make America proud.

You are nourished by what you swallow.
You are what you swallow in America.

You are good because you swallow.
White. English. Flawless. Fluent.

You must swallow the good stuff.
They don't care how it is roping out for you.

Now you can do the talk. You can do the speech. You can do the language.
You are fluent. Swallow.

You suck it in.
Doctors, teachers, therapists, governors, parents.

It is supposed to be good.
You are swallowing in America.

The straight hypocrite.

~

I'm glad that you told them, but it is just that timing might not be right. Your deaf brother says.

What do you mean?

Well, Grandpa isn't doing well. Mom and Dad are stressed with work.

Oh. Well, I just wanted them to know. If they want me to be open and honest, at least I can be now?

Yes. Definitely. It's their problem anyway.

~

Your dad has breakfast with you. He is on a business trip in DC and can spare some time with you.

You need to decide. I mean, I know you. You are not gay. But you say that you are—and now that is causing marriage problems for mom and me. We are not sure what to do with you.

Oh.

Yeah, I mean this is something that we have to work out by ourselves—but thanks a lot, you know. He looks frustrated.

I just want to be open and honest with you. I don't mean to cause more problems. All I ask is that you let me to go on my journey in life, whether it is by myself, with a woman, or with a man.

He has to go to the conference now. *I'll always love you.* He says.

~

What do you tell people that you are? Your mom asks, second night you are home for Thanksgiving break.

I don't exactly like labeling.

She stares.

Well, if I have to pick a word... I would say queer.

She makes a horrified face. *Queer! Seriously... queer? What is that supposed to mean?*

Well, to me, it means being interested in people who are able to connect with me, regardless of identity.

~

On the road to your grandparents' house for Thanksgiving, which your mom says could be one of the last times you will spend Thanksgiving with Grandpa, as he is in the hospital, mom takes out a pamphlet, *Homosexuality, Speaking the Truth in Love*.

I want you to read this and see what the Bible says about homosexuality. I like this approach because you are human, a sinner like everyone else. You shouldn't be treated any worse than other sinners. This approaches sinful issues with love, not hate.

The pamphlet makes a lot of points, but it makes no point about having an intimate, fulfilling relationship with people. How is it wrong to have a feeling that straight people have for the opposite sex for people of the same sex?

Does this change your mind? Mom asks.

It makes a lot of points that I will take into consideration, but this doesn't change anything.

She looks at you with a sad face.

She becomes focused on Grandpa.

~

The swing hanging from the metal bar is barely swaying. The merry-go-round, colored red, green, and yellow, is frozen in place. Autumn leaves are still on the wooden chips.

You zip up your coat a little more snugly as you make to the little speaker tube near the monkey bars. You bend down and put your ear to it.

Nothing, of course.

Hello. You speak softly.

You remember how you yelled into the speaker tube, hoping that your deaf brother on the other side of the park could hear something through the tube. It was the most interesting thing in the park by far, only because hearing kids whispered into it or giggled as they put their ears to the tube—to you and your brother, it was just a simple metal pole. Hollow and empty.

You raise your arms to the monkey bars right above your head. Your fingers trace the diamond grooves that once left your hands red after swinging across—across what you once imagined to be a river infested with crocodiles. You remember being high up, straining your little arms as your dad followed you with his hands, ready to catch you if you tumbled to the crocodiles below.

No one is around this time. The crisp autumn weather drove the kids home; to their TVs, and perhaps iPads... you don't know. You walk to the swing set and randomly pick a swing to sit down. The cold from the rubber nips you through your jeans. You pull your long-sleeved shirt over your hands and hold the chains of the swing.

The swing hangs low towards the ground, so you spread your legs, your feet firmly planted into the wooden chips, and push yourself gently backwards, releasing to swing forward.

The world once seemed complete as you slid down the plastic slide, your hair standing at the ends as electricity tickled down your spine. How joy swelled up inside as you surged high in your swing, so high that the chains of the swing bounced as you landed back into the swing—gravity commanding you back down.

The magic is gone. The world is greater than the little plot of land, filled with wooden chips, metal bars, chains, plastic, and rubber.

You keep swaying softly on the swing, conscious of how empty the playground seems.

It was all you needed, but you went away. Coming back, you realize that magic isn't imagination, but acceptance. Magic of home was once the innocent acceptance of what you had, but the magic of life is the understanding what the world has. The older you get, the more you fit with the outside. Outside of the plastic slides, outside of the speaker tubes, outside of the swing you are now sitting on.

After all, you've gone skydiving, parasailing, and scuba diving. Instead of the sand box, you've played in the mud bath in Vietnam. Instead of the swing, you've overcome your fear of riding the world's fastest rollercoaster. Instead of bouncing on the see-saw, you've ridden Asian elephants. Instead of being on the top of the playground tower, you've been on the top of the Eiffel Tower.

Coming home is bittersweet. This was the perfect place for your childhood fantasies, but it no longer holds magic. The fences seem too constricting. The slide seems too small. The monkey bars are too short. Even the swing is too low for your legs.

The wind picks up a little. The merry-go-round squeaks a little, its rusty hinges groaning as it moves. Leaves twirl up into the sky and fall down, some of them landing on the slide. The cold nibbles your face—your eyes become watery.

You walk out of the playground, your mind lingering among the memories of the playground; faint, distant, and once warm and full of life.

~

There isn't a Christmas tree set up. You decorate a little, fake tree for the family during your winter break. When you are not around, your parents don't bother lighting up the tree. This has been going on since you started college.

There aren't any Christmas gifts, either. Instead, you go on an expensive family vacation in Florida. Your brothers spend a lot of time playing on iPad. Dad watches a lot of television. Mom plays games on her iPad and frequently checks her emails.

You read a book and talk with a friend about social justice.

Your Grandpa dies two days after Christmas.

~

You love your box of colored pencils. The unicorn and rose stickers on the box makes you feel sentimental. You can't imagine throwing the box away, but you do need new colored pencils and maybe a box.

~

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The last piece of the silver colored pencil snaps. There is not enough cedar to hold the graphite. The small piece of silver rolls on the paper.

~

The guy you love lives in the dorm suite next to yours. Your door is open, and so is his. You hear his laughter from his room.

You still love him, of course.

There are more reasons to love him, too. He is more humble, more willing to listen, and more ready to apologize and learn. And he is still his original self... the good part.

But, he doesn't make your heart beat crazy so often, anymore. You can still love him more in an instant, but the power of love lies within the ability to share it.

He is whistling as he passes your door. He increases the pitch of his whistle when he sees you, as if he is happy to see you, and sticks out his thumb.

There used to be days when he didn't acknowledge people when he passed them.

You smile even though nobody is looking. You keep typing on your laptop. Maybe memories cling, but it is what you have now that is important.

~

It isn't about seeing people naked, about being ready to see them with all of their clothes off. It is about seeing the naked truth, seeing what they are like in the inside.

~

You have a new box of colored pencils, unopened—one hundred and fifty this time, not seventy-two. There is a brand new silver colored pencil inside. Unsharpened. Ready.

You look outside through the window. Snowflakes fall gently to the smooth, white ground. The rose bush is bare, revealing the thorns.

You pull up the scarf to your nose, and you smell the faint smoke from the last campfire you had—where the guy you loved was also there. You push the door open and walk out into the flurries. The cold bites your ears.

~

Being honest with yourself and others means you will always be a work in progress.

~

Afterword

Assessing my memoir as an Honors Capstone project, I realize that personal growth often goes hand-in-hand with academic learning and success. As an English major, writing to show, not tell, remains one of the most important challenges in engaging readers. Here, I do the same once again. My memoir is evidence of a journey and the art of expressing that journey.

Nevertheless, I must mention some details about what pieces of literature shaped the fundamental interest and skill for me to write this memoir. Before I started composing my memoir, I had to research what other works were similar or relevant to my project, and without these works, the shaping of this project would be completely different. Before, I did not imagine writing any nonfiction or even sharing my own life stories, but after reading certain works of creative nonfiction, I saw the beauty of expressing stories with a little more depth and meaning of historical life, including mine.

Literary elements—specifically symbols, theme, and foils—are also important in my storytelling. They contribute to the meaning and the understanding of the memoir and why it is presented the way it is. In my memoir, they do not only impact the stories themselves, but also suggest more meaning and understanding outside of the stories.

Literary Influences

Books written in the second-person point of view are rare finds, and even rarer when it comes to memoirs. Therefore, my memoir is a unique project. I play with different angles on storytelling using the second-person point of view, subtext, and various literary elements like narration, metaphors, freestyle poetry, and conversations.

The five angles I use—which I illustrate in excerpts from my memoir—exist in other works of literature as well. I discuss them as a way of defining what is unique in my work. I hope you find other angles as well.

Angle One: Memoir—Compelling Intimacy

In Nicholas Sparks' memoir, *Three Weeks with My Brother*, he narrates a trip around the world. On the trip, the author and his brother reminisce about their childhood, the deaths of their parents and sister, and their current families. The brothers bond and learn to live life to the fullest. The memoir was successful because it wove the past and present together as well as juxtaposed familiar settings with unfamiliar settings. The brothers were able to understand their lives better through a shift in perspective, whether from being in a different place, or comparing/contrasting their stories of the past. As a result, the brothers developed a stronger bond with each other. As I read the memoir, the feeling of bonding was strong for me as well. I have experienced the same bonding with my family. I realized that, in this zeitgeist, the *real* stories are the ones that mean the most in life—because the stories *are* life. A simple difference—traveling, a second-person point of view, or meeting new people who see the brothers in a different light—stimulates a perspective so compelling and prompts a more rewarding memoir. In the same way, my memoir is inclusive by incorporating the continually new perceptions on life as I continue to change and grow.

Angle Two: Memoir as Enlightenment

My memoir shares stories about love and romance among other universal preoccupations. My feelings, thoughts, and beliefs about love and romance have changed and continue to do so. An evidence of such change is the shift in my attitude and enjoyment of the *Twilight* series by Stephenie Meyer. I read the first book while I was a junior in high school before the hype began. In 2008 as a freshman in college, I read the last book, *Breaking Dawn*. At first, I really enjoyed the story and the interesting angle of a vampire-

human relationship. I wanted the main character, Bella, to end up with the vampire, Edward, and not the werewolf Jacob.

However, after three years of rooting for Edward, I had broken up with my girlfriend and stayed best friends, met new people, attended a college that was 200 times larger than my high school, and had a plethora of new experiences. I had changed. I had learned that love was an intimate and mature commitment to a person, a person who is willing to *share* life and not *be* life. I had learned that I still only knew a little about love, but I knew enough now to know that blindly becoming obsessed and enticing a vampire to change you is not love. This storyline is a sadistic, sexist, and superficial tactic of infatuation to gain only external/physical change, and I bought into the story. I did not understand that bonding really happens on a deeper level. Over these years I was reading the Twilight series, I finally realized that I had been shaken up by reality. In my eyes, the fiction I had indulged in became empty, fake, and depressing because it was unattainable, flawed, and wrongly conceptualized. The step outside of the Twilight craze gave me an eye-opening perspective. The life I had in three short years were more intimate and more intense than all four books combined. When I take my experiences and transform them into the memoir, especially in the second-person point of view, my perspectives narrate this change as more personal and intimate than the *Twilight* saga.

Angle Three: Interactive Second-Person Memoirs

My understanding in life continues to grow as I shift perspectives. I shift perspectives while writing by using the second-person perspective. The shift is important because multiple perspectives, like various literature theories, excites the readers, including myself, to draw more conclusions about life. Joan Wickersham, the author of *The Suicide Index: Putting My Father's Death in Order*, uses the second-person point of view as a self-

alienation tool to gain a different perspective. “Not only does this show the distance [Wickersham] felt from herself, but it prompts the reader to buck against her assertions. When an author tells a story in the second-person, they create a feedback loop, in which the audience is constantly asking ‘Is that what I would have done?’” (Ryan 76)

This interaction happens between author and reader but also author to self. In other words, when I “speak” to myself during writing, I become an audience to my own stories and my readers, and I ask, “Is this really what I would have done?” This question is a powerful question as an analytic tool. Readers like myself will ponder on feedback and develop a connection with the memoir. This interactive connection, this “[p]ostmodern nonfiction... revels in the chaos, finding meaning in moments, much the way people do, and have done, worldwide, forever” (Ryan 82).

Tone is one indication of an author’s interaction with his or her material. *Bright Light Big City*, a novel by Jay McInerney is an example of how the second-person narrative is powerful in creating tone: “The book is unusual in that it is written in the second-person, which, combined with the tone, makes the whole thing read, appropriately, like an admonishment” (Judd). Because of the point of view, reading the novel feels like receiving caution or advice from the author. Excerpts of my memoir also may feel like an admonishment. The tone and perspective makes the following sample of my writing, “Still Swallowing in America” admonishing, albeit ironic—shockingly so:

“Ahh.

Swallow, dear. Swallow.

It doesn’t matter how nasty it is. Swallow.

You are still swallowing in America.

Bitter. Salty. Sweet. Sour. Bland.

Having it shoved down your throat.

Swallow.

They feel your throat. They make sure it's okay.

But they don't care how nasty it is. Swallow.

You are still swallowing in America.

You make America proud.

You are nourished by what you swallow.

You are what you swallow in America.

You are good because you swallow.

White. English. Flawless. Fluent.

You must swallow the good stuff.

They don't care how it is roping out for you.

Now you can do the talk. You can do the speech. You can do the language.

You are fluent. Swallow.

You suck it in.

Doctors, teachers, therapists, governors, parents.

It is supposed to be good.

You are swallowing in America.

The straight hypocrite.” (151)

The poem reads as an admonishment because I seem to be writing about social expectations but simultaneously this admonishment is undercut by the rebellious sexual advice that is shocking and degrading. Through *double entendre*, my word choice focuses on the oppressions that America had created—where the American society forces down our throats what kind of entertainment we should enjoy, what kind of language we should use, and what kind of friends, status, and possessions we should have. This could also be about being submissive to what my family wants me to identify as (based on context that this excerpt was presented)—being in the closet where I had to swallow what I was being fed. Identity is Americanized, and, swallowing that hypocrisy, I choke, unable to nurture my true identity.

Second-person point of view not only controls tone but also readers’ emotional responses so that the reader may attune more to the author’s own feelings about the subject matter. In “Your Life as a Girl” by Curtis Sittenfeld, another short story written in the second-person view, an athletic, lanky girl struggles with becoming a woman in a patriarchal society. The effect of “you” in the memoir takes away the pity factor and implicates the reader in her own experiences. I feel that describing the insecurities, frustration, and anger in the first person would have a “pity-party” effect. Describing the same feelings in the second-person view provides a strong assessment of her feelings,

letting the readers draw conclusions themselves as if they might experience what she does. Sittenfeld struggles to accept herself, assuming if she was the girl character—“you,” as if she does not want to be in her body—it is an alienation of self that is so powerful, it seems like Sittenfeld still seeks to deny her memories. That in itself is a strong statement about identity as a girl and living how society expects girls to behave and look. Since “you” is placed in the girl’s shoes and “experiences” how she does not fit into the world, the potential to realize the impact of people’s seemingly harmless remarks and antics is rich.

In the same way, my identity has been shaped by the limited ideologies that society constructed. The resulting alienation is evidence of society’s limitation of my identity. By gaining the courage to face the facts and by stating these in my memoir, we have the opportunity to recognize the essence of me underneath the societal constructs. Through alienation, I interact with myself by looking inside rather than looking out. Looking from the outside and understanding what it is like to be inside, I can see how I have grown and how I can be more genuinely myself in the world I live in. Therefore, the second-person point of view invites the reader to interact with my own personal experiences in a way that leads away from mere pity to greater understanding of the work of this life.

Angle Four: What Details or the Absence of Details Reveal

Julia Scheeres (*Jesus Land*), and Chuck Klosterman (*Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*) both wrote life stories using two different approaches. Scheeres is candid and humorously wry about her life. She presents her childhood stories—dominated by an abusive father, negligent mother, and a black, adopted brother—where readers are taken aback by how it is presented. She describes in detail her family but not herself. But even the details are reported dispassionately. The abusive father is clearly racist and her black brother a victim and a victimizer, but Scheeres is aloof, noticing only tiny details of reporting. For example,

she quotes her older adopted brother's outburst to her other adopted brother, "Our *dad*? You looked at yourself in a mirror lately, boy? If he was your real dad, do you think he'd get such pleasure out of whipping your sorry black ass" (Scheeres 66)? The story has an interesting detachment in her focus on how dysfunctional her family rather than her own feelings. But this very absence of detail about her own participation in this family conveys the depth of the scars. This telling detail sums up her technique: she just stood there and focused on the carpet when her two adopted brothers quarreled.

On the other hand, Klosterman is an outspoken man who loves to rant about topics in postmodern America, including Pamela Anderson and Jesus Freaks. He has the passion and involvement that Scheeres seems to lack—but it is only about things that are not personal. He spends an entire page talking about *Real World* TV show and how he knows so much about the show. This outward focus is not like Scheeres because, at the end of his argument, he applies it to his own life, but the connection is analytic rather than intimate: "One day, you just suddenly realize it's something you know. And—somehow—there's a cold logic to it. It is an extension of your own life, even though you never tried to make it that way" (Klosterman 29). For the rest of the chapter, or 13 pages, he describes how *Real World*, whether a sham or actually real, still shapes American life. His intense analytic thinking, trying to find something wrong, leads to debates on little things that make readers think twice about the society we live in but not know him as we know Scheeres.

Scheeres is also different from Klosterman because she writes about her past while Klosterman writes about the social present. Looking back over time and memories, Scheeres is more candid and emotionally detached. She only provides the necessary details, achieving a powerful, personal impact. Klosterman differs by being detailed and personally involved with his argument, even though the topic is much less intimate than Scheeres' story.

I fall in between the two authors. I present stories with different attitudes that may sometimes shock in the same way Scheeres does; my coming out story contains few details and many gaps. But I also become passionate and analyze situations down to the littlest details—for example, the story about the gay dogs. This story connects to mine but in the same observational, commenting way as Klosterman.

Like Scheeres, I also use detail to imply subtext. I found that the second person point of view allows direct story telling layered with indirect subtext. This subtext contributes substantially to the cohesiveness of my self and my work.

Angle Five: Subtext

Writing in the second-person view creates a very direct story because the author takes the action of commanding the reader what to do and think. However, when I write what I want to say in this seemingly direct way, some of it is found through subtext, just like in life. The subtext I provide is a powerful contrast with the second-person view. While the second-person view explicitly focuses on subjecting readers to my experiences, the subtext subtly suggests a different perspective that is left up to the reader to decipher. I understand subtext in this way:

The text is the tip of the iceberg, but the subtext is everything underneath that bubbles up and informs the text Subtext points to other meanings. The words we hear are meant to lead us to other layers. Conflict exists at this intersection of text and subtext. Great drama dwells beneath the words. (Seeger 3)

The conflict between what I explicitly tell and subtly share packs more into my memoir to be analyzed. In other words, the subtext represents the part of me that is less overt but still me.

I am usually very honest, blunt, but tactful with my advice, suggestions, and feelings. However, creating subtext is a hidden rebellion, a challenge I give to those who deserve to know me more. While I tell my readers what it is like to be me, they still have to work to decipher the subtext in order to understand. I am not entirely comfortable telling people who or what I am. As one critic states, “Sometimes subtext is the underlying meaning that can’t be expressed because of repressive cultures or situations... Sometimes the subtext is an indirect challenge to the ruling class” (Seeger, 133). My memoir uses subtext to challenge to the society I live in—the society that develops systems of oppression and conformity.

“Biography of a Dress” by Jamaica Kincaid is a brief memoir about a dress that she got when she was two years old. She tells the story of how the yellow dress was made by her mother and how she wore it. Through her repetition of the word, “yellow,” and her little observation of details—such as noting people’s names, clothes, and brief histories—she implies how she and her mother fit into a racist and overbearing white society. Kincaid creates a picture of Mr. Walker, the studio photographer that Kincaid’s mother takes her to. She describes him as a man unconscious of his privilege and therefore acting crass:

and he then walked over to a looking glass that hung on a wall and squeezed with two of his fingers a lump the size of a pinch of sand that was on his cheek; the lump had a shiny white surface and it broke, emitting a tiny plap sound, and from it came a long ribbon of thick, yellow pus that curled on Mr. Walker’s cheek imitating, almost, the decoration on the birthday cake that awaited me at home, and my birthday cake was decorated with a series of species of flora and fauna my mother had never seen (and still has not seen to this day, she is seventy-three years old).

(Kincaid, 5)

The reference of Mr. Walker popping the pimple and comparing it with Kincaid’s birthday cake suggests that the black people like Kincaid live off the white society’s gross excrement.

The photographer's taking her picture represents the white control of her image—infecting every aspect of her life. Even worse, the white society promotes celebration of this class separation and oppression, to which Kincaid metaphorically compares the cake decoration of “flora” and “fauna” that she and her mother have never seen. The subtextual intention is to show that she and her mother lived the way white society decided that they should live.

My memoir will be very similar to Kincaid's story because I will take ordinary life moments and add symbolic and other subtextual meanings of the object and/or moment. For example, my childhood experience of gathering flowers while everyone played football or losing control of my bladder when getting punished are served as ordinary moments that are not so ordinary after all—using the context to make the stories suggest different meanings. This excerpt illustrates my use of subtext by relating the story of mixed feelings toward a strong sexual attraction and my memory of needing to go to the bathroom but being unable to go to avoid punishment over fighting with my brother.

“The smell fades away, and you hope you won't wake up to it again. You tumble back into your dreams.

~

Your brother takes your stuffed bear from you.

Give it back! you whine.” (52)

The smell is “taken away” from you, and the odd thing is that you hope not to smell it again. Of course, you want to smell that again, but it feels wrong. Maybe it will have some negative

consequences. You drift back to your dreams, or memories. The very next story goes back to your childhood where a teddy bear is “taken away” from you. You fight to get it back, but what happens in the end seems negative. Unpleasant.

“Sorry, you know I love you, but what you did was wrong.

You sniffle. Then suddenly, you clutch your privates and say that you have to go to pee first.

You run into the bathroom, but you are too scared to go.

It has been a while. Your mother frowns.

I need to go but I can’t!

You need to come out, soon. After another minute, she takes you out and spansks you with a little wooden rod.

Your pants are suddenly wet with urine.” (53)

What happens here is another childhood experience that could seem ordinary but memorable enough because of the childhood fear and discomfort. However, the meaning of the story goes deeper, like how the white man pops his pimple and the connection between that to a birthday cake. The connection between not wanting what society (a higher power) puts on us and being embarrassed or ashamed happens with the juxtaposition of these two

memories. This deeper connection manifests finally in the play on the “need to come out” of the bathroom.

Elements of Creative Non-Fiction

Throughout the memoir, the most often used symbols relate to nature and colored pencils. Combined, they reflect my interests in nature and art. To me nature is a silent life that commands you to look for signs. Thorns on roses remind of the pain of perfection. The wilted or scorched leaves show the yearning to be quenched. Seeds that fall from dead sunflowers represent the eternal sunshine that requires the death of a flower before seeds can scatter. Humans alone, or words alone, may be incomplete without nature and its symbols. For me, writing is one medium of expression, and drawing with colored pencils is another. I use both in symbolic ways.

Cycles of nature, from plants to seasons, represent the growth and progress that I go through. The colored pencils get used, but rarely do I talk about the pictures I draw—they represent the experience. However, to create art, the color pencil (you) gets used (depleted, broken, dulled, sharpened), and the pencil cannot go back to its original state. In this sense, art is a process, and I must continue to progress in life with more art or new growth.

Through nature and art, readers are required to look for the silent signs that I might be giving away about myself. The conversation I had with mom in the beginning of the memoir mirrors how readily I open up to other people. I don’t like to talk about myself. I am often silent—but I am there, like nature or art. You can sharpen a pencil quickly or pluck a flower swiftly, but there is always a right time to do so. The whole memoir is a reflection of this sense of timing, it explains a lot about my life, but this is only one season in my life, or one art piece drawn with a handful of colored pencils out of a whole box of pencils.

Some of the characters mentioned in the memoir serve also as foils to my character. For example, my foster sister for only a year could be used to show how passive and caring I was towards her as a part of my character development. However, her being helpless and what people could classify as “immature” also serves as a mirror, a symbol, of what I was; helpless and immature regarding my identity and how I could love others. I resented the fact that I couldn’t help her. I resented the fact that I couldn’t help myself. Another example, the little five year-old boy who I mentored in high school depicts how I both accepted and judged myself. I could relate so much with him. He was quiet. He liked cars, but he also liked art and playing in the kitchen. He connected well with girls. He had boy clothes—but one thing seemed different about him besides his suspected additional disabilities—he had long hair. I judged him, or I wasn’t entirely accepting of the fact that his long hair could make him look more like a girl. I caught myself judging others in the same way I was judged (recall the earlier story where my two older brothers accused me of being a girl when I wore a blanket over my head). The characters often have a little piece of them that mirrored me, that made me grasp a bigger picture of what I was and am.

Since the importance of the characters is their relevancy in my memories, not naming the characters emphasizes what they were to me, not who they were in life. By not naming the characters, readers are forced to collect all of the little details that the characters were to “you.” Giving the characters descriptive cues instead of names, such as “old chemistry lab partner” or “the girl who loves you” encourages constant formation of characters, which in turn only benefits the character development of “you.” This uncommon practice may be confusing and challenging; I acknowledge it is work to develop characters on the readers’ own—something I intend as part of the “you” point of view. Nonetheless, I realize that the prose may be too austere and not provide enough for the reader even to fill in and develop characters. If it is too sparse, the price may be too high: the reader will be

too disengaged and not bother to participate in understanding the story. I am still experimenting with the balance. As this is a draft, I will continue to add details that create the characters or settings so that the characters will not appear as complete strangers and readers can picture a setting more vividly and feel involved enough while still challenged to add meaning and make the story their own.

One of the major themes in my memoir is love. Often, I don't understand how love works for me. Why don't I love when it would seem to make perfect sense to love? Why do I love irrationally, or do I even understand what love is? Although maybe not as obvious, another strong theme is power. There is power in my parents' love, power in society's reactions, power in moral values and faith, power of fear, and the power over self, including allowing myself to love. Both power and love go together. As the power dynamics between my mother and me changed drastically, that shift affected the love between us. I was raised under the power of family and society, as well as faith. As I gained power over society's control over me, I also acknowledge that the power to be myself in front of my parents is completely different... because of love. My parents have unconditional love for me, and I love them, too, but I had yet to go through a journey of asserting the power (whether that power came from God, within, or both) to open myself up to my family. My sexuality plays a big role in the theme of love, especially with the fact that society still controls the concept of what love should be. Ultimately, I learned to be okay to love some people more than others, instead of questioning what society or my family thinks of me. I loved my ex-girlfriend tremendously for who she was, but at that time I didn't love her to desire to be committed to her. Instead, I believed I loved her because that is what I assumed society thought I was supposed to do. At the end of the memoir, it is clear that I still might not understand love, but I have the power to love—whether it be loving certain people or loving to go out in the fields and pick flowers—and be okay with it. Again, it is a work in progress.

Another theme is the concept of exploration and experimenting. This is reflected by the whole memoir as an experimental literature—a memoir in second person point of view loaded with subtext—and creating a sense of “other” by understanding stories differently in context. The memoir explores different meanings in memories by tying them with other memories and discovering how they relate. For example, when I wrote the story about my foster sister, I did not see how that would be exciting or relevant in my memoir. It did not seem important, and I couldn’t explain why I bothered to write that story. However, when I wrote other stories, I realized that it was a moment where I asserted myself as “better” and deserving of love. I might have done that because up until that point, I knew subconsciously that I was different from what I was expected to be. Other examples are more obvious, like trying different drugs and gaining (or actually, regaining) perspectives that I once had on people. The party scene, as much as I avoided it for the first two years of my college career, became one of the central places where I explored the concepts of society, how people interact, and how I allowed my life to be defined by these very same people. Perhaps “under the influence,” I realized that I was capable of much more than I ever expected, whether it was loving, peaceful, committed, to being angry, reckless, or irresponsible. The context I grew up with broadened exponentially.

Last, while there is a sense of closure in the memoir, there is still the theme of incompleteness, as symbolized by the colored pencils and characters that readers may never get to know enough. This speaks to the concept of a work in progress. The intent of this incompleteness is to verify that it is normal to be incomplete. No number of stories is enough to define a person’s life and experiences, and even the complete understanding of another character is also impossible. I wanted to make this obvious, challenging readers to abandon completeness and settle with what they have that is most completely portrayed—the “you” in the memoir.

Conclusion: Memoir as My Contribution to the World

I have read several poems and essays written by people of different colors and sexual orientations. I realized how often the “other” goes overlooked. Although I am a white male who benefits from privileges in a white-dominated society, I am still an “other” in my own way. I am Deaf. My sexual orientation is either fluid, soul seeker, or queer. I do not fit in the typical, straight macho male image. My memoir is an opportunity to present myself to the world, including my struggles, my achievements, and my differences. This is my contribution as I share experiences that I hope will inspire, open up, and change some people, including my family.

In “Letter to Ma,” Merle Woo wrote a letter to her mother where she explains how she wanted her mother to stop belittling her and just to listen to her. Woo explains her belief, activism, and career as a strong social advocate—all of which her mother never really approved. Woo writes, “Until we can all present ourselves to the world in our completeness, as fully and beautifully as we see ourselves naked in our bedrooms, we are not free” (Woo, 160). Woo, like myself, seeks to be free to offer ourselves in our completeness.

Woo presents herself to the world by publishing her letter to her mother. Woo pours out her dreams of making the world a better place while knowing her mother is completely missing out on her wonderful contributions. She uses the letter to say what she had been holding from her mother for so long, but she also uses it to give to all of her readers—either to inspire them or to teach them about how to be better contributors in the world. Likewise, my memoir is a presentation of what I am and what perspectives I value.

Discovery happens when you step outside of yourself and see what you are—at least at the moment. This discovery may not give me an answer of who I want to be, what I will

be, or what I will do next, but it will always give me an answer that it is up to my free will to make a difference in myself, whether it be intellectually, personally, socially, physically, or spiritually.

It is my dream to publish my memoir and make it available to the public. More important, while this memoir is a tool for improving my expressive and writing skills, I dream to learn and explore myself more and the world I live in. This draft is only a working draft, still—literally—a work in progress.

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